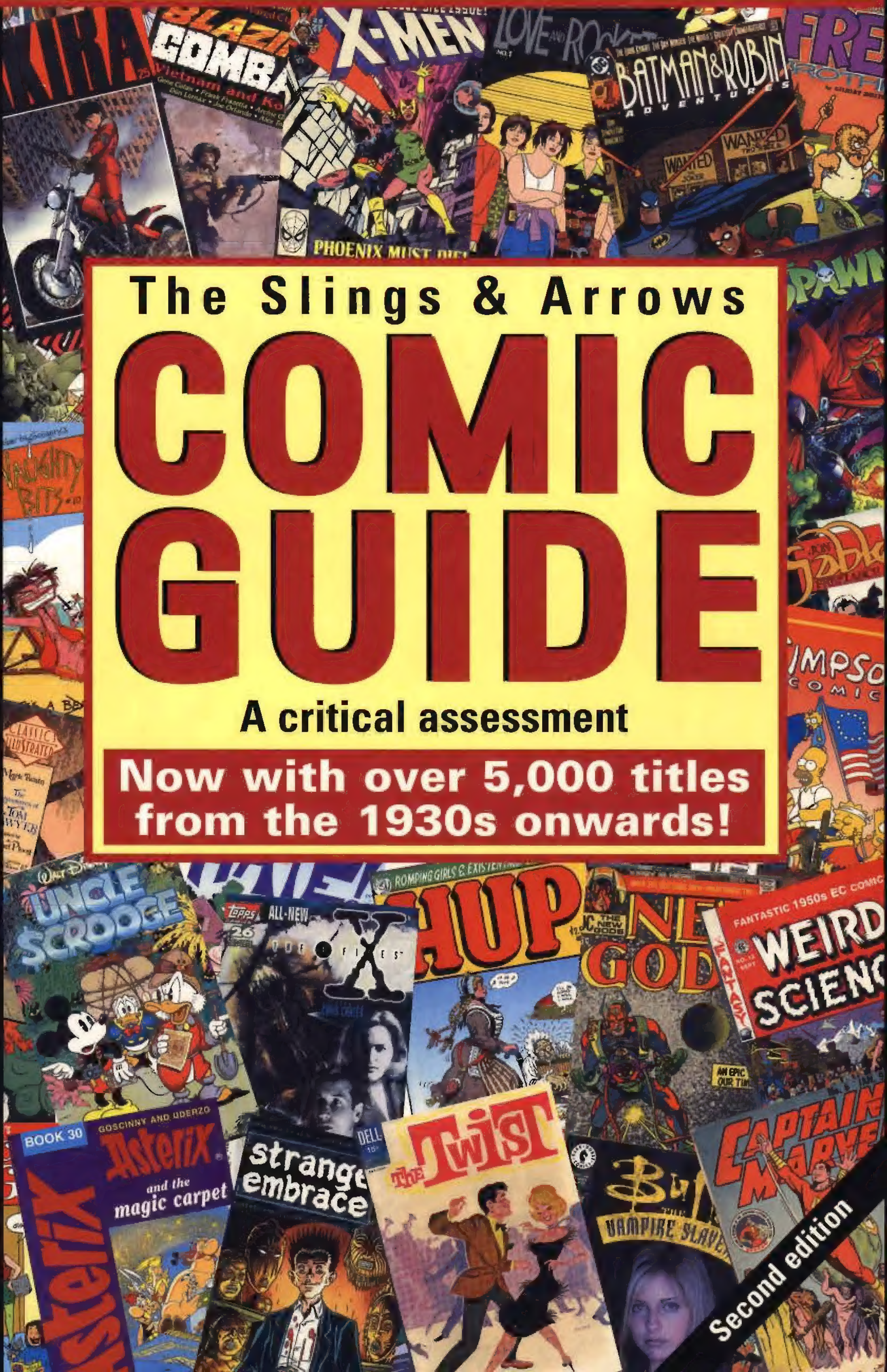
Must haves!
What to avoid!

The essential guide for any serious comic collector

Thousands of titles reviewed from these publishers:

- Aardvark-Vanaheim
- ABC
- ACG
- Antarctic
- Atlas
- Bongo
- Caliber
- Chaos!
- Charlton
- Comico
- CrossGen
- Dancing Elephant
- Dark Horse
- DC
- Drawn & Quarterly
- EC
- Eclipse
- El Capitan
- Eternity
- Fantagraphics
- First
- Gladstone
- Gold Key
- Image
- Kitchen Sink
- Last Gasp
- Malibu
- Marvel
- NBM
- Oni Press
- Print Mint
- Renegade
- Rip-Off
- Slave Labor
- Tekno
- Top Shelf
- Topps
- Tower
- Tundra
- Valiant
- Vertigo
- Viz
- WaRP Graphics
- Warren
- WildStorm
- and many more!


AKIRA
BLAZING COMBAT
X-MEN
PHOENIX MUST DIE!
LOVE AND ROCKETS
BATMAN & ROBIN ADVENTURES
WANTED
SPAWN
NAUGHTY BITS
CLASSICS ILLUSTRATED
SIMPSONS COMICS
UNCLE SCROOGE
ALL-NEW
THE X-FILES
HUP
ROMPING GIRLS & EXISTENTIAL
THE NEW GODS
FANTASTIC 1950s EC COMIC
WEIRD SCIENCE
AN EPIC OUR TIME
CAPTAIN MARVEL
BOOK 30
GOSCINNY AND UDERZO
Asterix and the magic carpet
strange embrace
DELL
THE TWIST
BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER

The Slings & Arrows

COMIC GUIDE

A critical assessment

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Second edition

THE SLINGS & ARROWS
COMIC GUIDE

Slings & Arrows Ltd

Editor: Frank Plowright

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INTRODUCTION

What you're looking at is the most comprehensive review of American comics ever published. It beats the previous holder of that position, our first edition, by almost doubling the amount of titles covered. I've always found it odd that most comic guides are primarily concerned with a perceived value of a comic. You'll find several guides telling you a copy of Spawn issue 1 is now "worth" $10 or so, but none will tell you whether it's a good read or not. That's where we come in. The aim of *The Slings & Arrows Comic Guide* is to present a widespread, qualitative guide to comics published for the American market from the 1930s to the present day. You'll disagree with many of our reviews, and embrace others. I hope everyone who buys this book will be rewarded by discovering at least one excellent series they'd previously overlooked or not heard of. The reviewers who've compiled the bulk of the entries have discovered dozens.

Happy reading
Frank Plowright, Editor

The content and scope of the guide

This guide reviews every American comic series of note from the 1960s to the present day, along with plenty not of note, and many more dating back long before that time. Exclusions encompass comics so rare we just couldn't get hold of them, comics produced for young children unlikely to have wider appeal, most collections of single-tier gag newspaper strips, promotional and giveaway comics only available to a limited percentage of the public, below-average adaptations of films and TV series, and comic sized publications consisting primarily of text and accompanying illustrations, such as sourcebooks, or collections of pin-ups.

The titles covered were read and reviewed to allow a contemporary perspective, and the text encompasses comics up to those dated December 2002, occasionally slipping into 2003 for miniseries.

Definition of entries

The alphabetical system used in the main body of the text flies in the face of conventional order. It's long been a tradition that comics named after people such as *Katy Keene* are listed in trade publications under Katy, and we're sticking with that. There are also cases where the exact title of a comic is uncertain, conflicting versions being on the cover and the first-page indicia. Our solution is simple but effective: we consider the title the largest logo lettering on the cover. As always, though, there are exceptions. One is for titles such as *Shadow of the Bat*, so known for over half its run, and listed here under S despite latter issues prominently featuring Batman's name instead. Another is *Marvel Premiere*, home for dozens of different features, many for no more than a single issue and each with their own logo printed in larger type than the words 'Marvel Premiere'. For cases like this there's an index at the back of the book advising where to locate assorted one-offs and features from umbrella titles. One-shot team-ups between characters are mentioned under reviews concerning the first named character in the title.

Multiple comics with the same title and character from the same publisher are covered under one entry, so all series of *Elementals* are together, whereas Marvel have published three distinct *Spider-Woman* titles, so they're dealt with individually. So are series from different companies with the same title, such as *Beauty and the Beast*, which are listed in order of publication. Properties from outside comics are generally only licensed to publishers for a limited period. As each successive publisher has different editorial approaches and creators there are separate entries for licensed titles such as *Tarzan* and *Star Trek* each time they change publisher. These are listed in chronological order. Creator-owned properties switching publisher, such as *Madman*, are only allocated the single entry because they have a consistent creative vision. Limited series are generally allocated a separate entry, but if they have a parent title or spawn an ongoing title there'll only be the single entry. Likewise multiple miniseries featuring the same characters are gathered under the one entry.

Graphic novels are the hardest items to categorise. Those starring characters already given an entry, such as *She-Hulk*, are covered in that entry. Characters best known from an ongoing series of graphic novels such as Corto Maltese or Tintin, have their own entry, as does any series extending to three volumes or beyond, such as Raptors. Beyond that, the simplest manner of covering other graphic novels has been to cover all entries under publishers' names. Those included are Alternative Press, Amerotica, Catalan, Cha Cha, Comcat, Dark Horse, DC, Diva Graphics, Drawn and Quarterly, Eclipse, Epic, Eros, Eurotica, Fantagraphics, Heavy Metal, Humanoids, Image, Kitchen Sink, Knockabout, Marvel, NBM, Piranha Press, Slave Labor, Spire Christian Comics, Top Shelf, Venture and Vertigo. Just to be contrary, reviews of graphic novels featuring stories that originally saw print in the UK's *2000AD* have been gathered under a 2000AD Graphic Novels entry, with the amount of Judge Dredd collections rating them a separate entry. One-off graphic novels from imprints that don't generally publish such material are given a separate entry, like *The Cowboy Wally Show*.

Ordering of entries

In cases where a character occupies multiple comics with slight variations of title they're largely to be found in the same general area. The largest lettering on the cover is considered the title portion and capitalised, while for purposes of identification the remainder of the title is in lower case. SUPERMAN precedes Adventures of SUPERMAN, which in turn precedes SUPERMAN ADVENTURES. Numeric titles such as 22 Brides are ordered as if spelled out, and for purposes of easy location acronymic titles such as *M.A.C.H. One* are treated as if spelled out. Again, for ease of location, titles featuring the contractions 'Dr', 'Mr', 'Sgt' or 'St' are filed under Doctor, Mister, Sergeant and Saint respectively. Titles with two or more words will precede single-word titles starting with the same letters, so *Black Hood* will be found before *Blackball*. Although wrong, the sheer volume of x-hyphenated titles has necessitated listing them alphabetically as if without hyphen, as that's where most people will look. *Xenozoic Tales* therefore precedes *X-Files*, *X-Men* and numerous others. The few titles known by their initials such as E.V.E. are also listed in the main alphabetical run.

Components of entries

Below the title the publisher is listed, followed by the number of issues plus any annuals or specials, and publication dates. Where the run doesn't start with 1, issue numbers are noted in parentheses, and if there's a large gap in publication this is also noted, together with the split in issue numbers. In the instance of titles still being published as of December 2002 the number of issues is followed by a + sign. The text of each review is followed by the initials of the reviewer (whose full names are noted in our colour section), and recommended issues are only listed where applicable. Those familiar with our first edition will note collections are no longer listed at the end of an entry. So many are now available, that listing them is prohibitive. Instead, for miniseries and limited series, an asterisk by the dates on the publication line indicates a collection was published. This is also used when all issues of longer running titles have been collected, but in this instance it's likely that more than one collection was required. For other longer-running titles asterisks within the body of the text denote any issues mentioned that have been collected, or feature in collections. Not all the collections noted are still in print, although a large proportion are, and in the case of long-running titles there will be plenty of collections available of material not noted in the text.

Recommended issues

There's a wealth of recommended old comics here, many of which can be found in the discount boxes at your local comic shop. The choice of recommended issues will occasionally be controversial, with accepted classics neglected and previous non-contenders reappraised. It amounts to personal choice, although a guiding principle was that this isn't intended to be an elitist selection. In terms of artistic achievement and literary qualities, an issue of *Love and Rockets* is clearly a greater work than most Spider-Man comics, yet there's plenty to enjoy in *Spider-Man* on a different level, and we therefore recommend issues of both. The criterion for recommendation was to assess how well a particular issue had achieved what it set out to do, with only the best being recommended. The best issue of an abysmal run is never listed by default, only if it matches better issues of similar comics. Inversely, if a title is of exceptional quality throughout perfectly acceptable issues may not be listed simply because they fail to match the high standards attained by other issues in the run.

It's usually only issues containing original material that are recommended. Plenty of comics, often starring Disney characters, reprinted stories up to four times during the run. We felt it less likely to confuse readers if just the original received a recommendation. The exceptions are anthology titles gathering reprints from hither and yon, or titles reprinting material almost impossible to obtain in original form, such as *The Spirit* or *Little Nemo*.

Imprints and publishers

Several companies have used multiple imprints, usually to distinguish a selection of titles differing from their traditional output, and the company of origin isn't immediately apparent from the name. If both company name and imprint appear on the cover of a comic, such as DC and Vertigo, that's the way the publisher is listed in this book. In cases where the parent publisher is not immediately apparent from the cover, such as DC's WildStorm imprint, then only the cover imprint is noted. Listed below are imprints together with the name most regularly associated with their parent companies. In the case of companies still existing today the current publishing name is used.

Adventure = Malibu
Aircel = Malibu
All-American (1990s) = Innovation
Amaze Ink = Slave Labor
America's Best Comics = DC
Armada = Acclaim
Bravura = Malibu
CX = Fantagraphics
Epic = Marvel
Eros = Fantagraphics
Eternity = Malibu
Fanny = Knockabout
FX = Eclipse
Gauntlet = Caliber
Hard Boiled = Fantagraphics
Helix = DC
Homage = DC
Iconographix = Caliber
!mpact = DC
Krupp = Kitchen Sink
Max = Marvel
Mighty Comics = Archie
Monster Comics = Fantagraphics
Next = Mirage
Pulp = Viz
Red Circle = Archie
Star = Marvel
Tapestry = Caliber
Tekno = Big Entertainment
Timely = (became) Marvel
Tome = Caliber
Ultraverse = Malibu
Upshot = Fantagraphics
Valiant = Acclaim
Vertigo = DC
WildStorm = DC
Windjammer = Valiant
Zongo = Bongo

Some definitions and some history

Atlas Comics The Atlas Comics of the 1950s is what would evolve into Marvel Comics. The Atlas Comics of 1975 is a different company, although, confusingly, started by the same person, Martin Goodman, who ran the 1950s company.

Bad Girl Art A 1990s equivalent of Good Girl Art (see below): a plethora of scantily clad females with attitude bursting out all over.

Colourist Known as a 'colorist' in the USA, traditionally they were responsible for colouring copies of the inked pages of artwork, but today are more likely to provide guides for computer generated colouring.

The Comics Code A self-regulating method of proclaiming comics as wholesome, introduced in 1954 when the threat of congressional investigation hung over the industry. The prominent application of the Code stamp on the cover of a comic was an assurance to parents that the contents conformed to a stringent set of guidelines. It was once essential to ensure the distribution of comics, but is increasingly irrelevant today as only Archie and DC continue to carry the stamp (at about an eighth of its original size).

Continuity Ongoing plot elements continuing from issue to issue in the manner of TV soap opera. Introduced to comics in the 1960s, it's now rare to have superhero stories complete in one issue.

Cover date The month displayed on a comic's cover. In order to ensure extended display time on the news-stand shelves, the cover date is rarely the date of publication, but anything up to three months later. Comics are increasingly published with date of publication only printed in the interior indicia.

Crisis on Infinite Earths This limited series had a long-lasting impact on the continuity of DC heroes. In the 1950s DC introduced updated versions of their 1940s superheroes, who eventually met their counterparts. When these meetings occurred, the 1940s heroes were consigned to what was labelled "Earth Two", an Earth similar to that occupied by the more modern heroes. Over the years assorted other alternative Earths were introduced, all separated from "Earth One" by virtue of "vibrating at a different speed". In the 1980s DC editors decided this plethora of alternative Earths (and, by then futures) was too complicated and after Crisis on Infinite Earths all DC heroes occupied a single Earth with an established timeline.

Crossover When the story from one title is continued in another. In recent years four monthly Batman titles and four monthly Superman titles have been used as weekly editions of the same comic. Since the 1980s DC titles feature an annual event affecting all their characters (*Crisis on Infinite Earths*, *Final Night*, *Legends*, and *Zero Hour* to name but a few), and more recently themes connecting their annuals.

Editor Generally the company employee who liases with the freelance creators. Until the 1970s it was common for an editor to be actively involved in plotting a comic, and to this day, particularly with major characters, they apply a general storyline. They are also responsible for offering suggestions, imposing deadlines and, at the big companies, ensuring stories don't violate previously established strictures.

The Golden Age Term applied to 1940s superhero comics by 1950s comic fans nostalgically looking back through rose-coloured glasses at material that was largely poorly executed and predictable.

Good Girl Art Most prevalent in the 1940s and 1950s as artists tended to over-emphasise female attributes and provide provocative poses.

Graphic Novel Basically a big comic. Usually a self-contained story of forty-eight pages or longer in length, like Asterix and Tintin, but often also applied to collections of previously serialised material.

Inker The artist who applies black ink to pencilled pages. This is more than just tracing, with different inkers bringing individual styles to the art, and sometimes correcting pencil deficiencies.

Layouts In some cases of artistic collaboration an artist will provide rough pencil sketches breaking down a story for the pencil artist to follow. These may occasionally be detailed enough for an inker to fill in directly.

Letterer The person who physically writes the text within word balloons, although specifically designed computer fonts are now used on comics from most big companies.

Limited Series Title planned as a self-contained story of pre-determined length upwards of six issues.
Logo Artistically distinctive title lettering.

Manga - Name applied to a form of comics in Japan, but generally used as a term for all Japanese comic material outside Japan.

Microseries Two-issue self-contained story.

Minicomics Self-produced and photocopied comics usually in multiples of eight small sized pages, cut down from one photocopied sheet. Many more individual creators started by producing minicomics.

Miniseries Title planned as a self-contained short-run story, usually of four to six issues.

Multiverse The wider universes occupied by superhero comics, encompassing numerous alternate Earths, eerily familiar, yet oddly different.

One-shot Individual issue not part of a regular series with a self-contained story.

Penciller In order to save time in monthly publications it is common for one artist to break down a plot into pencilled pages depicting all necessary elements, which are passed to another artist for inking in black.

Plotter A writer who conceives a story, but turns it over to someone else for scripting.

Scripter A creator who dialogues someone else's plot.

The Silver Age 1940s superhero comics having been called the Golden Age, the natural successor is rather an elastic term that can begin with the arrival of Martian Manhunter in 1955's *Detective* 225. It's more commonly acknowledged to start with *Showcase*'s revival of The Flash a year later, but can stretch to encompass superhero comics up to the late 1960s.

Underground The 1960s counterculture found comics a cheaply produced and effective way of communicating ideas, and a medium that had been the exclusive province of the major publishers was suddenly host to a wide variety of new talent and adult topics.

Universe A term applied to the sphere of existence occupied by the major superheroes, primarily at Marvel and DC. It encompasses places as familiar as the streets of New York, or as strange as another dimension.

Writer Generally the person who has conceived and written a story, although until the 1970s it was commonplace for an editor to suggest a story or plot it with the writer. Since the 1960s a writer will often produce story synopsis for a pencil artist, who breaks it down to fill the required amount of pages, which are then scripted by the writer. Alternatively the writer supplies a full script, which resembles a film script complete with dialogue and directions for the artist.

Xeric Foundation An organisation founded by Peter Laird with the money earned from *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* to administer grants for new creators to produce their own comics. Much respect, sir.

Zero issues In the early 1990s companies went through a phase of issuing comics numbered 0, often to introduce a new title. DC's reorganisation of their multiverse in *Zero Hour* was followed by every title reverting to issue 0 and providing an origin story for new readers with their comics cover-dated October 1994.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the following people for letting us dig into their collections, lending us specific comics, services rendered or supplying invaluable background information. Without them this guide would have been a much more expensive proposition: Simon Baker, Clive Banks, Dewi Black, Miki Breakwell, Lee Brimmicombe-Wood, Mark Buckingham, Hugh Campbell, Phil Clarke, Ben Counter, Mike Collins, Mike Conroy, Simon Curran, John Freeman, Ken Gale, Dave Gibbons, Martin Hand, Allan Harvey, Richard Hayes, Peter Hayward-Brewer, Emma Hull, Niall Gordon, GothicGuru, Trin Li Lau, Tim Leng, Andy Mangels, John McCrea, John McShane, Bob Napier, Kevin O'Donnell, Joe Palmer, David Pardoe, Peter C. Phillips, Peter Root, Peter Rubinstein, Rob Rudderham, Scott Saavedra, Chris Savva, Gio Spinella, Andrew Sweeney, Dave Thomas, Mercy Van Vlack, Dean Whittaker and Jan Wiacek.

The first edition of this book would have been much more work without the consideration of Chris Bleistein at Kitchen Sink, Ruth Cole at Titan, and Charlie Novinskie at Topps. This edition has considerably benefited from the following company representatives Oliver Chin at Viz, then North Atlantic Books, Richard Davies at Red Route, Shawna Erwin-Gore at Dark Horse, Jeff Mason of Alternative Comics, Thierry Nantier at NBM, Michele Pugilese at CrossGen, Chris Staros at Top Shelf, George Broderick of Comics Library International, and Tim Stroup at Cold Cut Distribution. Two gentlemen however stand out as having been exceptionally helpful throughout and unceasingly charming to boot: Brent Braun at Image and Eric Reynolds at Fantagraphics. If you ever meet either of them, shake them heartily by the hand, ply them with drinks and offer to have their children.

Special thanks are due to the following retailers who've been generous enough to lend comics they might have sold while in our hands. They've been unfailingly helpful when asked to search their entire stock for specific comics, or to let us do the same, and in supplying out of the blue comics that had been eluding us for months. Without their assistance and generosity this guide wouldn't have been possible. They are:

Peter Root of City Centre Comics, Kollectibles, Parnie Street, Glasgow G1 5LU
Paul Hudson of Comics Showcase, 63 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0NE
Gafin Austin of Deadhead Comics, Candlemaker Row, Edinburgh EH1 2QG
Kenny Burns of Static, Argyle Street Market, Arglye St, Glasgow G1
Rob Rudderham of 30th Century Comics, 18 Lower Richmond Road, Putney, London SW15 1JP

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- The Underground Comix Info Hub www.ugcomix.info/hub.html

E. &. O.E.

Finally, there are going to be errors in this guide: whether they're typos or plain mistakes we hope they've been restricted to a minimum. Wherever possible we've attempted to verify information ourselves, and this will account for some discrepancies between this and other publications. In cases where we're just plain wrong, though, please let us know at comments@slingsandarrowspublishing.com, so that we can correct any future editions.

A1

Atomeka Press: *6 issues, 1 Special 1989-1992*
Epic/Atomeka Press: *4 issues 1992-1993*

A1 allowed a lot of class artists to let off steam, sometimes without a writer in tow, and published some corking stories alongside the resultant indulgences, which were always great to look at. Where else will you find Glenn Fabry writing and drawing a modern story of street life ('Bricktop' in 1-6)? Encouraging more mainstream creators to experiment was part of the remit: Barry Windsor-Smith submitted loose black and white strips, and Moebius was notable among other contributors. The first issue started auspiciously with Ted McKeever and Dave Gibbons each writing a story for the other to illustrate, and Pete Milligan and Brendan McCarthy's experimental collage about a child molester sitting next to a wacky Bob Burden Flaming Carrot strip. A similar willingness to mix and match on the part of editors Dave Elliott and Garry Leach prevailed throughout.

The emphasis was on British creators; there are a lot of strips from *Warrior* ('Father Shandor', Warpsmiths, 'Bojeffries Saga') in the first series and Deadline (Tank Girl, Cheeky Wee Budgie Boy) in the second. Sexy fantasy stories by Leach and Brian Bolland, particularly in the 'Bikini Confidential Special', rub shoulders with serious drama, comedy and slice-of-life tales. Although it's lacking in direction at times it's a pleasure to see so many great names in one place, rarely doing what you expect of them. Series one was in black and white, while the Epic volumes were in colour.~FJ

Recommended: Series one 1, 3, Special

A.A. PRIME

Viz: *1 volume 1995*

Three romances set in a future where a race of delicate red-maned 'unicorns' (mutates genetically developed for space exploration) dot frontier society. In '*A, A*' (46 pages) we learn that clones of specialists are available to make fatalities at colonial outposts less disruptive to progress. For those who have developed relationships with the deceased a perfect copy's arrival is unexpectedly traumatic. In '4/4' (50 pages) the childlike Trill's life has been concentrated on reason, intellect and experience by her guardian, a scientist who is experimenting on her. An almost-relationship with Mori, a telekinetic, unleashes a 'fourth quarter': emotion. In 'X & Y' (99 pages) Mori has moved to Mars and meets Tacto, a unicorn coming to terms with discovering that he/she is transsexual. The emotional turmoil provides an unpredictable trigger to Mori's powers. Moto Hagio gives us a masterful example of science fiction in a shojo (girls') manga style. The stories are relationship-based and sentimental, but work in the futures that she unfolds for us. The expected romantic facials and montages are carefully played-off against the portrayal of the various planets and their communities.~SW

Recommended

A.A.R.G.H.

Mad Love: *One-shot 1988*

A benefit comic intended to raise funds to combat anti-gay legislation. The acronym stands for Artists Against Rampant Government Homophobia, and the list of contributors is stellar – Neil Gaiman, Frank Miller, Alan Moore, Bill Sienkiewicz, Dave Sim and a cast of thousands. Unfortunately the stories tend to be painfully earnest (Moore), or suspectly flippant and dismissive (Miller's 'Robohomophobe'). Still, most readers will find something of interest.~HS

A & D Armed Dangerous

Acclaim: *4 issue miniseries 1996-1997*, one-shot ('Saturday Night Special') 1997*

'I can do that,' thought Bob Hall after a glance at *Sin City*, and indeed he can. Not as well, though. Charly Donovan is a washed-out drunken ex-gangster who inadvertently becomes involved in a gang war. Hall lacks Frank Miller's sense of design and dynamics, and while his writing is good enough why buy *A & D* when the real thing is so much better at the same price?~WJ

AARGH!

Marvel: *5 issues 1974-1975*

A combination of horror and humour that never managed the consistency of its inspiration, DC's *Plop*. Creators like Alfredo Alcala, Mike Sekowsky and Roy Thomas contributed decent enough material without ever coming up with anything particularly memorable. Tom Sutton's 'Rat' in 1 and 3 was the comic's highpoint, although 1950s reprints from Bill Everett in 1 and 2 were equally nice to look at. The final issue, by contrast, was a calamitous change of direction to more mainstream humour by Ross Andru and Mike Esposito that seems prepared for a different comic altogether. Avoid.~DAR

AARON STRIPS

Image: *4 issues 1997*

Collects Aaron Warner's syndicated strip *The Adventures of Aaron*, about a slacker youth with an overactive libido and a dysfunctional family. Attractively drawn, and, while not original, and possessed of no belly laughs, there are quite a few wry smiles to be found here.~HS

ABC WARRIORS

Fleetway/Quality: *8 issues 1990-1991**
Hamlyn: *1 Volume 1997*

The ABC Warriors are an eccentric bunch of robots with personalities able to resist Atomic, Bacterial and Chemical warfare, none more so than the mystical Deadlock, combining spells and steel. Originally serialised in five-page episodes in *2000AD*, when collected the lack of any developing plot is glaring. Luckily, the largely inventive scripts of Pat Mills ensure individual episodes remain memorable, and 1-4 are a showcase for almost all the artists working regularly on *2000AD* in the late 1970s. The best are Mike McMahon's chunky stylings and Kev O'Neill's more angular work, but other artists of note include Carlos Ezquerra, Dave Gibbons and Brendan McCarthy. By *2000AD*'s third run of ABC Warriors, serialised from the end of 4, Mills was plotting an entire story in advance, and the greater cohesiveness and a fixed destination provide a more satisfying read. It features the first comics work of Simon Bisley, although the other artist used, SMS, is good and generally overlooked. In the end, though, shoddy printing ensures everything looks terrible. Titan Books volumes reprinting the early stories are the best place to see *ABC Warriors*, and a Hamlyn volume reprints work continuing the series, two stories titled 'Khronicles of Khaos' and 'Hellbringer'. By now the Warriors have a mission to spread Khaos, Tony Skinner has a heavy and detrimental hand in the writing, and there's an ecological and anti-corporate subtext. Kev Walker's art is good as far as it goes, which isn't beyond powerful figures to any backgrounds, although his vibrant and vivid palette is distinctive.~WJ

ABE SAPIEN

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1998*

Spun-off from *Hellboy*, this starred his fellow paranormal investigator in a tale of ships haunted by the ghosts of African slaves. Brian McDonald's script is decent enough, and Derek Thompson puts a lot of work into the art, but there's no denying that without Mike Mignola things fall a little flat. This is underlined by a great Hellboy back-up by Mignola that has all the style and wit lacking in the lead strip.~DAR

---

* Available in a collected edition

A. BIZARRO

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1999*

Gene tampering has produced a resilient being with the I.Q of your average ape. As the bizarro attempts to piece together his past and find a future he has to fight off Luthor's attempts at capture via a side-trip to Apokolips, along the way meeting several people familiar to Superman readers. It's a sometimes amusing read, but just the transitory diversion.~FP

ABOMINATIONS

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 1996-1997*

Hulk-free sequel to his 'Future Imperfect' microseries by Ivan Velez Jr and Angel Medina. In the wake of the Maestro's departure a decaying Abomination rises to take the tyrant's throne, motivating some of the Outlaws to escape to our present. Inevitably, they face off with the current Abomination. Everyone and his brother has an attitude and it is all too cute for its own good.~APS

ABRAHAM STONE

Platinum: *1 Graphic Novel 1991*
Epic: *2 issues 1995*

In the graphic novel Abraham Stone leaves his rural homeland to seek his destiny in New York. Since this is the century's second decade his experiences of getting to grips with city life manage to include a fair amount of violence, especially since he's looking for the criminals that killed his family. In doing so he becomes an enforcer for a local mobster, eventually moving closer to the person who ordered his parents' execution.

The Epic volumes are traditional comic size, and see Abraham bedding a rich woman who takes him to Hollywood, where he gets involved in the early days of the movie industry, in 1, and becoming an unwilling part of Pancho Villa's revolution in 2. Abraham looks out for himself first, and is all too easily cajoled into illicit activities, but he retains a nobility and sense of justice that sees him through to the other side. Written and drawn by Joe Kubert, it's well up to standard artistically with Kubert evoking a strong period flavour in all issues, but equally all issues could have used a tighter script.~NF

ABSOLUTE ZERO

Antarctic: *6 issues 1995-1996*

Hit-or-miss anthology title that features work from unpublished creators, most notably Dean Hsieh who debuted Athena in 1-3, and the return of anthropomorphic mouse warrior Mighty Tiny (2 onwards) by Pat Kelly. Most of the remaining content is very forgettable, including early work from James Kochalka.~WW

The ABYSS

Dark Horse: *2 issue microseries 1989**

Film adaptation notable for Mike Kaluta's art. Unfortunately his usually decorative and well designed pages are muted by the necessity of multiple-talking-heads panels. The special effects endowed the movie with an eerie splendour, and lacking them the script's resemblance to a 1950s B-movie is highlighted.~FP

AC ANNUAL

Americomics: *4 issues 1991-1994*

Expanded adventures of AC's *Femforce* and their supporting heroes and villains. That's all there is to say really. Go on to the next entry. Or look up *Deadbeats*, which is rather good.~HS

ACCELERATE

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 2000*

Punk science fiction, written by Richard Kadrey and drawn by the Pander Brothers. A young woman whose dead boyfriend contacts her on the anniversary of his death is set off on a drug-fuelled adventure that takes her through the mutated Los Angeles landscape and pits her against the city's cops and politicians. Accelerate is the drug that allows her to move outside normal time and eventually re-unite with her boyfriend in cyberspace. As much a homage to L.A. and lost youth as a thriller, its strong characters and expressionistic artwork just about keep your interest.~NF

ACCIDENT MAN

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1993*

Mike Fallon is a high-level assassin, arranging accidents on behalf of the CIA, but putting most of his energies into comparing designer labels with buxom fellow-assassins while in the process of changing into bondage gear. Pat Mills and Tony Skinner lift the standard of dialogue and ideas slightly above average for this category of soft porn, but nowhere near high enough to justify three issues, and the mean artwork provides even less reason to stick around.~FC

ACE

Harrier: *One-shot 1987*

The pick of Eddie Campbell's earliest comic work, done for the fun of it, documenting the adventures of attendees at the Ace Rock And Roll Club, a 1950s revival hang-out in Southend. Stories don't get much more kitchen-sink than 'If Monkeys Could Fly', in which a girl recounts how she may have become pregnant and considers an abortion, and while the art is sometimes rough in places, the writing is among Campbell's best.~FJ
Recommended

ACE INTERNATIONAL

Starhead: *1 issue 1993*

Dennis Eichhorn narrates tales of the days when he was a hippy Private Eye/Process Server. Underground-style humour in short stories illustrated by the cream of the alternative cartoonists circuit, including Peter Kuper and Jim Woodring.~WW

ACE McCOY

ACG: *3 issues 1999-2000*

This reprints the latter end of the Frank Frazetta newspaper strip Johnny Comet featuring the hectic adventures of a daredevil race-driver and movie stuntman – a career change that ostensibly prompted the name-change of the lead character. Both daily and Sunday strips are featured, leavened with some truly appalling reprints from Charlton's 1960's motoring comic *Dragstrip Hot-Rodders*, but although Frazetta's art is magnificent the scripting is mediocre and the strip was cancelled mid-term. Historically interesting but unsatisfactory.~WW

ACES

Acme/Eclipse: *5 issues 1988*

One of the many valiant attempts to sell European strips to an English speaking audience. The magazine format *Aces* consisted of 'Air Mail' a 1920s aviation strip by Micheluzzi, 'Hollywood Eye', a 1930s detective story by Rivière, Bocquet and Berthet, and the hard-boiled 'Morgon' by Segura and Ortiz. They're all fine, but it was Zentner and Pellejero's superb adventure strip 'Dieter Lumpen', making its sole appearance in 4, that made the comic worth picking up.~DAR
Recommended: 4

ACES HIGH

EC: *5 issues 1955**
Gemstone: *5 issues 1999**

Aces High is a comic about the rather limited subject of World War I flying aces which, after only five issues, was clearly running out of creative direction. The artists and writers faced several problems, not least finding ways to introduce American characters to stories set in France.

Visually, while there is some stunning artwork, particularly from George Evans, it proved difficult to make the multiple dogfights that comprised the bulk of the action look different from story to story. The issues followed a similar pattern, opening with a visually accurate Evans story with beautiful artwork, followed by a story illustrated by Wally Wood, which usually had less fights and more characterisation. Even so this is obviously not Wood's favourite subject matter and some of the figure work looks rushed. Bernie Krigstein looked most out of place in the line-up, cluttering his art as if trying to ape Evans and Wood's level of intricacy. It doesn't suit him, although the writers have obviously tried to accommodate his strengths and supply him with more character-based stories such as 'Revenge' in 1 and 'The Mascot' in 2. Finally Jack Davis, again drawing in a slightly more detailed style than one associates with him, would round out the issue with a quirky shock story like 5's 'Iron Man', about a seemingly invulnerable fighter who doesn't realise he's a ghost. Davis' broader line and robust approach to storytelling added a much-needed vigour.

Although lovely to look at, it's clear Evans would have happily illustrated the same basic story until the cows came home. In issue one's lead story, 'The Way It Was', an old man reminisces to his grandchildren about how fine and chivalrous fighting was in the old days, and how the air aces subscribed to a forgotten code of conduct which was transgressed at their peril. It's repeated time and again ('Chivalry!' in 2, 'Footnote' in 3). Evans does get to draw the best story in the run, 'The Green Kids' in 4, in which a squadron leader, sickened by the way young pilots with almost no experience were supplied as aerial cannon fodder, continually harangues his commanding officer, who seems cold and distant. When appointed to replace him he discovers that he had been futilely battling for the same ends. Generally, Aces High soft-pedals the 'awfulness of war' angle for which Kurtzman's earlier titles became justly famous, and here the idea is refreshing. Ultimately, beautifully drawn but few stories worth reading. For the art at its best, seek out the black and white hardback collection reprinting the entire run.~FJ

ACME NOVELTY LIBRARY

Fantagraphics: *15 issues + 1993 to date*

Chris Ware's Acme Novelty Library is an astounding publication, presenting comics that engage the intellect, and managing from the first issue to do so in an accessible manner, thus succeeding where Raw failed. It's also arguably the first comic to move the medium forward since the undergrounds of the 1960s, yet keeps a clear eye on the past. Ware employs a regular cast including an archaic representation of a robot, an aged superhero archetype (sometimes presented as God), a hapless rural character dominated by his father, and Jimmy Corrigan, the smartest kid on Earth. Seen as child that fantasises about superheroes, and a dull middle-aged adult, the appellation is a cruelly capricious label, as Corrigan's strip, described in 5 as "an attempt to accurately counterfeit the mechanism of mundanity", portrays him as the loneliest and most pitiful person seen in comics. Occupying a spartanly furnished apartment and dreaming of dating his co-workers, his only social interaction is frequent phone calls from his overbearing mother. Ware's very dark humour puts his character through the grinder and an optimistic childhood becomes a solitary adult life punctuated by brief bursts of aspiration, always unfulfilled. The very epitome of the person who's always worse off than you are, Corrigan's incessantly depressed existence and hangdog face can't help but induce guilty laughter. As the series progresses, Corrigan comes to dominate, undergoing a disappointing reunion with his father. The family history is also disinterred by Ware, stretching back to events centred on the Chicago World Fair at the end of the 19th century. Here the narrative has a sense of foreboding and if anything, the humour becomes even more jaw-droppingly bleak in the longer concluding chapters presented in 13 and 14. The Jimmy Corrigan stories have been collected and in 2001 received the Guardian newspaper award for that year's best first book.

Quimby the Mouse is also remarkable, a 1930s-style cartoon mouse going about his business in an enormous series of intricate, minute panels, encompassed within a far larger design. Echoing the tomfoolery of *Krazy Kat*, Quimby's existence is also solitary and troublesome, and is the focus of 2 and 4, and there is now a Quimby collection. 15 concentrates on Rusty Brown, briefly seen in earlier editions, manifesting the worst habits of the obsessive collector. He's mercenary, unhygienic, calculating, and, unlike Corrigan, entirely unsympathetic as the engineer of his own isolated life. There are also a few 'Tales of Tomorrow', best described as Jimmy Corrigan in the future. This all makes *Acme Novelty Library* sound depressing, when in fact it's riotously funny if you're of a cruel-humoured disposition.

Ware's art is astounding. With what is on the surface a clear and simple line, his ability to portray a full range of emotions within this style is remarkable, and his frequent bleak land- and cityscapes, intended to convey isolation, are surprisingly edifying. His skill as a designer is even more impressive, with each issue meticulously pieced together and living up to the novelty aspect of the title. His storytelling also innovates, skipping back and forth over time from panel to panel in some instances. Only the first issue resembles the traditional comic format. 2 and 4 are each over a foot high, with 7 and 15 standing a full eighteen inches, while Jimmy Corrigan's chapters beyond 5 are presented in small pocket-sized landscape editions. 3 is a slightly larger portrait variation. Ware obsessively tinkers with the material as well. Most of it originates as strips produced for *The Daily Texan* or Chicago paper *New City*, which are re-jigged for *Acme Novelty Library*, often after having previously been altered for interim publication elsewhere. The content of 10, for instance was previously seen in *Blab* 7-8, but is here modified, including extra colour and a new epilogue. In turn the text pieces in 10 are very funny, particularly Ware's rant at the art world, but these are omitted from the Corrigan collection.

The comics are rounded out with ludicrously formally phrased (and very funny) nonsensical articles and fake ads, and intricately designed cut-out models of the type that might have been presented had there been comics in the Victorian era. This would be mere whimsical window-dressing elsewhere, but the archaic and convoluted language and formality of address bestow a cohesive substance to the entire package. *Acme Novelty Library* is a rare, and possibly unique, instance where the innovatively designed original comics stand as worthy artefacts and more desirable purchases than the collections.~FP

Recommended: 1-15

ACTION COMICS

DC: *796 issues +, 9 Annuals 1938 to date*

Action Comics 1 is clearly the most important comic ever published, defining the entire future of the American comics industry and creating a new genre in the superpowered crimefighter. Editor Vincent Sullivan made a bold decision in allocating the cover of his new title to a feature rejected by several other comic companies and newspaper syndicates. It was, of course, Superman, created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. While he may not have been the first skintight-costumed character in comic strip form, he was the first to lift a car over his head and smash it. Comics were certainly different in 1938 and for ten cents you got your money's worth. In addition to Superman the first issue included two black and white strips, one a Western strip titled 'Chuck Dawson', the other 'Scoop Scanlon Five Star Reporter'. Additionally in colour there were the adventures of Marco Polo, a cartoon strip, Bernard Baily's 'Tex Thomson', an adventurer, who would have a long run under various names, and 'Pep Morgan', a boxer by Fred Guardineer. 'Zatara The Master Magician' rounded out the issue, again by Guardineer, inspired by Mandrake the Magician, to whom he bore more than a passing resemblance. What differed him, though, was that he would recite his spells backwards! He was later better known as father of Zatanna, who inherited his abilities.

Contrary to current wisdom, the comics of the 1930s weren't all simplistic, and Action contained well plotted material. In his first appearance Superman must stop an execution, confront a wife beater, and almost becomes involved in political corruption. Siegel's plotting is tight, and Shuster's art, while perhaps a little crude, is very dramatic, and it's easy to see why this strip was a hit from day one. It contained large portions of the legend that remain today. Lois Lane appears in the first story, admiring Superman, but despising his timid alter ego Clark Kent. She's gutsy from the off, and Kent's persona is also well established as he begins working at *The Daily Star* (changed to *The Daily Planet* in 23). By all accounts this was an extremely high-selling comic, but DC didn't appear to realise this was due to Superman, who wasn't cover-featured again until 7, but from 9 either his name or image was presented, and from 19 there was no doubt who was the star of the comic. 6 introduced an office boy generally thought to be the first appearance of Jimmy Olsen. Superman's career as a journalist sees off Scoop Scanlon from 13, and Lex Luthor débuts in 23, oddly with a shock of red hair, although he does have a bald assistant. He'd not be seen again here until 42. You can find all these early stories in DC's *Superman Archives* series.

1940s Superman stories were strictly Earthbound, often prompted by Clark Kent's newspaper career, although his enemies were initially gangsters, then largely humans with a gimmick such as the Prankster and Toyman, introduced in 51 and 64 respectively. The former in particular proved more popular at first than Lex Luthor, and it wasn't until the 1950s that the bald evil genius was beefed up into Superman's pre-eminent foe. Like most other superheroes, Superman played a large part in the war effort, fighting home-front saboteurs and Nazis abroad. The most notoriously jingoistic result of the conflict was 58's cover proclaiming 'You Can Slap A Jap', and Superman putting up posters saying so.

Assorted back-up features replaced those from the first issue over time, with 23, 33, 37, 40 and 42 seeing the débuts of the Black Pirate, Mr America (actually Tex Thomson, who would further become the Americommando in 51), Congo Bill, The Star-Spangled Kid and the Vigilante respectively. Congo Bill lasted well in to the 1950s, eventually as the giant golden gorilla Congorilla, and in lasting to 86 the Star-Spangled Kid turned convention on its head by having an adult sidekick Stripsey. Often drawn by the expressive Mort Meskin, it was the Vigilante who was the quality act, replacing Shelly Moldoff's Black Pirate and running until 198. Country singer ("Prairie Troubadour") Greg Sanders had a dual career as radio star and crime fighter, masking himself by means of a distinctive red scarf tied around his mouth. The back-ups remained remarkably stable for years, some only dropping out when the page count was reduced. The last significant addition was Tommy Tomorrow in 127, a space-adventure strip set in the 21st century, who would run until 251.

Superman's powers gradually increased over the years, with X-ray vision introduced in 18, and his strength and speed on an upward curve. Pretty soon he was no longer leaping buildings in a single bound, but flying over them easy as you like. In 60 Lois Lane gains superpowers to become Superwoman, nicely handled for what was then a new idea. It would be recycled many times in the following decades. By this time Superman was established on Earth, although fantastic elements were added to his stories by recurring inept magicians Hocus and Pocus. Seemingly popular in the mid-1940s, they were the nearest Superman came to comedy sidekicks, but their bumbling was eventually deemed surplus to requirements, and the jokes were left to the Prankster. There were few glimpses into Superman's Kryptonian background until the late 1940s, and 158 features his own personal album 'The Kid From Krypton', expanding on his origin. This was in the early 1950s, and by this point Superman's stories had become more fantasy oriented. The appearance of aliens was frequent, as were time-travel stories, and Superman saw out the demise of the superheroes that had followed him with ease. This was possibly because as well as being the original article, despite his powers Superman had always offered more than a succession of villains, and the strip was consistently strong, with a distinctive supporting cast. Of course, that there was a Superman radio show throughout the 1940s and TV series running between 1952 and 1957 may have helped.

Although Jerry Siegel was still writing Superman stories, Shuster had long since given way to other artists. The pair maintained a studio from which various artists drew the strip, most notably Fred Ray, Paul Cassidy, Leo Nowak and John Sikela, who would go on to be the pre-eminent Superboy artist of the 1950s. Foremost among them, though, and longest lasting was Wayne Boring. His figures were stiff-looking, but there was a unique dynamism, albeit coupled with a tendency to draw everyone with lockjaw. DC also appointed Jack Burnley to draw some strips. The mid-1950s Superman is probably the version that most commonly comes to mind for most people. Still at *The Daily Planet*, Clark Kent was now a fully rounded and distinct character, and Luthor was making more of a nuisance of himself with a succession of outlandish schemes. The Kryptonian heritage was being mined to the full, not least with the various shades of Kryptonite, each affecting Superman in a different way, with green the deadliest. Assorted villains from Krypton's past would pop up with increasing frequency, starting with 194, and Lois Lane played a big part in most stories, now often obsessed with the idea of uncovering Superman's other identity. In 206 Superman married Lois Lane, except he didn't, but this teaser, and many others later, were for an event probably ordained from their first appearance. The Superman series was gathering momentum in *Action* by the late 1950s, and additions to his legend were constant, with the origin of Brainiac in 242, in which it was revealed that an entire Kryptonian city had been shrunk and was preserved in a bottle. The miniature inhabitants often later emerged to give Superman a hand when required, and he in turn would regularly shrink himself to visit the city for an adventure, occasionally masquerading with Jimmy Olsen as Kandorian superheroes Nightwing and Flamebird.

252 is a landmark, with the origin and first appearance of Supergirl. She's also a Kryptonian, who escaped the planet's destruction, and was, coincidentally, Superman's cousin. Not a hoax, villain or robot, she was for real, a female counterpart for Superman and a permanent addition to the legend, gaining a back-up strip from 253. Her late arrival on Earth was due to her domed city being detached whole from Krypton's destruction, and her only following Superman into space when a meteorite devastated the city. She lived in an orphanage, adopting the identity of Linda Lee, and secretly shooting out to perform heroic deeds in her Superman-inspired costume, during which a robot Linda Lee would replace her. Some stories focused on her romantic interludes, and she had a particular crush on a fellow orphan, Dick Malvern. Leo Dorfman and Jim Mooney provided constantly well plotted and drawn stories, page-turners each and every one. These earliest stories have recently been represented in hardbound DC Archives edition. In 285 Supergirl became known to the world at large, and a good sampler of her back-up years is 295-298, conveniently reprinted as a one-shot special. They put Supergirl through the wringer, but even more so did the same to her friend, Lena Thorul. Hmmm, can't those letters be rearranged? Yes, Lena was Lex's younger sister, and the family changed their name when Lex went bad. Other samples of classic Supergirl can be found in reprint issues 334, 347, 360 and 373.

By the mid-1960s there'd been an upheaval in the comics industry, but Superman, both here and in his own title, never really stood still. While editor Mort Weisinger had a low regard for the opinions of fans he nonetheless gave them what they wanted with tight continuity and inventive additions to Superman's legend. The regular pencillers at this time were Al Plastino and Curt Swan, with Swan being the more special of the two. A highlight of his is 'The Death of Luthor' in 318-319, in which Luthor returns to the planet Lexor, named in his honour after he used his great scientific know-how to save the planet from destruction. Here he's a hero, and lures Superman to the planet and fixes events to seem as if Superman has killed him. 319 is the trial, and even when Luthor's deception is revealed he's so beloved that he's forgiven and Superman banished. Luthor remains, married to the delightful Adora, apparently to live happily ever after. Of course, it doesn't last. The 1960s was also the heyday of the 'Imaginary Stories', which, unconstrained by continuity, allowed Superman's writers to present some very interesting ideas. 332, for instance, has the wrinkle of Supergirl preceding her cousin's arrival on Earth, and then training him, while 338 and 339 star Superman's descendant. 351-353 are Wayne Boring's finest hour, featuring Zha-Vam, a character obviously inspired by the original Captain Marvel. 357 was Boring's last issue, while the back-up Supergirl strip was drawn by the excellent Kurt Schaffenberger from 359. 363 began a great multi-part story in which Luthor afflicts Superman with a disease turning him into a leper. Not wanting to infect others, he exiles himself into space, and then plans suicide in order to destroy the virus. Before he becomes cosmic dust, though, he's saved by the Bizarros. This strange tale was the work of writer Jim Shooter and artist Ross Andru.

From 377 Supergirl was elevated into *Adventure Comics*, while the previous headliners there, The Legion of Super-Heroes, occupied her back-up slot. With only a few pages to play around with, Shooter turned in some memorable character-driven stories, particularly 378, which dealt with drug addiction (strangely passing the comic Code Authority which banned all mention of drugs). 381 spotlighted a Legionnaire who lived in the poorer section of town, along with family hardship. Shooter's last story was 384, and the remainder of the Legion's run was written by E. Nelson Bridwell and Cary Bates in admirable fashion. Bates was also becoming an inventive and popular Superman writer. Try 385-387, where the Man of Steel is trapped in the future and becomes immortal. The end of an era came with 392 as Mort Weisinger retired, having edited the Superman line for decades. Fittingly his final issue was an imaginary story, a form he pioneered. It was also the death knell for The Legion of Super-Heroes, not required by new editor Murray Boltinoff, whose preferred back-up feature was 'Tales from the Fortress of Solitude', introduced in 395 and detailing the history of assorted artefacts kept by Superman in his Arctic hideaway. Boltinoff also introduced credits for creators, and teamed now regular penciller Curt Swan with the magnificent inking of Murphy Anderson for the Superman art team supreme. There was no great change in the substance of the stories, but the team of Swan and Anderson made events look substantially more dynamic. Boltinoff also dropped the idea of imaginary stories, the final one occupying 396-397. Years later they were to be resurrected as 'Elseworlds' tales.

403-413 are fifty-two pages, all containing a nice selection of reprint strips, and a new back-up starts in 413, running until 418. Bob Haney and John Calnan failed to capture the quirky flavour of Metamorpho's 1960s series, although Haney did pack a lot of plot into eight pages. 419 introduced a new back-up, The Human Target, an inventive idea from Len Wein later to become a TV movie. Christopher Chance took the place of people marked for murder, using his wits to trap the killer. Carmine Infantino pencilled the first strip, inked by Dick Giordano, who thereafter pencilled as well. The Human Target alternated with Green Arrow (nicely drawn by Sal Amendola and Giordano) and the Atom in the back-up slot. Throughout a period of revitalisation at DC during the early 1970s, the Superman strip in *Action Comics* had remained largely unmodified, unlike his own title, even when the instigator of those changes Julie Schwartz, became editor. The only changes filtering through were that Clark Kent now worked as a TV reporter for WGBS, facilitating the introduction of sports correspondent Steve Lombard to the cast. He was always a practical joker, with Kent his constant target, but the jokes rarely went as planned. It also returned Lana Lang to the strip on a regular basis, now a more mature character able to appreciate Clark Kent a lot more, and eventually a relationship develops. Lucky old Clark. Although the art of Swan and Anderson remained very nice, the stories, now mainly written by Cary Bates and occasionally Elliot Maggin, verged on average. There were a few outstanding issues, though, such as 437 and 443, with lead stories written by Maggin and an excellent selection of reprints.

484 is another wedding of Superman and Lois Lane, but this time it's not a hoax, a dream or an imaginary story. It's the marriage of the 1940s Superman, whom DC continuity revisions had consigned to an alternate Earth. It's a charming issue giving the fans what they wanted. 488 saw the start of an occasional Air Wave back-up strip. This was an updated version of a 1940s superhero, and while competent was never outstanding, and ran to 535, often teaming with the Atom. 500's 'The Life Story of Superman' recaps Superman's life from the explosion of Krypton onwards from Martin Pasko and the usual Swan and Anderson art team. It coincided with the release of the first *Superman* film, which seemed to prompt some outstanding stories. 507-508 offer the miraculous return of Jonathan Kent, a time paradox story involving aliens, but returning a seventy-year-old Pa Kent, who hadn't died when Superman was a boy. It was a moment of inspiration from Cary Bates, who was also responsible for the very well plotted story, and very convincing 510-512, in which Lex Luthor apparently abandons his villainous ways. Sadly, having hit form, Bates was replaced by an uninspired Marv Wolfman. Combined with Bob Rozakis' determination to retain a 1960s feel to the Air Wave, Aquaman and Atom back-up strips, the early 1980s was far from a golden era for Action. This was compounded by Curt Swan's departure with 534, although he returned for 544, the 45th anniversary issue, to draw an excellent Cary Bates-scripted Lex Luthor story, returning him to Lexor. New artist Gil Kane drew some nice issues between 539 and 552, and his contribution to 544 was a Wolfman written tale transforming the old-style Brainiac into a new, grotesque cybernetic model. Kane's art was distinctive, but he gave way to Kurt Schaffenberger in 556. Splendid artist though he is, Schaffenberger's style was definitely 1960s, which can't have helped declining sales. 560, 563, 565 featured Keith Giffen's wacky Ambush Bug in the back-up slot, a decidedly welcome breath of fresh air. Giffen also drew the Superman strip in 577-579, the latter a nice Asterix homage written by Jean Marc and Randy L'Officier. It was a welcome change of pace, but the Superman strip was just coasting along with ever poorer plots. Something needed to be done and the result was a whole new look for Superman from 584. Before that, though, in 583* there was one of the best Superman stories ever, a nostalgia-drenched imaginary story drawn by the classy team of Curt Swan and Kurt Schaffenberger, and written by Alan Moore. It concluded the story begun in *Superman* 423 featuring all the classic Superman elements. It's magnificent, and no comic fan should deny themselves this story. Schwartz ended his editorship on a well-deserved high.

584 featured the new Superman in a revised continuity. The strip had reverted to its roots, and Superman's unique nature was emphasised by his being the only Kryptonian to survive the destruction of the planet. Artist and writer John Byrne revived the DC Presents idea of Superman teaming with different guest stars each issue, kicking off with the popular Teen Titans. The selection of guest stars was engagingly offbeat, as Byrne seemed to be running through his favourites. Jack Kirby-created characters were

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* Available in a collected edition

high on the list with the New Gods, Demon, Big Barda and Mister Miracle appearing in 586, 587, 592 and 593 respectively. He also had a soft spot for the Metal Men, featuring them in 590 and 599, but his most notable story was 591, in which the old Superboy starred in a tale of alternate realities. None of these stories dealt with Superman's personal life apart from 597, which guest-starred the two women in Clark Kent's life, Lana Lang and Lois Lane, sorting out their relationships with Clark. Byrne's run ended in impressive fashion with 600, an anniversary issue, with a number of stories all plotted by Byrne. There's a possible romance with Wonder Woman, drawn by George Perez and featuring Darkseid, and we're also treated to solos for many of Superman's supporting cast, drawn by classic artists. Although a nostalgic look at *Action Comics* it's also decidedly modern.

601 to 642 saw a complete change as *Action* became a weekly publication with episodes of several ongoing strips in each issue. This was innovative for the USA (although the traditional British format), and further risks were taken with the choice of strips, few of them headliners. Max Allan Collins and Terry Beatty's Wild Dog was a vigilante-style defender of the suburbs. Numerous attempts at popularising Blackhawk had failed since the 1950s, while the espionage strip Secret Six hadn't been seen since their own short-run comic in the 1960s. Mike Baron and Dan Jurgens revived Deadman, later illustrated by Kelley Jones, and Superman was relegated to a two-page centrespread in newspaper style format. The nominal star of the comic was Gil Kane, returning to former glories in illustrating Green Lantern, but the stories were disappointing. Later highlights included the return of 1940s tease Phantom Lady in a new incarnation from 636, the same issue in which Alan Grant started the restoration of the Demon. The weekly format was a brave experiment, but eventually produced little of note, much of the problem stemming from a generation of writers not used to providing a beginning, middle and end, or cliffhanger, in an eight-page story every issue. The final weekly issue is notable for a story running through the Deadman, Nightwing, Green Lantern and Superman strips pencilled by a number of veteran artists inked by young Turks. There's some nice combinations, including Carmine Infantino and Kevin Nowlan, Steve Ditko and Art Thibert and Curt Swan and Ty Templeton.

George Perez was at the helm as artist/writer in 643 to 652, producing decent enough stories scripted by Roger Stern, who carries on as writer after Perez' departure, with Brett Breeding taking over the art. A significant story occurs in 660, in which Lex Luthor dies. And we see the body. But who's this person with flowing red hair claiming to be Luthor's long-lost son? Even more significantly, in 662 Superman finally confides in Lois Lane, revealing his Clark Kent identity. It's the end of an era and the beginning of a new one as they decide to get married. Superman's immediately whisked away for two issues as part of the 'Time and Time Again'* story crossing over between all the Superman titles. Here he encounters old DC villain Chronos in the Stone Age and moves to the 1940s in 665, featuring a nice cameo from the Justice Society of America, while Luthor Jnr is proving very popular with the citizens of Metropolis. 674 was part of another crossover story 'Panic in the Sky'*, and introduced the new Supergirl, an artificial creature called Matrix, with shapeshifting abilities among others, who is befriended by the new, genial Luthor. Jackson Guice becomes regular penciller with 476, by which point Action had become part of what was to all intents and purposes a weekly *Superman* comic. Stories ran through all the Superman titles, with each having individual subplots, and the running order denoted by triangles on the cover. *Action*'s main sub-plot concerned Luthor, a paragon of virtue in public, yet with Supergirl apparently under his thrall. 683-691* are part of three long crossover stories in which Superman is killed by Doomsday, after which four possible versions of Superman appear, with each occupying one of the *Superman* titles. *Action* concentrates on the Eradicator, most resembling Superman physically, but brutal and vengeful in his actions. The genuine article is back in 692. Despite some faults, the entire idea of killing Superman and subsequent plots were well conceived and marketed, drawing many new fans to the comics, and convincing them that the oldest superhero could still be exciting and worthwhile. It rejuvenated Superman, who now has a higher profile than at any time since the Superman movie era.

The plots concerning Supergirl and Luthor come to a head in 700, which contains a nice sequence involving the wedding of Clark Kent's best childhood friends, Lana Lang and Pete Ross. The main story, though, has Lois Lane's investigations of Luthor bear fruit at last, to the great detriment of Metropolis. David Michelinie writes from 702, just in time to slot in 0 between 703 and 704 as part of the *Zero Hour* crossover, and Kieron Dwyer is the artist from 713. A lot of media attention focused on 720 as Lois calls off her engagement to Superman. The tiff didn't last long, though, and Lois and Clark get hitched, again with much media attention, and tying in to the 1990s TV series. While weekly appearances of Superman made for stronger stories, they sacrificed the individual personality of each title. Still, with the arrival of Tom Grummett as penciller from 727 at least the stories looked good while Michelinie ran out of steam. A protracted plot that has Superman change costume and powers (now electro-based) from 733 didn't help. New writer/artist from 738, Stuart Immonen was at an obvious disadvantage. His art was lovely, but his writing less polished. Superman was now back with his familiar costumes and powers, and subplots included Lex Luthor buying and shutting down *The Daily Planet* and forcing Lois Lane to work for him. A new super-team for Metropolis, The Supermen of America are spotlighted in 752, before their own miniseries. Issue 1,000,000 slots in between 748 and 749 and features Superman from the 853rd century. The last annual appeared in 1997. The second in 1989 is by far the best of the bunch featuring a story as part of 'Superman in Exile' storyline of that year with contributions by Jerry Ordway, George Perez and Curt Swan.

There's a big editorial shake-up from 760 and it's been downhill ever since. Joe Kelly takes over as scripter along with a succession of talented but totally miscast artists, most trying to imitate a manga style. If there are any decent Kelly stories, they're hard to find among dreadful storytelling and messy computer colouring. Storylines of note include the upgrading of Metropolis to a space-age city due to a Y2K virus in 763, the conclusion of first 'Return To Krypton' saga in 776 where the original style Krypton appears. Any confusion is explained in the final episode of a second 'Return to Krypton' story in 793. It was just a tease for old-time readers, but it's nice to see Krypto the Superdog (789-790) is still around. There's a darker tone to *Superman* from 783 after the conclusion of the 'Our Worlds at War' crossover, paralleling the disastrous events of September 11th 2001. 785 is the last issue with the continuing cover triangles, featuring a Bizarro story where – ha-ha – the story is printed back to front. Oh what wit! Mind you, reading any issue backwards at this stage would be a distinct advantage. You can start when everything's over! Yes! Only 791, a flashback to Clark Kent in Smallville is of any merit highlighting prejudices against anyone not body-perfect. Having ended the policy of continuing stories through all Superman titles, back they come again. The 'Ending Battle' story in 795-796 is only notable for Superman abandoning his dark look, perhaps suggesting there's new hope for this series. Avoid anything from 760, at which point DC mystifyingly let standards plummet on their international icon.~HY

Recommended: 309, 318, 319, 351-353, 363-366, 378, 380, 381, 384-387, 400, 437, 443, 484, 500, 507, 508, 510-512, 544, 577-579, 583, 591, 597, 600, 700

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* Available in a collected edition

ACTION GIRL

Slave Labor: *19 issues 1994-2000*

Outgrowth of editor Sarah Dyer's *Action Girl* 'zine, this women-only anthology suffers from the common delusion that excluding men is somehow less wrong than any other form of discrimination. To be fair, though, that's the only male bashing you'll find in this generally fun, upbeat and energetic book. The contributions of Patty Leidy, Chris Tobey, Carolyn Ridsdale, Elizabeth Watasin and editor Dyer are the front runners. *Action Girl* is a candybox comic, and with the range and diversity on offer you're not going to like everything, but the odds are that you'll love some of it. 13 debuted two characters who later headlined their own titles: Jill Thompson's Scary Godmother, and Watasin's 'Magical Witch Girl Bunny', star of Charm School. Following a hiatus of several months, 14 turned up in Summer 1998, but since 19 there has been no sign of further issues. A formal cancellation has not been announced, however, so it's to be hoped we'll see more.~HS

ACTION PLANET COMICS

Action Planet: *2 issues 1996*
Image: *1 issue (3) 1997*

Artist Mike Manley launched his own anthology title attracting an accomplished list of contributors, and the brief given to all of them appears to have been 'make it fun'. If anything it resembles an American take on the idea of Britain's *2000AD*. Jerry Ordway's 'The Messenger' would later be completed as a one-shot, and Manley's Monsterman and Ande Parks' Uncle Slam would have their own one-shots. The best feature, though, is 'Nails' by Phil Hester, the never completed story of a crime-busting cyborg.~FP

ACTIONOPOLIS

Antarctic: *1 issue 2002*

Huge anthology of name creators wrangled by Shannon Denton into producing short comics stories of action, adventure, science fiction and superheroics. Contributors include Ladronn, Bernie Wrightson, Shawn McManus, Keith Giffen, Cedric Nocoon and others, but sadly it's mostly of a forgettable quality.~WW

Sergio Aragonés ACTIONS SPEAK

Dark Horse: *6 issue miniseries 2001**

Sergio Aragonés is famous for his Mad Marginals, tiny silent gag cartoons that nestle in the corners of *Mad*. This series expands on the concept, with each issue featuring 24 wordless one-page gag strips. Aragonés is certainly a masterful storyteller who can cram an amazing amount of detail into a single panel, but frankly the vast majority of these strips are unlikely to raise much more than a (very) brief smile. The whole series can also be read in about ten minutes, making it remarkably poor value for money.~AL

AD Police

Viz (U.S.), Manga Publishing (U.K.): *1 Volume 1995*

In the 21st Century, the Genom Corporation controls those living in a post-disaster Tokyo. Genom's ultimate aim is computer control of the world but some freedom fighters (or maybe terrorists) have emerged to hinder the plan. The AD Police are a special police unit designed to combat terrorist and boomer crime (boomers being the cyberdroids that are used for most heavy manual labour). Into this situation comes a boomer whose brain has been affected by cosmic rays so that it can think for itself. It would have taken a minor miracle for author Tony Takezaki to raise this above its routine action-adventure roots. The messianic philosophising by the aberrant boomer is often funny but usually unconvincingly connected to the plot as a result. It almost reads like a cut version, as though there's a larger story just out of view. The reproduction doesn't do justice to Takezaki's detailed and evocative artwork, which bears comparison in style to Katsuhiro Otomo.~NF

ADAM STRANGE

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1990**

His *Mystery in Space* appearances have a nostalgic charm, but Adam Strange has rarely seen the limelight even from a distance since, and his guest appearances have decreased over the years. Instead of letting a character whose time had passed remain a fond memory, DC issued this pointless 1990s revision. Unsavoury aspects of Adam's apparently random trips across the universe to Rann are revealed, and it appears he'll be absent in his adopted planet's greatest hour of need. Despite Adam Kubert art, it's all downhill from there, and by the end of the series few constants remain in Adam Strange's life. The success of the makeover can be measured by Strange's continuing lack of presence until the status quo was restored in Starman almost a decade later.~WJ

ADDAM OMEGA

Antarctic: *4 issue miniseries 1997*

The Controllers have taken over the Earth and set out to remove all non-human life from the Galaxy. Addam Omega is a 350 year old biomechanoid, built by the Controllers, but now in the middle of an adventure that forces a reassessment of his blind obedience to their orders. Bill Hughes' space opera is an annoying, disjointed affair with its oddly minimalist art style, unnatural dialogue and his inability to decide whether he's writing a satire, a moralistic tale or a simple romp.~NF

Luftwaffe: 1946 Color Special – Der ADLER

Antarctic: *One-shot 1998*

A short story about race, equality and patriotism, backed with character biographies and aeroplane designs, all part of Ted Nomura's 'Altered Wars' series. It tries a little too hard to be *Enemy Ace*, but is a thoughtful piece, nevertheless.~NF

ADOLESCENT RADIOACTIVE BLACK-BELT HAMSTERS

Eclipse: *9 issues 1986-1989**

Don't be tempted by early Sam Keith art, this is slipshod pre-pubescent derivative rubbish.~FP

ADOLESCENT RADIOACTIVE BLACK-BELT HAMSTERS IN 3-D

Eclipse: *4 issues 1986*

Slipshod pre-pubescent derivative rubbish in 3-D.~FP

ADOLF: A Tale of the Twentieth Century

Cadence Books: *5 volumes 1995-1996*

Osamu Tezuka is best known outside Japan as the creator of Astro Boy, but was regarded in his homeland as the "God of Manga", his prodigious output unmatched in terms of quality, variety and influence. Early innovations include the application of film and animation techniques to comics in the 1940s, and his later contribution to Japanese animation was almost as noteworthy. Adolf is his career peak. It's part soap opera, part thriller, and part historical polemic; Tezuka's view of World War II as applied to two boys named Adolf, with a better known Adolf also examined. Adolf Kamil is Jewish and Adolf Kaufmann is the son of a German ambassador married to a Japanese woman. That both reside in pre-war Kobe stretches credulity, but has a historical basis regarding Japan as a destination for Jewish refugees. Tezuka masterfully details the development of both Adolfs, entwined by a secret concerning Hitler with far reaching implications should it become public knowledge. The secret involves a wider cast, each deftly and convincingly portrayed, with Tezuka diverting to strip away the demonic myth of Hitler to portray a man, albeit a considerably troubled man. For what's subtitled 'A Tale of the Twentieth Century' *Adolf* concentrates for the most part on the ten year period 1936-1945, although tellingly, the story doesn't end with the atom bombing of Japan. Despite the effects being chillingly detailed in microcosm, that's merely a pause before an uncomfortable conclusion set in 1970s Palestine. Both Adolfs are there, trapped by events that occurred thirty years previously.

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* Available in a collected edition

To pick, both junior Adolfs act beyond their established ages, and the Japanese tradition of instant switches into slapstick expressions for emphasis, often at tragic moments, is jarring. These are, however, minor quibbles concerning a masterpiece that will have grown men weeping at times. 'Epic' is an over-used adjective, cheaply applied to stories continued over several twenty-two page comics irregardless of scope. Adolf, totalling over 1250 pages, deserves the description, and ranks among the best comics ever published.~WJ

Recommended: 1-5

ADRENALYNN

Image: *4 issue miniseries 1999*

In 1980 Russian orphan Sabina Nikoli swaps her calipers for a new set of mechanical legs and starts her reconstruction as terrorist espionage cyborg Adrenalynn. In the present day she's retrieved from a Washington sewer, presumed dead, and if you ever wondered how unconvincing a corpse in an unzipped body bag would look drawn in the big-eyed girlie style this title obliges. Addy and her minder Yuri have to eliminate the four previous cyborgs sent to America to prevent a biochemical bomb exploding. Created and written by Tony Daniel, this series is drawn by Marty Egeland. The script is moronic but mercifully low on cloying exposition. Forgettable unless you're keen on cuties maiming and killing.~SW

ADULTS ONLY

Inkwell Ink: *1 issue 1979*
Yentzler & Goniff: *2 issues (2-3) 1985-1987*

Silly, and very often poorly drawn comics with panels of explicit sex. Produced at a time when this was a rarity, there was presumably a market, but with so much material in a throbbing vein now available there's no point in wasting your time with this.~FP

ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

DC: *36 issues, 1 Annual 1988-1991*

Surely the joy of role-playing games is participating, affecting the fate of characters, challenging others and relying on your wits and creativity? This seemed to be the opinion of all the writers, who consequently did their utmost to ensure people would stop buying the comics and return to playing the game. Writers were initially rotated every four issues, but it eventually fell to Dan Mishkin to ensure a consistent level of tedium. Jan Duursema's art, though, is rather a surprise. She obviously enjoyed this a whole lot more than other titles she's worked on.~WJ

ADVENTURE COMICS

DC: *472 issues (32-503) 1938-1983, 1 80 Page Giant 1998, one-shot 1999*

This series began life as *New Comics* in 1935, featuring cartoony humour strips, most notably by Sheldon Mayer, but also an adventure strip 'Federal Men', which ran until 70, from Superman creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. With 12 the title became *New Adventure Comics*, largely supplanting the humour strips with more adventure material, and with time the comedy was altogether phased out for a bunch of rugged he-men and 'Nadir, Master Magician'. With 32 the title changed to *Adventure Comics* and remained that way for forty-five years.

A pre-Batman Bob Kane strip, 'Rusty and his Pals' ran until 52, but the first departure from the norm, representing the gradual emergence of superheroes, is 40, with the débût of the original Sandman. Playboy Wesley Dodds donned cloak, hat and gas mask, used a gas gun to subdue the criminal element, and was obviously inspired by the pulp-fiction success, The Shadow. He quickly became the lead feature and dominated the covers, with stories largely illustrated by Creig Flessel. With superheroes becoming ever more dominant, 48 introduced The Hourman, drawn by Bernard Bailey. Physicist Rex Tyler swallowed a miracle pill to become super strong and agile for an hour. Certainly a popular strip, and even more so when aided by the Minutemen of America, a young kids' gang. A third superhero débuted in 61, Starman, with distinctive art from Jack Burnley. He was powered by a 'cosmic rod' that drew energy from the stars, enabling him to fly and shoot energy bursts. The Shining Knight arrived in 66, a genuine member of King Arthur's Camelot, transported through time with a winged steed. 69 sees the débût of Sandy, the Golden Boy, a kid sidekick for Sandman courtesy of writer Bob Kane, in a story giving Sandman a new skintight superhero costume. That's just in time for the arrival of Joe Simon and Jack Kirby on the strip with 72 to produce some truly dramatic stories until 91. In 73-80 the prolific duo offer us the first appearance of Manhunter, a costumed acrobat, having transformed the Paul Kirk strip about a big-game adventurer introduced in 58. Although a short-run obscurity at the time, he'd have considerable impact on DC continuity decades later. Jack Burnley left Starman after 80, and Hourman dropped out from 83, although Sandman was continued by other creators until 102, when he and Starman faded away, ending the first phase of DC superheroes.

A new look and several new features transferred from *More Fun Comics* with 103. That issue introduced Aquaman, underwater adventurer and King of the Seven Seas, speedster Johnny Quick, ace archer Green Arrow, and 'The adventures of Superman as a boy', One of Superboy's most significant adventures was in 128, which featured the first meeting between Superboy and a young Lois Lane. Superboy monopolised covers, being the main selling point, but oddly enough this may have contributed to the longevity of the Green Arrow and Aquaman strips, which outlasted the demise of superheroes towards the end of the 1940s, surviving all the way to 269 and 284 respectively. Even Johnny Quick survived until 207. Connoisseurs of good art may be interested to know that the Shining Knight was illustrated by a young Frank Frazetta, in 150, 151, and every alternate issue thereafter until 163, in stories later reissued as a *Shining Knight* one-shot. The character departed with 166, but Ramona Fradon's art on Aquaman kept up a high standard of art. Meanwhile regular Green Arrow artist George Papp made way for Jack Kirby in 250-256, recently reissued as a collection. 262 introduces Speedy, Green Arrow's kid helper, and Aquaman's young assistant Aqualad makes his first appearance in 269. Superboy's light-hearted adventure strip continued with few changes in format and substance from the 1940s to the late 1960s, mirroring stories in his own title, and those of his adult counterpart. Typical plots had him travelling into the past, the future, or battling strange beasts. Lana Lang, teenage pal of Clark Kent, was often the catalyst for the stories. In 167 she's transformed into Supergirl, complete with superpowers, the first use of the concept, although it wasn't lasting. 195 is typical, featuring 'Lana's Romance on Mars', with Superboy desperately jealous because she has a date with Mars Boy! Ahh...young love. It's all frivolous and enjoyable in small amounts. As Superboy continued, the legend of Superman was slowly being enhanced, never more so than in 210, which introduced Krypto, the superdog, who arrives on Earth in an experimental spaceship fired off by Superman's father as a trial run for that saving his son. Of course, Krypto is a dog also with super-powers, and he stuck around. 217-218 are, for the period, a rarity, being a continued story where Superboy's Kryptonian parents are apparently resurrected. Thereafter a robot teacher prepared by Jor-El to instruct Superboy how to use his powers arrives on Earth, and soon the entire population of Krypton appears to have avoided its destruction as assorted superpowered beings turn up. The most significant Kryptonians, and an imaginative addition to the cast, were those from The Phantom Zone, a concept introduced here in 283. Kryptonian criminals were transformed into phantoms, unable to materialise but seeing everything, and who survived the destruction of the planet in their ghostly forms.

By far the most significant issue of *Adventure* was 247, which introduced the Legion of Super-Heroes, a superhero club from the 30th century. Cosmic Boy, Lightning Boy and Saturn Girl (complete with names written on their chests in case of confusion) came back in time to test Superboy's eligibility to join their club. When introduced by Otto Binder and Al Plastino, the Legion were no more than another odd idea to be used for a single issue and forgotten like the earlier Mars Boy. Something about them, though, captured the imagination of the readership, and they returned in 267 (sadly, this time with only symbols on their costumes). Between those appearances Superboy and Lois Lane met again, and he befriends the young Green Arrow in 258. Giant golden gorilla Congorilla has a run in 271-281, and a Bizarro World back-up runs from 285 to 299, flying in the face of Bizarro when first introduced as a tragic Frankenstein's monster-like figure. He lives on a square world populated by comedy equivalents of the Superman cast. The distinguishing aspect of the Bizarro world was that everything was the opposite of the known world. You stop at green for their traffic lights, and gold is worthless while coal is almost priceless. It can be explained by the Bizarro code, which is "Us do opposite of all Earthly things. Us hate beauty. Us love ugliness. Is big crime to make anything perfect on Bizarro World". There you have it. The perfect world was the imperfect world. The strip was written by Superman creator Jerry Siegel with his tongue planted firmly in his cheek, wonderfully illustrated by John Forte, and recently collected in book form. If you like your stories ludicrous, they don't come more so than Bizarro World. It's the Legion of Super-Heroes who're gradually in the ascendant, though. In addition to appearing in *Action, Superboy* and *Superman,* they're back here in 282, 290 and 293, gradually introducing new members. From 300 they have a regular strip, starting as a back-up, but quickly usurping the lead strip, absorbing Superboy into the team.

The Legion were the first teenage superteam, and the longevity of the feature owes a lot to the colourful characters in its ranks, living up to its name when reaching a high of twenty-six members in the late 1960s. Early adventures were usually written by Siegel or Edmond Hamilton, and were illustrated by Forte, and have a certain primitive charm. In some ways, though, the strip was quite progressive, with one character dying in 304, and although he was later resurrected it was at the sacrifice of another character. An early blow for women's rights was struck when Saturn Girl became team leader, but then negated very soon after when she was barred from a mission because it was too dangerous for a girl! Incidents like these only add to the charm and somewhat daft nature of the series, as do some of the lesser powered characters such as Matter-Eater Lad, who could eat anything, Bouncing Boy (he could bounce), and Triplicate Girl, who could split into three people. While the Legion's early run was well received, the golden age of the feature began when a young Jim Shooter's first story was published in 346, introducing some new Legionnaires, one of whom he kills off a few issues later.

While the action was just as dramatic, Shooter developed the personalities of the team, redefined many relationships and was able to flesh out the minor characters. The majority of Shooter's stories were further improved by the art of Curt Swan and George Klein. By all accounts Swan never enjoyed drawing series, but it never showed and he gave each Legionnaire a distinctive look. Shooter provided many milestones, including the introduction of the Fatal Five in 352-353, who became mainstay adversaries. He also scripted one of the best Legion stories to date, 'The Outlaw Legionnaires' in 359-360. Bad guy Universo, introduced in 349, takes over the minds of virtually the whole of Metropolis, causing the Legion to be outlawed. Some are arrested and put to work on a chain gang, and others aren't permitted to use their powers. It's pure excitement all the way, and is reprinted in *Superboy and the Legion of Super-Heroes* 238. 354-355 have Superman travelling to the 30th century to meet the team as adults. It proved awkward in later years as it committed the Legion to a fixed history, but was interesting at the time. 365-366 return the Fatal Five and introduce Shadow Lass, and 367 débuts The Dark Circle, another perennial enemy. Shooter's other great two-parter was 369-370, concentrating on only a few Legionnaires and Lana Lang in the guise of Insect Queen, while introducing the evil magician Mordru. Shooter's work was occasionally interrupted with the stories of E. Nelson Bridwell, whose best is 350-351, featuring almost everyone ever connected with the Legion. The Legion ended in 379, but their entire run has been reprinted in the first seven volumes of their DC Archives series. It was thought at the time that they were taking sales away from the Superboy comic whenever he appeared prominently on *Adventure*'s cover, so they moved to back-up status in *Action*, with the former occupant of that slot, Supergirl, becoming the lead in *Adventure* from 381.

The Supergirl stories were much as they had been since the 1950s, usually involving a romantic interlude for the Maid of Steel, who, it was thought, appealed mainly to female readers. The magnificent Kurt Schaffenberger, and the equally professional team of Win Mortimer and Jack Abel drew one Supergirl story each per issue. Progressive times finally permeated in 397 with the appointment of editor/writer/artist Mike Sekowsky, recruited to rejuvenate a staid series. Sekowsky instituted some interesting changes, not the least being continual new costumes, many designs submitted by the readers, though most of them were terrible. Supergirl now had a recurring villain in Starfire, and her civilian identity Linda Danvers began employment at a TV station, where one of her colleagues happened to be Nasthalthia, Nasty for short, the evil niece of Lex Luthor. More significantly, Supergirl's powers began to fade, leading to a few interesting moments. Very much up to date, Sekowsky's costumes and scenarios reflected the late 1960s and early 1970s, and while often a stiff artist, his style is unique and engaging, and Supergirl has never been better. His departure was certainly felt, his sense of style and wonder leaving with him, although he did return to draw Supergirl's final few issues here 421-424. In the interim Bob Oksner, primarily known for his cartooning, adapted well to a more realistic style, drawing a far more feminine Supergirl, but the stories are forgettable.

From 409 Adventure increased to fifty-two pages, offering a selection of back-up reprints including Animal Man, The Enchantress, Hawkman, The Phantom Stranger and The Shining Knight among others. There were also new strips, including a beautiful Alex Toth Black Canary story in 418-419, and a gorgeous Zatanna story by Len Wein and Gray Morrow in 413-415, while Morrow also drew lovely Vigilante stories in 417 and 422. Zatanna was also well handled by Wein and Dick Giordano in 419. 425-428 showcased a number of features reflecting the title, with only the Alex Toth drawn Captain Fear in 425 standing out. Black Orchid appeared in 428-430, and was a well produced series about a mysterious silent superpowered heroine whose identity and origin were only revealed in her own miniseries fifteen years later. Written by Sheldon Mayer with art by Tony DeZuniga, Black Orchid was unlike anything else DC were producing at the time, with a nice gothic mood to the strip.

431-440 revived 1940s ghost The Spectre in controversial fashion, not least due to the unusual ways writer Michael Fleisher had the Spectre dispose of villains, all gorily drawn by Jim Aparo. One group was turned into wood and run through an electric buzzsaw, while another villain was cut in half by a giant pair of scissors. Always a spirit of vengeance, The Spectre had never been quite so extreme. Fleisher was obviously having a whale of a time conceiving ways to kill villains, but the over-the-top nature led to a hasty cancellation. Luckily for you the entire run plus the stories completed but never previously printed were collected as a four-issue series titled Wrath Of The Spectre in 1988. Aquaman was back in 441-452 after successful back-up appearances in 435 and 437 by Paul Levitz and Mike Grell. It was an enjoyable series by David Michelinie and Jim Aparo that led to Aquaman's own title being revived, though 452 did see the pointless death of a member of the Aqua family just for gratuitous shock. In 449-451 there was a Martian Manhunter strip written by Denny O'Neil, and nicely illustrated by Mike Nasser and Terry Austin, that heralded the return of the character after an absence of many years. Superboy is back for 453-458, without any notable moments among them, yet popular enough to propel him back into his own series. With 459 *Adventure* became sixty-four pages without ads until 466, running a variety of superheroes. The better ones were the Deadman strip written by Len Wein with art by Jim Aparo or José Luis Garcia-Lopez, Gerry Conway and Don Newton continuing the New Gods saga and the continuation of the Justice Society Of America strip, recently of *All-Star Comics*. Paul Levitz and Joe Staton continued as the creative team and the most significant event here is 462's death of the original golden-age Batman.

Starman, a new superhero with an old name, appeared in 467-478 from Levitz and Steve Ditko in an interesting space saga. Those issues also featured Plastic Man by Marty Pasko and Joe Staton, the later being a natural for the strip who produced his best artwork since *E-Man*. Aquaman, seemingly never able to keep his own series, was back for 475-478 in a story revealing his past before moving over to *Action Comics*. It was clearout time again in 479 as everything was replaced by 'Dial H For Hero', an update on the 1960s *House of Mystery* strip. This time there were two magic dials transforming the finders into a different superhero each time they dialled the word 'hero'. All heroes were created by readers, and largely drawn by Carmine Infantino, with Marv Wolfman scripts. The feature continued in *Superboy*. Cancelled with 490, the title was quickly revived as a hundred page digest comic reprinting previous glories including The Legion of Super-Heroes, Sandman, Aquaman, Spectre and Superboy, and occasional issues featured a single new story. This was largely inventory material that had been gathering dust in a drawer, the most notable of which was Shazam drawn by Don Newton.

The 1998 Giant offers stories featuring previous tenants Green Arrow, Legion of Super-Heroes, Shazam, Superboy, and Supergirl, and newcomer Wonder Wonder by John Byrne and Phil Winslade. It's worth picking up for a tale of the Bizarro World by Tom Peyer with art by Kevin O'Neill, a series he was born to draw! An all-new number 1 appeared in 1999, but for that see *JSA*.~HY

Recommended: 349-355, 357-360, 365-367, 369-370, 380, 397-402, 403-408, 428-440

ADVENTURE ILLUSTRATED

New Media: *1 issue 1981*

An early attempt to bring something different to U.S. comic market, *Adventure Illustrated* and its companion, *Fantasy Illustrated*, were designed to be American equivalents to such European anthology titles as *Pilote* and *Tintin* (but specifically not like *Metal Hurlant*). Lofty ambitions, however, were not enough to produce a bestseller. Despite bringing together some well-regarded writers and artists, only one issue was ever published, leaving all of its serials incomplete. It's tempting to say that it was ahead of its time but later attempts to introduce similar magazines have almost without exception failed. Only *Drawn and Quarterly* is still published and that infrequently. Still, for the curious, there's some pleasure to be found in either the story or artwork of most strips. Doug Moench and Bill Sienkiewicz offer the science fiction 'Magenta Core' with Sienkiewicz in full Neal Adams mode while 'Stinger Ray' by Pat Boyette is time-travelling horror. Mark Evanier and Mike Sekowsky's complex political science fiction epic, 'Rayder' did continue into *Fantasy Illustrated* 1 but Tom Sutton's sentient dolphins in 'Matrix' didn't. Finally, for no very good reason, there are three illustrations by Don Heck accompanying a chapter from Owen Wister's western novel, *The Virginian*.~NF

ADVENTURE Strip Digest

WCG: *4 issues 1994-1996*

Originally produced as a small-press series, this is an appealing and largely successful attempt to recreate an adventure tradition exemplified by newspaper strips like *Terry and the Pirates*, *Steve Canyon* and *The Spirit*. Rob Hanes is a private detective working for Justice International in a fictional Middle Eastern country threatened by rebels. In 1 a princess involves him in the local conflict between the army and rebels. 2 switches to Russia and two femme fatales in Isabelle Corbeil and the Siberian Minx. Industrial espionage in Paris (3) introduces villain, Nikolai Korda who also turns up in 4, framing Rob for murder. Creator, Randy Reynaldo works hard to establish credible plots and characters. His artwork, heavily influenced by Caniff and Toth, is clean and simple, but is least effective on Hanes himself, simply because he looks far too young. *Rob Hanes Archives* collects the small press stories and the series continues as *Rob Hanes Adventures*.~NF

THE ADVENTURERS

Aircel: *2 issues 1986*
Adventure: *11 issues (0-10) 1986-1987*

It's a standard Dungeons and Dragons campaign: the by-the-dice assortment of fighters and magic-users, undertaking an escalating series of quests, in this case, for a set of keys. Nothing startling, but it trots along at a fair pace and the ideas get steadily better. The artwork in Issues 1 and 0 (the origin issue, published out of sequence) is by Peter Hsu, who has a definite talent with architecture that can make a small panel seem like the set of an epic film.~FC

ADVENTURES IN THE DC UNIVERSE

DC: *19 issues, 1 Annual 1997-1998*

In the manner of the comics based on the Batman and Superman animated TV shows, this takes a look at the wider DC cast of characters, but without an accompanying cartoon series. The usual format consists of one complete feature story, usually by Steve Vance and John Delaney, which are generally rather unimpressive, and a short vignette. 1 stars the Justice League of America who returned in 12 and 18, followed by JLA members Flash (2 and again in 9 and 14), Wonder Woman (3 and 11) and Green Lantern (4 and 11), the Martian Manhunter (5 and 13) and Aquaman (6). The Shazam Family starred in 7 and 15, and the Legion of Super Heroes in 10, but the best stories are team-ups of established heroes, such as the race between Superboy and Flash in issue 14. There's a detective caper for Blue Beetle and Booster Gold in 8, Catwoman and Wonder Woman against the Gods (19), a drug tale covering two generations of Green Lantern and Green Arrow (16), and the excellently zany Martian Manhunter and Impulse (13), with the modern Green Arrow. The annual contains five well produced short tales of Dr. Fate, Impulse, Rose and Thorn, Superboy and Mr. Miracle. Although its always good to see another series aimed at younger readers, there's an inescapable feeling here that the entire series was designed as a promotional device for TV Animation producers to pick and choose from.~WW

Recommended: 13, Annual 1

ADVENTURES IN THE RIFLE BRIGADE

DC/Vertigo: *3 issue miniseries 2000, 3 issue miniseries ('Operation Bollock') 2001-2002*

That Garth Ennis is a very naughty boy and needs to be shot at dawn for this obscenity! It's *Monty Python* meets *The Dirty Dozen* as Ennis, superbly aided by artist Carlos

Ezquerra, storm troops through minefields of British stereotypes and clichés. The first series has our band of British misfits trying to thwart Nazi plans to create a special rocket fuel. Along the way they encounter various opponents such as the Gestapo officer, Wankshaft ("Venkschaft! Damn you!") and a unique bunch of Nazi paratroopers. The second series is the icing on the cake. This time our adventurous heroes seek out Hitler's missing testicle, which has developed mystic powers. Well weirder things have happened in life. Along with buggering elephants and an Indiana Jones piss-take it all makes for a gem of a read. One running joke has the closet homosexual Lieutenant Doubtful trying to get his commanding officer, Captain Darcy, to give him some er...oral relief. Yes, that Ennis chap deserves six of the British best! Followed by a good thrashing.~HY

Recommended: 1-3, 'Operation Bollock' 1-3

ADVENTURES INTO THE UNKNOWN

ACG: *174 issues 1948-1967*

On its début this became the first continuing horror anthology comic, setting the tone with an adaptation of Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto.* In several issues from 5 there's a continuing strip, 'Spirit of Frankenstein', although once it finished in 16 no other ongoing feature appeared until Nemesis in the 1960s. 27 is notable for a strip drawn by Al Williamson and Roy Krenkel, but by and large there's very little in the early days that would have anyone demanding the comics. Always professionally produced, the 'shock' endings were nevertheless predictable. The arrival of the Comics Code Authority in the mid-1950s toned the content down considerably, and forced writer/editor Richard E. Hughes to become more inventive, and given the already high standard of art, it's worth sampling at least one issue after 62. Some of John Buscema's early work can be found in 100, 106, 108-110.

Changing with the times, a superhero, Nemesis, was introduced in 154, running until 170. He was returned from the dead in order to avenge himself on his murderers in an origin story clearly inspired by DC's Spectre. The artwork by Pete Costanza and later Chic Stone could hardly compete with DC or Marvel's superheroes. The tongue-in-cheek scripts of Hughes never really clicked. Realising Nemesis was a bit of turkey, he was ousted as the final four issues returned to the anthology format, but by then it was too late for ACG.~SW

ADVENTURES OF AARON

Image: *4 issues (1-3, 100) 1997*

Creator Aaron Warner certainly enjoys himself in the companion title to *Aaron Strips.* Wacky humour is the name of the game, as young Aaron, who seems to like hanging around a xeroxing bureau, has many adventures while baby sitting, is wrongly accused of a robbery, gains super-powers, and is attacked by his smelly socks and the occasional busty-babe garbed in leather and chains (lucky devil). Perhaps too self-indulgent, but you can't help but be amused, and wondering if Warner was smoking something illegal while writing this series. 100 is a larger-sized edition with guest creators, which compensates for 3, where the reader is expected to write and draw most of the story. What fun!~HY

THE ADVENTURES OF BARRY WEEN, BOY GENIUS

Image: *3 issue miniseries 1999**

Oni Press: *3 issue miniseries 2000*, 6 issue miniseries ('Monkey Tales') 2001**

Ten year old Barry is the smartest person on Earth, but conceals this from everyone bar his friend Jeremy. While his peers are learning basic reading, Barry is constructing androids to fill-in for him at school. It's a good premise, and creator Judd Winick has the imagination to conceive appropriate scenarios, and the wit to ensure they're very funny. Barry is never lost for an inventive sarcastic put-down, or the means to pull off the most outrageous stunts. Your best friend been turned into a dinosaur from something you left lying around your lab? No problemo, just clone a new body from follicles left in his hairbrush. Other problems concern returning a crooked alien mob accountant home, the covert security services tracking Barry and an intelligent alien ape needing freed from the zoo to return home through an inter-dimensional portal. A major component of the humour is Winick's facility with dialogue, which brings us to the potty mouth problem. There has been much discussion of the frequent profanity, perhaps because it's somehow more shocking coming from cutely drawn cartoon kids. Move past that, though, and see *Barry Ween* in terms of adult cartoon shows that have followed *The Simpsons.* The first two series are the funniest. The third, using a theme of apes or monkeys throughout switches the focus away from Barry for large portions of each issue, and the comic is weaker for it, as it is for the continued story occupying 4-6, although the conclusion is well worked.~WJ

Recommended: Series one 1-3, series two 1-3

THE ADVENTURES OF EVIL AND MALICE

Image: *3 issue miniseries 1999*

The two young daughters of arch-villain The Black Eye set up as superheroes while Dad's out trying to take revenge on Dooplis City, which he blames for the death of his wife. While a pleasant enough read, the story and art fail to hit the level of charm they obviously aimed for, and the big secret is way too obvious to be intriguing.~DB

THE ADVENTURES OF JO, ZETTE AND JOCKO

Methuen: *3 volumes 1987*

Early in his career, Hergé experimented with various strips before Tintin's all-conquering success forced him to concentrate on the intrepid reporter. Jo, Zette and Jocko may predate Hergé's classic period but the wonderfully simple line and dynamic storytelling are unquestionably there and his narrative gifts are breathtakingly evident. Young Jo and Zette are brother and sister, while Jocko is their pet monkey. Together the trio whiz around the globe, righting wrongs and defeating dastardly villains of all descriptions. Admittedly, there is nothing here that is not found in *Tintin* in spades, but nevertheless this is still a terrific read from one of the medium's true geniuses.~DAR

Recommended: 1-3.

THE ADVENTURES OF PUSSYCAT

Marvel: *One-shot 1968*

One of the least-known characters of Marvel's 1960s revolution was Pussycat, who ran in numerous men's magazines for years. This magazine collects eight adventures of the pneumatic airhead agent of S.C.O.R.E. as she takes on the evil minions of L.U.S.T. Yes, the whole affair is every bit as vacuous as that suggests. Not surprisingly, considering the strip's provenance, the secret agent set-up is a transparent excuse for Pussycat to walk around in her underwear and, since she was drawn by Bill Ward, Al Harty, Bill Everett and (gasp!) Wally Wood, the magazine is at least easy on the eye. The title is rounded out by a new strip by Jim Mooney, who would go on to draw Pussycat strips well into the 1970s.~DAR

THE ADVENTURES OF RHEUMY PEEPERS AND CHUNKY HIGHLIGHTS

Oni Press: *One-Shot 1999*

Not quite the laughfest the title and the involvement of Penn Jillette (from Penn & Teller) might lead you to expect. These are slim stories about a pair of show business types, dragged down further by very little variance in the art, which is Renée French reined in. Very disappointing.~FP

AFTER DARK

Millennium: *One-shot 1995*

Themed anthology featuring a selection of Vampire characters in short complete tales. An excellent *Vigil* story bridges the gap between 'Road Trips' and 'Desert Foxes'.

Additionally there's Faye Perozich's 'Nico', 'Lost Soul' from Wendy Snow-Lang's Night's Children, plus two illustrated poems and a Brazilian horror short by the Mike Deodato studio, insipid offerings all. Goth chicks and Vigil completists only.~WW

(AFTER) LIFE IN GOTHLAND

NBM: *4 issue miniseries 2000*

Shea Anton Pensa writes and draws this surreal look at the subculture of black eyeliner, sex and drugs. We follow the adventures of Maddox, who's moved into a new apartment with three other freaks who spend their time making their debauched way through the goth underworld. Pensa's script is very funny, with Maddox's unpleasant outlook on life making him a fascinating study. The art starts off looking like something from a goth fanzine, by the end, it's developed its own style that fits the feel of the comic perfectly.~DB

AFTER SHOCK

Last Gasp: *1 issue 1981*

All women anthology comic with an immense variation in quality. Trina Robbins, Diane Noomin and Aline Kominsky-Crumb conform to expectation, Mary Wilshire turns in some charmingly drawn tongue in cheek gag strips, and Phoebe Gloeckner chronicles an empty life. Beyond that, though, there's nothing to interest or beguile.~FP

AFTERMATH

Chaos!: *One-shot 2000*

After the events in *Armageddon*, Lord Chaos restarts existence and creates eight separate Earths in parallel dimensions. This provides a brief glimpse of five of these worlds as Bedlam travels between them. Very much an introduction to the new Chaos Universe, there's little by way of storytelling or of interest to the casual reader.~NF

AFTERTIME

Antarctic: *3 issue miniseries 1998-1999*

Antarctic's Warrior Nun universe is The Crusades meet Dungeons and Dragons with a few spaceships thrown in. In this story, written and painted by Patrick Thornton, Dei has a crisis of faith and falls foul of a corrupt cleric. There are occasional flashes of imagination in the details, but the whole is leaden and the painting poor.~FC

AGE OF BRONZE

Image: *15 issues †, 1 Special 1998 to date*

The deceptive name doesn't hint at the grandeur of this series, which is a lavish account of the Trojan War by writer and artist Eric Shanower. It's obviously a labour of love for which Shanower has researched in depth beyond just *The Iliad* to present a faithful adaptation of the legends. Artistic licence is required, particularly in providing dialogue, but the liberties taken never approach the level of a Hollywood movie. Events are set in motion when adventurous young cowherd Paris discovers he's really a prince from the city of Troy and escalate through rash acts and misunderstanding to the point of war. The chronicles of the Trojan War, are of course full of the stuff of legends, and the circumstances of all the major players are spotlighted as Shanower draws them together. He plans a seven volume series to chronicle the entire tale, although the number of issues this will be is open-ended.

There is a downside to producing such a legitimate and all-encompassing work, and it's most prominent in the often sluggish pace, and a seeming tendency not to overlook any detail researched, no matter how slight. Keeping track of a vast cast, some only occasionally seen, over the infrequent publication of the comics is also difficult. 'A Thousand Ships' collects 1-9, and is a better way to consume the series. Don't expect a quick read, though, as in addition to the density of the text Shanower's black and white art is gloriously detailed, and bears scanning on its own.

The 1999 special highlights the brothers Agamemnon and Menelaus, and Shanower adapts his style to adapt this tale, drawing it in the fashion of the depictions found on ancient Greek and Etruscan pottery. There was also a 'Behind the Scenes' one-shot providing a who's who, production sketches and articles explaining Shanower's creative thinking. Overall, this is a refreshing change from the superhero titles that dominate the market. Both Shanower and Image are to be congratulated for their persistence, and it's to be hoped that the accolade of several award nominations ensures continued publication.~HY

Recommended: 'A Thousand Ships'

THE AGE OF HEROES

Halloween: *2 issues 1996*

Image: *2 issues 1997, one-shot ('Wex'), 2 Specials 1997-1999*

Ye olde comic booke fantasy, written by James D. Hudnall and illustrated by John Ridgway, whose scratchy yet atmospheric line style is well-suited to the strips' predominantly rural settings. If you like your quests to be epic, your fairies to be faery, and your monsters to be the personification of all evil, then you could do a lot worse than this thoroughly professional package. The two specials reprint the first four issues of the comic, while 'Wex' features a more continental art style from Angel Fernandez.~AL

AGE OF REPTILES

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1993-1994*, 5 issue miniseries 1996**

Each issue contains a well conceived vignette of what life might have been like during the Cretaceous era. Dinosaur fans will be seduced by the excellent, although oddly coloured, art from Ricardo Delgado while everyone else will flick through the comics in a minute.~WJ

The AGENCY

Image/Top Cow: *6 issue miniseries 2001-2002*

A team of operatives from the mercenary police force, the Agency (including the cybernetically-enhanced, Virtual Jonez), is tasked with stopping the serial killer, God's Man. However, it quickly becomes apparent that they are as much hunted as hunters in this complex, twisted tale from Paul Jenkins, with suitably dark and outlandish artwork from Kyle Hotz. It's full of graphic violence and other psychotic mayhem, but lots of fun for all that.~NF

AGENT LIBERTY

DC: *One-shot 1992*

A minor supporting character from the *Superman* series muscles fleetingly into the spotlight performing a tired and threadbare 'Dark Captain America' routine. Soporific.~HS

AGENT X

Marvel: *5 issues + 2002 to date*

Sharp and snappy continuation of the adventures of Deadpool rebooted for the post-Manga generation. Alex Hayden is amnesiac, butt-ugly with huge X-shaped scars on his face, permanently horny and a chick magnet. He is also trying to re-establish himself as the world's greatest mercenary, which leads to being stabbed quite a lot by his trainer, Taskmaster. Nevertheless he still manages to have lots of thrill-packed, bullet-riddled adventures. Gail Simone writes and Alvin Lee, Rob Ross and a host of assistants illustrate a fun little action series just slightly left-field of the Marvel Universe. Fun for the non-purists.~WW

AGENTS OF LAW

Dark Horse: *6 issues 1995*

An unknown figure called Law arrives at the gates of Golden City carrying the corpse of its ruler Grace. Within weeks he's organised a coup, and Golden City is his. An excellent compact study in the acquisition and maintenance of power from plotter Keith Giffen, scripter Lovern Kindzierski and artists Dan Lawlis and Ian Akin. By focusing largely on the cold-blooded brutality of Law some events are related only in expository dialogue, and others given no explanation in a curtailed series. Additionally, the peremptory dismissal of previously essential Golden City characters with unfulfilled potential is a shame. Otherwise a fine title let down only by an abrupt resolution predicated by poor sales.~FP

AGONY ACRES
AA2: *5 issue miniseries 1996-1997*

A police investigation drama set in a near future when the major sport is Agony, a virtual reality game pitting combatants against each other in a variety of historical or fantasy scenarios. The sport is dirty, and as the conclusion to the championship draws near the leading challengers are all dying, leaving the way to the top open to a rookie. Ronn Stern's lead Jack Calhoun is a little too obviously based on Clint Eastwood's Dirty Harry, but his storytelling is good, and he and Charles Satterlee have turned out a well-constructed thriller.~WJ

AIDA-ZEE
Nate Butler Studios: *1 issue 1990*

This evangelical anthology boasts a contributor line-up including Murphy Anderson, Dick Ayers, Gaylord DuBois, Kerry Gammill, and Nestor Redondo. The set-up nature of several strips marks this as an attempt to introduce an ongoing title. There are proselytising teenagers in a tough neighbourhood, an old-style biblical warrior Bukki, and the most original story has Satan sending a civil war reprobate to the 20th century. Elsewhere there's a horror tale using alien abduction as an allegory for abortion, surely the only ever artistic pairing of Steve Lightle and Jay Disbrow, and Jesus returning as a space-man. Not as rabid as some Christian comics, but surely entertainment for the converted.~WJ

AIR FIGHTERS CLASSICS
Eclipse: *6 issues 1987-1989*

Facsimile reprints of the 1940s *Air Fighters Comics* (2-7), featuring such heroes as Airboy, Black Angel, Flying Dutchman et al. Invaluable for Golden Age buffs.~HS

AIR RAIDERS
Marvel: *5 issues 1988*

Insipid toy tie-in featuring – no doubt to his eternal shame – early work by later acclaimed artist Kelley Jones.~HS

AIR WARRIORS
Bad to the Bone: *Graphic Novel, 1 issue 1997*

An assemblage of fantasy clichés (chivalric politics, enchantresses, dragonriders) concerning an elite squad of airship pilots in what appears to be an alternate Earth. It's stitched together quite skilfully, and redeemed by Derek Gray's art, which, while very far from technically perfect, is curiously engaging.~HS

AIRBOY
Eclipse: *50 issues 1986-1989*

Tim Truman and Chuck Dixon's revival of the 1940s flyer was a fond homage that captured the spirit of fun and adventure of the original, who appeared in Hillman Periodicals' *Air Fighters Comics* during the 1940s. Colourful and flamboyant, Truman and Dixon's hero, the son of the original, faced a series of pulp-inspired foes including left-over Nazis, zombies and robots, with a supporting cast re-introduced from the 1940s. *Airboy* proved popular enough to spawn numerous spin-offs including a solo series for Valkyrie and The Airmaidens, several one-shots, team-ups and reprints. Back issues have never descended to bargain box prices, but are relatively cheap for the easy, satisfying read they deliver.~JC

AIRBOY One-shots
Eclipse: *Airboy And Mr Monster Special 1987, Airboy Meets The Prowler 1987, Airboy Vs The Airmaidens 1988*

The *Mr Monster* special continues the story begun in *Airboy* 28, teaming the two Eclipse characters and most of their supporting casts. What seemed like a bizarre pairing of the colourful, flamboyant Airboy and the more detective noir-influenced Prowler actually produced an entertaining tale in which the two second-generation heroes take time out from the action to reflect on what it means to live up to their 1940s legends. Especially useful for the complete Eclipse Airboy checklist contained in the back. For the final one-shot while under the influence of a brainwashing drug, Valkyrie and the Airmaidens assassinate a drug baron for a rival crimelord. Wondering what the hell his girlfriend's up to, Airboy follows her and – wait for it – her love for him snaps her out of it, where upon the lot of them whup the bad guys and live happily ever after. Actually, it's not (quite) as bad as it sounds.~JC

THE AIRMAIDENS
Eclipse: *One-shot 1987*

Yet another spin-off from the popular *Airboy* comic, the Airmaidens were essentially a team of superheroines led by Valkyrie, Airboy's reformed ex-Nazi girlfriend. Like *Airboy*, the comic was a lot of fun as the girls travelled round the world righting wrongs and generally enjoying themselves. This features the origin of La Lupina. Not the best of the spin-offs, but nonetheless worth picking up from the cheap boxes.~JC

AIRMAN
Malibu: *One-shot 1993*

The Hawkman-alike member of The Protectors has a pointless solo adventure continuing directly into issue 7 of the team title. Reads like a *Protectors* fill-in that was drawn too badly, so issued as a one-shot to flog it to a few 'must have number ones' diehards.~HS

AIRWAVES
Caliber: *5 issues 1991*

Sadly uncompleted story of a future where corporate power and government are synonymous and the masses are kept docile by pabulum fed through radio programming. Michael Lark's art brings Ted McKeever to mind, and although an expansive use of space restricts the plot it's intriguing enough to investigate.~FP

AKA GOLDFISH
Caliber: *5 issue miniseries 1995-1996**

Brian Michael Bendis creates a powerful crime noir story as small time con artist David Gold, 'Goldfish', comes home after ten years. Nothing is the same; his old point man Izzy is now a cop, and ex-girlfriend Lauren Bacall is now the most powerful and ruthless criminal in the city, which she rules from her nightclub, Cinderella. An ugly coterie of gangsters and power hungry city officials fill the background, all jockeying for position. As the players advance their own agendas, each exploiting friend and foe alike, it is impossible to guess who, if any will survive the inevitable final confrontation. It's a dark, ruthless tale with no heroes, and Bendis manages to blend staccato action with moments of slow, choking tension. Excellent stuff, well worth seeking out.~WW

Recommended: 1-5

AKIKO On The Planet Smoo
Sirius: *One-shot 1995, 40 issues + 1995 to date*

Glorious story for children of all ages as little Akiko journeys to the fabulous planet Smoo where she has adventures with a cast of characters as memorable as any from *Little Nemo* or the *Oz* stories. Mark Crilley crafts genuine 'sense of wonder' tales where the evil villains are not all that bad and the dauntless companions aren't particularly competent, all the while stage-managing enough gratuitous violence to keep even the most hardened toddler happy. The world abounds with cool robots, one-legged rogues, princes and professors, and some of the best-drawn hideous monsters you could ever hope not to see. Thoroughly enjoyable. Issues to 31 are now collected over five paperbacks, with 'Flights of Fantasy' collecting the back-ups.~WW

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* Available in a collected edition

Recommended: One-shot, 1-24, 31-33

AKIRA

Marvel/Epic: *38 issue limited series 1988-1995**

The first thing to make clear about *Akira* is that it's important to the history of comics. It was a huge success in Japan when it first appeared, helping *Young Magazine* achieve a circulation of a million (bi-weekly!). It spawned a state of the art animated movie that broke into the English-speaking mainstream, and created a large market for Japanese animation in the West. Visually, Katsuhiro Otomo set standards and started trends that have had vast repercussions for Japanese comics and then, in turn, for US and European comics. If the current popularity of Manga in the West can't be laid entirely at Otomo's door he has certainly played the most important role in popularising them. *Akira* is his magnum opus.

Akira is set in Neo-Tokyo, 2030AD, a world recovering from World War III. Kaneda and Tetsuo are school friends forever getting into trouble on their motorbikes. While Kay and Ryu, members of an underground resistance organisation, try to rescue an escaped paranormal, child- like figure from the military, Tetsuo is captured by them. They discover he's a latent psychic himself, and when he escapes starts exhibiting dangerous powers and needs large amounts of drugs to stay sane. The military have been looking for a way of controlling Akira, potentially the most powerful psychic of all, who has been imprisoned since birth. When Tetsuo frees Akira a laser canon is fired at them and the city is devastated by the force of Akira's mental response.

Tetsuo and Akira create the Great Tokyo Empire, healing and organising the survivors of Akira's blast. As Tetsuo relives his past and tries to find more psychics, the religious leader Lady Miyako tries to hold together what remains of the resistance with the help of her own psychics and Kay. The Western powers eventually take an interest in what's happening in Japan, sending an assassination squad against Akira and using biochemical weapons. Then things get really weird. After destroying part of the moon, Tetsuo's arm begins to mutate. In the final chapters Akira consumes Tetsuo and then seemingly himself, as Otomo hammers out his message about the necessity for humankind to evolve.

Though action-packed, the strip staggers forward, sometimes lacking a sense of direction, and characters disappear and re-appear later with no explanation. Otomo seemed to have abandoned *Akira* at one point, there was such a wait before it was completed, and maybe this accounts for the disappointing conclusion. Though the artwork remains of high quality, there is a real sense of retreading old ground towards the end and the metaphysical nonsense of the final revelations sours the memory of the previous issues. With a detailed and labyrinthine plot, the huge scope of Akira warrants attention but it's not always all it's cracked up to be.~NF

Recommended: 1-12

ALADDIN

Disney: *One-shot 1992, 2 issue microseries 1993*

The one-shot is a good (condensed) adaptation of the excellent movie, with artist Xavi's cartooning delightful. The microseries is an original story with an illogical plot by John Blair Moore drawn by the anonymous artists of the Jaime Diaz studio. There is some entertainment value to be had, but it falls well short of the real thing.~WJ

Recommended: One-shot

Disney's ALADDIN

Marvel: *11 issues 1994-1995*

Pencilled by David Riguard (1-6) and Eduardo Savid (7-11), assorted writers produce reasonable stories. Any will entertain children, but adults having to read them repeatedly will best appreciate 2 about an ancient curse, 11's magic carpet race, both written by Dan Slott, and Buzz Dixon's 8, in which Aladdin and Jasmine exchange bodies.~FP

ALARMING ADVENTURES

Harvey: *3 issues 1961-1962*

This title sported intelligent stories by editor Joe Simon and a débuting Archie Goodwin among others with artists of the calibre of Baily, Crandall, Powell and Williamson adding a touch of class to the package. Sadly Simon's efforts to reprise the quality achieved in 1950s science fiction anthologies seemed ill-advised at a time when everyone else was shutting down science fiction titles or converting them to superhero venues.~SW

ALBEDO

Thoughts & Images: *15 issues (0-14) 1984-1989*

Antarctic: *10 issues 1991-1993, Series two 4 issues 1994, series three 1 issue 1996*

Albedo was originally a science fiction anthology, primarily featuring anthropomorphic characters. Steve Gallacci's 'Erma Felma EDF' became the mainstay and raison d'etre, a complex, hard-science tale concerning the Extraplanetary Defense Force, which concentrates on the social and political aspects of policing, largely eschewing scenes of conflict. The 'Erma Felma' stories from 1-14 and the first two issues of the Antarctic series are reprinted in four issues of *Command Review* and a 1993 colour special reprints the first story. Stan Sakai's Usagi Yojimbo made his first appearance here (2-4), as did Matt Howarth and D.M. Kister's 'Konny And Czu' (6-14), a humour strip about interplanetary trading featuring aliens who actually look and behave like alternate life forms. Both have since appeared in their own titles. Albedo is an ambitious project, but the wordiness of much of the content often gives the impression of an illustrated story, and with only one issue since 1996, it looks as though the series may never be completed..~NF

ALEC

Escape: *3 issues 1984-1986*

Acme/Eclipse: *1 volume 1990*

Eddie Campbell Comics: *1 volume (After the Snooter) 2002*

Before embarking on *Bacchus*, Eddie Campbell was exploring similar themes of drink and companionship in self-published stories. In the early 1980s Essex, his thinly disguised alter ego Alec MacGarry socialised in the King Canute pub, into which wander sooner or later a rich collection of friends and acquaintances, most notably van driver, pub philosopher and all-round good egg Danny Grey. Warm and knowing, Campbell tells his stories in the manner of a pub raconteur, rolling around the houses before getting to the point, which is by no means a complaint. Anecdotes in the first issue relate to those in the third, which in turn will have connections to those in the second, so don't expect a linear narrative. MacGarry/Campbell makes a good observer of life, constantly puzzled by people, continually unable to grasp his opportunities, and always reactive rather than proactive.

Campbell's artwork is as understated as his stories, sketchy characters and backgrounds with endearingly appended patches of letratone. Even at this early stage, though, Campbell's storytelling is excellent, particularly in knowing when to leave a pause for emphasis. Anyone who's enjoyed an active social life ought to be able to see aspects of their friends mythologised by Campbell. A typical story, this from the second issue, has MacGarry and friends awakening on the pub floor after a heavy night, clearing up, being fed breakfast by the landlady, then returning to the bar as the lunchtime crowd arrives and attempting to name the fifty states of the USA between them. It's a recollection, not a plot, but its strength lies in prompting similar recollections and a consequent warm glow in the reader. If it all seems like a pile of self-indulgent wank, then *Alec* is not the comic for you.

A collection titled *The Complete Alec*, later republished by Campbell as *Alec*: 'The King Canute Crowd', presents material intended for an unpublished fourth issue. It's therefore, a more desirable (and easily obtained) purchase than the individual volumes. *After The Snooter* collects shorter, more recent autobiographical strips by Campbell, now married with children and living in Queensland. There are also longer strips dealing with founding his own publishing company, touring the world to promote his comics, and how strange it is to deal with Hollywood over *From Hell*. The expected grace, charm and mixture of awkward ego and self-deprecation is present and correct, and just how well the younger Campbell did his job in the past is realised by the strips chronicling a visit to a now much older Danny Grey. His alias now stripped away, we didn't know we cared so much.~FP

Recommended: After the Snooter, 'The King Canute Crowd'

ALEX

Fantagraphics: *6 issue miniseries 1994-1995*

Alex Kalienka, a dog-headed bunny cartoonist, who briefly worked for Mickey Walt Studios, has returned to his hometown of Bandini. Still dreaming of escape and love, he's downhearted and often drunk. He has no real social life apart from his friend Jerome, who calls around to watch Gilligan's Island with him, accidental meetings with his neighbour when he's thrown something out of the house, and strange conversations with an old teacher, when they meet in the liquor aisle of the supermarket. Mark Kalesniko's simple, sketchy artwork complements his themes well, though he offers no explanations or easy answers, and despite the black humour this is not an upbeat series.~NF

Recommended: 1-6

Nightwing ALFRED'S RETURN

DC: *One-shot 1995*

After the events of 'Knightfall', Alfred has moved to London, where he's been convinced by an old flame that he has a son who's in trouble and needs help. When Nightwing turns up to ask Alfred to return to Gotham, they are both involved in an attempted coup against the British government. The plot's daft but the background on Alfred's past is well handled. Alan Grant and Dick Giordano provide adequate, if uninspired script and pencils.~NF

ALIAS:

Now: *5 issues 1990*

Ponderous and rambling story of a serial killer/hitman with a coldly efficient manner and a gift for disguise. Alias picks up contract after contract as the fumblingly obsessive FBI agent Neal Mathis finds himself outclassed again and again. Chuck Dixon, Todd Fox and Enrique Villagran fail to impress in this soporific would-be thriller. The title changes each issue encompassing the identity adopted by our man.~WW

ALIAS

Max: *15 issues + 2001 to date*

Jessica Jones is a New York private investigator with an unusual past: she used to be an Avenger named Jewel. It goes without saying that no such character existed before this series. This series works as a street-level complement to writer Brian Michael Bendis' revamps of the Marvel universe in *Ultimate Marvel Team-Up*. Jessica "doesn't do the superhero thing anymore", but her investigations still tend to involve many second-string Marvel characters – Luke Cage, Carol Danvers, Man Mountain Marko, Clay Quartermain, J. Jonah Jameson, Rick Jones and Scott Lang. 1-5* involves Jessica witnessing a murder that appears to implicate Captain America. The problems she has getting in touch with The Avengers and The Fantastic Four as a member of the public (in 2 and 8 respectively) are hilarious. In 11-14 she drives out to smalltown Lago on a missing persons inquiry that stirs up some unpleasant prejudices and allows cover artist David Mack to construct some pages in the style of a collaged diary of sorts.

Bendis floats his dialogue strings over Michael Gaydos' cleverly constructed pages where the repeated panel is allowed to become a virtue. 10 is a little hard to follow – the typeset dialogue refusing to separate from the painted artwork. Overall a steady, non-super pace is maintained, but the creative team wring such excellent performances out of the characters that it's hardly noticeable. Prior knowledge of Marvel since the 1960s makes this title even more of a delight given Bendis' propensity for in-jokes. There's adult subject matter and language but it's in the interests of giving the dialogue-driven stories an informal, understated feel as well as emotional currency. An excellent read. 1-9 are colleted.~SW

Recommended: 1-6, 15

ALICE COOPER – THE LAST TEMPTATION

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 1994**

Writer Neil Gaiman's almost unblemished streak of quality comics came crashing to an end with this half-baked nonsense. Apparently developed as both album and comic, *The Last Temptation* is sorely lacking as the latter. It's the all too common seduction of the innocent scenario with Alice playing the role of a manipulative and theatrical tempter. In a world of AIDS and school massacres Alice poses the threat of a gerbil, and if souls or coins of the realm are to be redeemed it should be for the consistently excellent art of Michael Zulli.~FP

ALIEN ENCOUNTERS

Eclipse: *14 issues 1985-1987*

Mixing humorous and twist-in-the-tail plots, this science-fiction anthology suffered from the predictability of its stories, and with little space to develop characters it was largely artwork that carried the series. Worth seeking out are Micheluzzi (3, 8), Tim Truman (4), David Lloyd (5), Richard Corben (5), Rick Geary (7), John Bolton (9) and Gray Morrow (10). Later issues tended to use fewer established artists and writers though the overall quality of the strips remained consistent. Sometimes attacked for including unnecessary nude scenes, *Alien Encounters* did largely manage to avoid gratuitous sex and violence.~NF

ALIEN FIRE

Kitchen Sink: *3 issues 1987, one-shot ('Pass in Thunder') 1995*

In the near future Earth has been devastated by nuclear war, but *Alien Fire* is not a dystopian story, it's about the legacy of Earth and a few humans living among alien races. Ed's a crew member aboard the Wooden Bird, which trades in antiques from Earth – jukeboxes, books, anything that survived. When Chia X Hong, a Vietnamese businesswoman, accidentally comes into possession of an ancient artefact, made in Japan, sold in a gumball machine, an item regarded with horror by the Hive Nations, a mystery starts to unravel that threatens the peace on Leyden Frost, the artificial world on which she lives. There's much more going on than this can begin to explain. Writer Anthony F. Smith and artist Eric Vincent have created a wonderfully rich future, populated by imaginatively conceived and designed aliens, reflecting the thought that has clearly gone into the series. It is really unfortunate that *Alien Fire* has never been finished. 'Pass In Thunder' reprints stories from *Dark Horse Presents* and *Plastron Café*, dealing respectively with Ed trying to trade a convertible and an alien's passage through Ed's mind.~NF

Recommended: 1-3, One-shot

ALIEN LEGION

Marvel/Epic: *Series one 20 issues 1984-1987, series two 18 issues 1987-1990*, 3 issue miniseries ('On the Edge') 1990-1991, 2 issue microseries ('Tenants of Hell'), 2 issue microseries ('Grimrod') 1992, one-shot ('Binary Deep') 1993*

Alien Legion was basically Epic's attempt at straight science fiction. In 'a future age', the TGU is an alliance of three galaxies devoted to achieving and maintaining peace. The Alien Legion is the Foreign Legion idea spread onto a galactic stage: soldiers of fortune getting the dog end of the jobs with no questions asked. The first issue opened on eight pages of handbookesque text info. It's hardly the best way to immediately snare the reader's attention, especially when it's leading into a fairly clichéd and none too original Marvel-style intra-group bickering and 'oh this terrible war' angst. Early issues read as a fast-track immersion course in the Alien Legion's universe, deluging the reader with alien glossaries and text explanations, which could have been introduced more slowly, and less confusingly, in the stories themselves. Back-up stories about the characters' pasts were more entertaining than the main event, and perhaps writer Carl Potts just needed tighter editing to have made what wasn't a bad idea more palatable. The series improves when there's no more info to be dumped on you by the truckload and you can just settle down to reading the story. Checker have just republished the entire second series in two paperbacks.

Following the regular series, the characters were kept in print through miniseries and one-shots. Of these, *Grimrod*, written by Chuck Dixon with innovative art by Mike McMahon, is the best, achieving the sense of alien weirdness so often striven for and so seldom obtained. Legionnaire Grimrod sets off for what he thinks is going to be an easy job on a paradise planet, only to find that he's made a terrible mistake. If you sample any *Alien Legion* make this the one and forget the rest. Assorted issues from the first series are collected, and Checker are now collecting the entire run chronologically.~JC.

ALIEN NATION

Adventure: *4 issue miniseries ('The Spartans') 1990*, 4 issue miniseries ('A Breed Apart') 1990-1991, 4 issue miniseries ('The Skin Trade') 1991, 4 issue miniseries ('The Firstcomers') 1991, 4 issue miniseries ('Public Enemy') 1992, one-shot ('The Lost Episode') 1992*

After DC's release of a straight-faced unexciting movie adaptation, rights went to Adventure who produced a series of mini-series featuring new stories set in the continuity of the TV show. 'The Spartans' proved unexpectedly successful, to the point that it generated several variants of its first issue (four different colour covers, a gold limited, an embossed with additional art and a regular second printing). None of the hoo-hah could conceal the stories were done with more fannish enthusiasm than skill and interest rapidly died away. 'The Lost Episode' one-shot wraps up all dangling plotlines from the TV show.~HS

ALIEN WORLDS

Pacific: *7 issues, 1 Special 1982-1984*
Eclipse: *2 issues (8-9) 1984*

An attempt to revive the quality of EC science fiction comics was a laudable editorial decision, and an opening tale from Al Williamson in 1 reinforced the intent. Sadly, it was an experiment that largely failed. Bruce Jones wrote almost all the material, varying wildly in quality, but instead of enforcing a unity through a stable of regular artistic contributors, the net was stretched far and wide, with only Bo Hampton and Al Williamson drawing more than two stories. The sex and nudity permissible in 1980s comics is largely gratuitous and juvenile, and thirty years after EC too many stories still hinged on the last-panel shock ending. Two better twist-in-the-tail shorts appear in 8, Ken Steacy drawing a story based on *Mars Attacks* bubblegum cards and Al Williamson adapting a wistful William Nolan tale. Other notable contributions amid the rough are the Tim Conrad illustrated 'Talk To Tedi', which pulls on the heartstrings in 1, some fine John Bolton art in 5, and Bo Hampton's 'The Maiden And The Dragon' in the final issue. Dave Stevens is in 2 and 4, 4 being a particularly good issue for artists, with Bo Hampton, Jeff Jones, Ken Steacy and Al Williamson all on hand. The latter's contribution is a vintage piece, actually completed in the 1950s, while the Roy Krenkel story in 6 is his last work. Having published the work inherited from Pacific, Eclipse chose to start anew with the similar *Alien Encounters*.~WJ

ALIENS

Heavy Metal/Futura: *Graphic Novel 1979*
Dark Horse: *6 issue miniseries 1988-1989*, 4 issue miniseries ('Aliens II') 1989-1990*, 4 issue miniseries ('Earth War') 1990*, 4 issue miniseries ('Hive') 1992*, 4 issue miniseries ('Genocide') 1992*, 3 issue miniseries ('Aliens III') 1992*, 2 issue microseries ('Newt's Tale') 1992, one-shot ('Tribes') 1992, 4 issue miniseries ('Rogue') 1993*, one-shot ('Sacrifice') 1993*, one-shot ('Salvation') 1993*, 4 issue miniseries ('Labyrinth') 1993-1994*, 10 issue limited series ('Colonial Marines') 1993-1994, 4 issue miniseries ('Stronghold) 1994*, one-shot ('Earth Angel') 1994, 4 issue miniseries ('Music of the Spears') 1994, one-shot ('Mondo Pest') 1995, 6 issue miniseries ('Berserkers') 1995, one-shot ('Mondo Heat') 1996, one-shot ('Lovesick') 1997, one-shot ('Pig') 1997, 1 Special 1997, 2 issue microseries ('Havoc') 1997, 3 issue miniseries ('Alchemy') 1997, 3 issue miniseries ('Kidnapped') 1997-1998*, one-shot ('Glass Corridor') 1998, one-shot ('Stalker') 1998, one-shot ('Wraith') 1998, 3 issue miniseries ('Survival') 1998, 4 issue miniseries ('Apocalypse – The Destroying Angels') 1999*, 4 issue miniseries ('Xenogenesis') 1999*

A huge success, the Aliens have not always inspired noteworthy comics despite many notable writers and numerous approaches to the central idea up to and including comedy aliens. Artists have done better. Fans of Sam Kieth, Kelley Jones, Mike Mignola, Richard Corben or Kevin Nowlan will not be disappointed by their bits of this extended epic.

Aliens, *Aliens II* and 'Earth War' all feature Hicks and Newt from the films (Ripley turns up in 'Earth War') battling on the alien home world and then on Earth. Mark Verheiden writes in competent fashion, concentrating on the madness of corporate greed and the relationship between the three combatants. Artwork by Mark Nelson, Denis Beauvais and Kieth respectively is diverting. Kieth pays homage to EC science fiction but he's not yet fully developed his own skills. Beauvais' painted artwork suffers from over-colouring and, like Nelson, a stiffness of composition. Later collections have changed the names of the characters.

'Hive' is a change of pace. Written by Jerry Prosser, it concerns a bizarre plan to use a robotic alien to steal the Alien queen's royal jelly, "the most sought after consciousness-altering substance in existence". It's drawn by Kelley Jones, who does great aliens but weak faces. 'Newt's Tale' retells the *Aliens* screenplay from her point of view, lacking the atmosphere or pace of the film. 'Genocide' concerns an expedition to steal royal jelly to synthesise, but there's no passion to the story. Also lacking zip, although much admired, is 'Tribes', a graphic novel written by Stephen Bissette with static art from Dave Dorman. 'Salvation', by contrast, has gorgeous artwork by Mignola and Nowlan, and a punchy Dave Gibbons script. Another series with beautifully rendered artwork is 'Apocalypse' by Mark Schultz and Doug Wheatley. Tying in to the original film, the aliens are believed to be universal cleansers, ensuring that no race reaches too far into space. Schultz draws on the films and on other horror themes to produce an atmospheric, thrilling tale.

Schultz also writes 'Havoc', again dealing with royal jelly and a ship full of aliens engineered for psychic abilities. The novelty is in having each page drawn by a different artist, from Peter Bagge, Sergio Aragonés and Dave Cooper to Moebius, P. Craig Russell, Art Adams and Travis Charest. 'Survival', by James Vance and Guy Davis is a good tale about the Company sacrificing colonists in an attempt to find a way to inoculate humans against alien infection. It might have worked better with more realistic artwork. 'Rogue', by Ian Edginton and Will Simpson, and 'Sacrifice', by Pete Milligan and Paul Johnson, both reprint stories produced for the UK.

'Colonial Marines' marks a change of emphasis, concentrating on troopers sent into battle against the aliens. Also different is 'Labyrinth', the most chilling and intelligent Aliens story to date, written by Jim Woodring.

A scientist survives for six weeks as a captive of diseased aliens and then dedicates his life to experimenting on them for the government. The Labyrinth refers to the tests he puts the aliens and an enquiring soldier through. The artwork by Kilian Plunkett bears comparison with Art Adams and is clearly also indebted to Moebius, which is no bad thing for this tale of clinical horror. 'Xenogenesis' introduces a strikeforce attempting to clean up an alien infestation. It's something of a return to the themes of the first films with concerns for team-mates and the machinations of the Company.

The Special features two short stories, from Darko Macan and Frank Teran in which a marine dreams of an encounter with the aliens and from Nancy A. Collins and Leif Jones in which a colony of religious fanatics decide to become one with the alien. Further diverging from the basic premise, 'Alchemy', by John Arcudi and Richard Corben, describes a small planetary community struggling with progress, suddenly beset by an alien. In 'Kidnapped', Woodring and Justin Green with F. Solano Lopez produce a twisted and grim story about the dangers of trafficking in alien eggs infected with serious diseases. David Lloyd's 'Glass Corridor' concerns stowaways on a spaceship and one man's coming to terms with past mistakes. Jay Stephens and Eduardo Risso tell a tale of teenagers confronting an old alien near their campsite in 'Wraith'.

Several Aliens series experiment with the established scenario. David Wenzel pits Vikings against aliens in 'Stalker', John Byrne' sets 'Earth Angel' in the 1950s, while 'Music Of The Spears' is an oddity in which an alien is trained to produce the right sounds to perform a symphony. What were C. Williamson and T. Hamilton on when they thought of that? 'Stronghold' by Arcudi and Doug Mahnke, featuring a cigar-smoking alien and 'Pig' by Chuck Dixon and Flint Henry in which a bomb-rigged pig is used as a lure, are attempts at a funny Aliens story. None of them are outstanding, except for their quirks. Unfortunately 'Berserkers' is equally forgettable, as is 'Mondo Pest', reprinting the story from *Dark Horse Comics* 22-24, and 'Mondo Heat', but none are as avoidable as the adaptation of *Aliens* 3.

People who liked the films should seek out the 1979 adaptation of the original by Archie Goodwin and Walt Simonson, two creators who know something about creating a tense atmosphere. There are few moments in the entire Dark Horse *Aliens* series that better it. Almost every *Aliens* miniseries is available as a collection.~NF

Recommended: Alien graphic novel, 'Labyrinth' 1-4, 'Apocalypse – The Destroying Angels' 1-4

ALIENS vs. PREDATOR

Dark Horse: *5 issue miniseries (0-4) 1990*, 12 issue limited series ('The Deadliest of the Species') 1993-1995*, 2 issue microseries ('Duel') 1995, one-shot ('War') 1995, 4 issue miniseries ('War') 1995*, one-shot ('Booty') 1996, 4 issue miniseries ('Eternal') 1998*, 4 issue miniseries ('Xenogenesis') 1999-2000, 1 Annual 1999, 4 issue miniseries (Aliens vs Predator vs Terminator) 2000**

Dark Horse's decision to pair their two successful licensed properties was another canny commercial move and the results are mostly entertaining. The first series has the Predators seeding a planet with Aliens intending to return and hunt them later. Randy Stradley's script creates a sassy heroine in Machiko and it's her story that draws you in. The collection includes the prequels from *Dark Horse Comics* (also collected as issue zero) and the short sequel from the *Dark Horse Presents Fifth* Anniversary Special.

'Deadliest Of The Species' is an ambitious thriller in which Chris Claremont pulls out all the stops with a story featuring his trademarks, strong women and physical transformation, as Aliens, Predators and humans fight for survival against a common foe. Mostly drawn by Eduardo Barreto, after the initial issues by Jackson Guice (1-3), the script calls for switches between genres and gives him plenty of room to display his skill. 'Duel' is a clichéd tale of humans and Predators overcoming their differences against an Alien/Predator hybrid. The 'War' one-shot collects the strip originally published in Dark Horse's publicity zine, *The Insider*. 'War', the miniseries returns Machiko, initially working with the Predators but ultimately having to choose between their code of honour and the lives of the humans. The artwork by Mark Heike and Ricardo Villagran makes this an enjoyable. 'Booty' is a straightforward adventure in which a cargo ship becomes the scene for a battle between Predators and Aliens. 'Eternal' is less about Aliens and Predators than *X-Files*-type conspiracies producing an effective, downbeat tale. Charlie and Elliot are duped into breaking into a company working with Alien genetic material in 'Xenogenesis'. Again, the aliens are secondary to the human plot, but Andi Watson's protagonists are smart and likeable.

The Annual contains five short stories. The first three all offer female protagonists trying to survive amongst the aliens, but the perspective of each is sufficiently different to keep reader interest. Mark Schultz explores the pressures of Predator society (drawn by Tom Biondolillo) and Alex Maleev gives the legend of Saint George an alien twist. Schultz returns for 'Aliens versus Predator versus The Terminator', reuniting Ripley and Annalee Call from *Alien: Resurrection*. Call has heard about more military tampering with aliens, but both are unprepared for a Terminator/Alien hybrid that wants to rebuild Skynet. Schultz just about pulls off the crossover, allocating reasonable plot-time to each of the franchises.

After the Annual, 'Deadliest of the Species' comes closest to making the series interesting rather than just an enjoyable series of bloodthirsty romps and is almost worth recommending on the strength of the artwork.~NF

Recommended: Annual

ALISON DARE

Oni Press: *One-shot ('Little Miss Adventures') 2000, 3 issue miniseries ('The Return of Alison Dare, Little Miss Adventures') 2001*, 2 issue microseries ('and the Heart of the Maiden') 2002*

Alison is the child of an archaeologist/adventurer and her superhero husband The Blue Scarab, and the niece of an international super-spy for good measure. Living a 'normal' life at the St. Joan of Arc Academy for Girls, Alison drags her friends, Wendy and Dot, into dangerous situations at every opportunity, including meeting a genie and Baron von Baron, intent on world domination. The story of how her parents met and her father received his powers is told 'The Return' 2, and, in the latest series, the school is invaded by ninjas and neo-nazis, all seeking the mysterious Heart of the Maiden. J. Torres is clearly aiming at a young audience, but his script is funny and clever enough to entertain older readers. J. Bone's artwork is cartoony, perhaps too blocky and simplistic, but has loosened up a little for 'Heart of the Maiden'.~NF

ALL ACCESS

DC/Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1996-1997**

The character Access is jointly owned by DC and Marvel, and first appeared during their 1996 crossover. His job is to maintain the separate status of the DC and Marvel worlds by ensuring there are no rifts in reality. Of course, without them there's no story, so when Venom turns up on DC Earth Spider-Man is brought across to help Superman battle him. Other teamings include a reprise meeting for young loverhearts Jubilee and Robin, and Batman meeting Doctor Strange, who has an idea of what's going on. The final issue features a tiff between the X-Men and the JLA, during which the characters merge for a short time in some interesting combinations. All in all it's some nice hokum that passes the time, but is nothing to be taken too seriously.~HY

ALL-AMERICAN COMICS

DC/All-American: *102 issues 1939-1948*

Like the majority of 1930s anthology comics, *All-American* began life with features that were either recycled newspaper strips such as Mutt & Jeff, or new material designed to look like a strip reprint. It was thought readers wouldn't warm up to a feature unless it had been 'proved' by a newspaper placement! In addition to Mutt & Jeff, who managed to endure until 101 in the majority of issues, *All-American* featured largely forgettable humour and light adventure fare. The only notable or enduring series were aviator Hop Harrigan and Sheldon Mayer's boy cartoonist Scribbly, star of his own fifteen issue series from 1948 to 1952, and progenitor of the Red Tornado, of whom more later. Harrigan enjoyed an astonishing success throughout the 1940's, lasting until 99 and starring in a radio show and movie serial. The way ahead was indicated by Ultra-Man, who debuted in 8. While a Flash-Gordonesque future champion rather than a superhero, the brightly-costumed Gary Concord's short-lived series (ending in 19) paved the way for more fantastic adventurers, and established the dominant theme for most of the decade.

In 16, Green Lantern made his first appearance. Engineer Alan Scott discovers an ancient mystic lantern, which flares with an emerald light, granting him immense power. Naming himself for this talisman, he arrays himself in a largely red & purple costume (he's heroic, but nobody said he had any colour sense...) to battle the dark forces. The vitality of the concept, as created by Martin Nodell, outweighed the rather pedestrian art, also by Nodell, later by Paul Reinman, Martin Naydel and Irwin Hasen. It captured the public imagination, establishing GL as the title's unquestioned star, and granting him a popularity that resulted in his own 38 issue series from 1941 to 1949, collected in *Golden Age Green Lantern Archives*. For most of the 1940s, Green Lantern succeeded despite its illustrators; although some stories were very imaginative, (especially the introduction of the undead Solomon Grundy in 61 in 1944) the majority were marred by illustrations more suited to a humour series. This tendency was exacerbated by the introduction of comedy sidekick, Brooklyn cabbie Doiby Dickles, in 27. Circa 1947, Hasen's art dramatically improved and Carmine Infantino and Alex Toth, took over several instalments. Suddenly, the series had the graceful and dynamic art it always should have possessed, and during this period that two of our hero's most notable enemies made their first appearances. The Icicle (90) was a cryogenic foe with surprising longevity, and the Harlequin (89), a female felon who was secretly a good guy, attacking the villainous community from within, and who was also, of course, in love with Green Lantern. Both proved popular with readers, but the Harlequin in particular, making six repeat appearances in the last fourteen issues and being prominently cover-featured, was a latter-day hit, and, had the tide not turned against superheroes, may well have been spun off into her own series.

Green Lantern was *All American*'s unchallenged star, but several long-lived and popular series backed him up. In 20 Scribbly introduced the Red Tornado, a.k.a. Ma Hunkle, Scribbly's burly landlady, who pulled on a pair of long johns and a stewpot helmet to become DC's first super-heroine, albeit one not to be taken entirely seriously. Scribbly and the Red Tornado shared the strip until it was dropped with 59. The Atom (from 19) was diminutive student Al Pratt, who compensated for his lack of height with a power-packed physique. Clearly possessing 'issues', he donned leather shorts, a cape and a full-face mask and ran around at night beating up the tallest crooks he could find. This slender concept presumably appealed to 'vertically-challenged' readers, as he enjoyed a surprisingly long run until 72, then transferred to *Flash Comics*. Dr. Mid-Nite (25-102) was, for a change, an actual M.D., Charles McNider, who was blinded in a criminal attack. He discovered he could see in the dark, but needed special lenses to function in normal light, so stocked up on 'blackout bombs', and set out to 'cure' his city of crime. Sargon the Sorceror (26-76, not every issue) possessed the 'Ruby of Life', an enchanted heirloom that gave him control over everything he touched. Illustrated primarily by Paul Reinman, his adventures, particularly against his female nemesis the Blue Lama, were a cut above the usual Mandrake-imitator. Even Hop Harrigan slid into super-tights for a handful of issues as the Guardian Angel (25-28) before deciding that it wasn't really him. A rare non-superheroic entry in was the Black Pirate (72-102), a saga of a corsair and his son who swashed their buckles together on the Spanish Main, imported from *Sensation Comics* and clearly modelled on the popular Flynn/Fairbanks movie thrillers.

By 1948, waning sales on all the superhero titles prompted DC editors to try different genres. In 100 Johnny Thunder made his first appearance. No relation to the earlier JSA member, this Johnny Thunder was a western sheriff, and signalled the end of the comic as readers had known it. With 103, Green Lantern, Dr. Nid-Nite, Black Pirate and co. were rudely despatched, and the title continued for a further three years as *All-American Western*, before being again refurbished as *All-American Men of War*.~HS

ALL-AMERICAN MEN OF WAR

DC: *118 issues (127, 128, 2-117) 1952-1966*

This rose from the ashes of *All American Western*, hence the unusual numbering. As with other DC war titles, unconnected short stories are the order of the day throughout the 1950s. Almost from the start the title favoured editor Robert Kanigher's stable of top-flight artists, with plenty of work from Russ Heath, Joe Kubert, Jerry Grandenetti, Irv Novick and the team of Ross Andru and Mike Esposito. The first year saw notable additional art contributions from Bernie Krigstein (2, 3, 5) and Gene Colan (3, 4, 6-8), while a little later Wally Wood (29, 30), John Severin (58) and Bill Everett (77) all left their mark. Mort Drucker is worthy of a special mention for his exceptional combination of realism, grit and narrative, and his work can be found in 47, 48, 52, 58, 61, 63, 68, 69, 71, 73, 74 and 77. Kanigher wrote most stories, although the likes of Dave Wood, Bob Haney and Bill Finger also made significant contributions. The archetypal 1950s story would use a gimmick or theme of some sort, most infamously in 41's '50-50 War' by Kanigher and Kubert, where a soldier who can't walk teams with one who can't see. The era's best tale, though, was 'Toy Jet' in 78 by Haney and Heath. Atypically set in Korea, it concerned an escape from a prisoner-of-war camp, and was surprisingly convincing. As a rule, almost any issue to 80 will contain at least one good story and some lovely artwork.

Early attempts at series with Gunner And Sarge (67, 68, then quickly transferred to *Our Fighting Forces*) and 'Tank Killer' (69, 71, 72, 76) foundered, but led to the long-lived Kanigher and Novick strip 'Johnny Cloud'. The eponymous hero was a Mustang-flying pilot who also happened to be a Native American – 'the Navajo Ace' as the title had it. The writing continually drew parallels between the character's military endeavours and native customs and beliefs, even to the extent that Cloud would habitually thank his "brother in the sky", an actual cloud conveniently shaped like a horse-riding brave! Cloud himself was a grim, uncharismatic character, and the strip's most outstanding feature was Novick's stylish art.

One final strip was introduced in the comic's death throes, 'Lt Savage... The Balloon Buster', a World War I aviation strip that was very much conceived as a counterpoint to the German Enemy Ace. Savage was a sharpshooter very much given to saying "I'm th'gun" (yes, it was written by Kanigher), and something of a rebel. The strip's brief run in 112-114 and 116 never really gave it time to (ahem) take off, but Russ Heath's art, particularly on 116, was glorious.~DAR

Recommended: 2, 3, 5, 78, **112-114, 116**

ALL-AMERICAN WESTERN

DC: *24 issues (103-126) 1948-1952*

Continuing the numbering from *All American Comics*, which effectively became a western title with its last issues, much of the appeal lies in the artwork of Alex Toth. He supplied some wonderful covers (103-107, 109-114, 117, 121, 122, 125, 126) and also drew the lead strip, Johnny Thunder, written by Robert Kanigher. Johnny lives a double life as a timid schoolteacher who disguises his appearance to help his sheriff father. Overland Coach (unusual in having a female lead), Minstrel Maverick (a guitar-plucking wanderer) and Foley of the Fighting 5th (cavalry versus Indians) are in each issue (with Minstrel Maverick missing from 123). The writers on the first two of these strips are unknown, though the artists are easier to identify. Overland Coach's include Irwin Hasen (103-106, 109), Gil Kane (107-108, 114-115, 117-119, 121-126) and Frank Giacoia (110-111, 113). Minstrel Maverick was usually drawn by Irwin Hasen. Amongst the known writers on Foley of the Fighting 5th, are Lee Goldsmith, John Broome and David V. Reed whilst the artwork was by Joe Kubert (103-116), Frank Giacoia (117, 126) and Carmine Infantino (118-125). Apart from the regular strips, issues often carried another short story until the page count dropped to thirty-six with 122. These included a number of 'Epics of the Texas Rangers' (109, 110, 112-116, 118-121). Johnny Thunder is always entertaining and with the bonus of Toth artwork, is pretty much compulsory reading. The other features can't match this combination, but there's plenty of compensation in the form of Kubert, Kane and Infantino artwork.~NF

ALL HALLOWS EVE

Innovation: *One-shot 1991*

Charmless retelling of the "legends and origins" surrounding America's favourite holiday. Michael Perkins and painter John Lang provide the ghoulies and goblins but don't expect any chills or thrills.~WW

ALL-OUT WAR

DC: *6 issues 1979-1980*

War comics were on the decline in the 1980s, so it's not surprising that this oversize comic didn't last. It's main feature was Viking Commando, a true Viking who avoided Valhalla and spent his time helping the Allied cause against the Nazis in the usual Viking way without a uru hammer in sight.~HY

ALL-STAR COMICS

DC: *74 issues 1940-1951 (1-57), 1976-1978 (58-74)*

The first two issues resembled any number of other 1940s anthologies with several popular heroes in separate stories under one cover, but with the third issue a revolutionary new concept was introduced. There were, as before, separate stories for each featured hero: The Flash, Hawkman, Green Lantern, Hourman, Atom, Dr Fate, the Spectre, Sandman and Johnny Thunder, but in a framing sequence these heroes met, talked and compared notes on what was happening in the world of 'mystery men'. A fraternity of superheroes, the Justice Society of America, was introduced to the readers and became the mould for countless other superteams. The heroes would meet in the first and final chapter of each issue, and each JSA member would battle an aspect of the menace featured in that particular issue in his own chapter drawn by that hero's regular creators. This initial formula became compressed by the shrinking page count as the decade progressed, with chapters starring two or three heroes, but remained essentially unchanged until the title's conversion into *All-Star Western* with 58. In the intervening decade most of DC's heavy hitters joined the team, and fought bizarre menaces such as Per Degaton, Brain Wave, Solomon Grundy, The Wizard, the Injustice Gang, and of course Hitler. Along the way they were the first heroes to tackle social issues, with stories on racial prejudice (16), juvenile delinquency (40) and the role of disabled people in society (27). Wonder Woman débuted in 8 in a story unrelated to that issue's JSA tale, before joining in 11.

Roaring across time and space, treating the solar system like a small neighbourhood where it was possible to go to Jupiter, thrash the bad guys and still get back for supper, the scope of these adventures rattles the reader along at a hectic pace. Yet for all their world-conquering power, the JSA were never reluctant to help the common man, as in the memorable 21, where the team travels back in time solely to help a dying man undo his earlier misdeeds and die with a clear conscience. The hardcover *All-Star Archives* have now reprinted 1-38.

Falling sales for the entire superhero genre transformed *All-Star* into *All-Star Western* in 1951, but it lived on in fandom's collective mind. The JSA were revived in 1963 in Flash 123, rapidly followed by the first teaming with the Justice League of America in JLA 21, inaugurating an annual tradition continued until the 1980s. A clamour for the revival of All-Star began, but when DC finally revived the title in 1976 the JSA connection was downplayed, with the emphasis on three younger characters: Robin, the Star-Spangled Kid and Power Girl as "The Super Squad". This bogus ploy was only discarded in 66 when they were accepted as JSA members and the *JSA* logo was again heavily cover-featured. Possessed of snappy scripts by Paul Levitz, working with Gerry Conway on 58-62, and excellent art from Keith Giffen and Wally Wood, supplanted by Joe Staton and Bob Layton from 66, the new JSA was rapturously received. The old heroes were portrayed realistically as older people still striving to do the right thing, and the newly created Power Girl, a startlingly pneumatic Kryptonian with a major attitude, was a huge hit. Abrasive, rude and arrogant, she proved you don't have to be a nice person to be a good person, and people who only know the gutless shell of Power Girl around today don't know what they've missed. Sadly not even her introduction and, later, the Huntress, daughter of Batman and Catwoman, helped the title survive. The JSA stories continued in the extra large *Adventure Comics*, and there's a fine explanation for why the JSA didn't win World War II on their own in *DC Special* 29, but by 1980 they were once again mere guest stars. For the 1999 *All Star* see *JSA*.~HS

Recommended: 13, 21, 27, 33-38, 58-73

ALL-STAR SQUADRON

DC: *67 issues, 3 Annuals 1981-1987*

The greatest DC heroes of the 1940s live again in a series of untold World War II adventures recounted by writer Roy Thomas – surely his dream assignment, having been a Justice Society Of America buff since the 1940s. Originally under instruction not to use too many characters with modern counterparts, Thomas had to work with second-stringers as his core team. When the restriction was dropped the title was a JSA series in all but name. Sadly, to the comic's detriment, Thomas proved unable to detach himself from his fanboy roots. Rather than concentrating on entertaining the reader, he worried over explaining and correcting perceived continuity errors. Many issues were excessively wordy and dry, lacking the gung-ho zeal of the 1940s originals. Although often well illustrated (Jerry Ordway's run of 19-26 and Annual 2 being particularly lovely), the series was all too often strictly for ageing nostalgists. A pity.~HS

ALL-STAR WESTERN

DC: *Series one 62 issues (58-119) 1951-1961, series two 11 issues 1970-1972*

As the door closed on the first superhero era, DC shunted out the Justice Society of America, and added 'Western' to their title for a seamless overhaul. In contrast to the majority of DC's themed titles of the time, *All-Star Western* featured ongoing characters. The Trigger Twins, introduced in 58, ran until 116, largely illustrated by Carmine Infantino. Gimmick-led from day one, humour came from Wayne's shop assistant forever holding up town sheriff Walt as a paragon of virtue and bravery. It's only charming in small doses. Less popular features introduced in 58 were the sharpshooter Jeff Graham, the Roving Ranger, and Don Caballero, a Zorro rip-off. He named his fencing sword El Capitan, and luckily the bullet with his name on never came his way. Strong Bow was a more interesting idea, pedestrianly executed. Only he survived the massacre that wiped out his tribe to become a sort of Native American ronin (masterless samurai) who wandered a 14th-century USA preaching peace, but perfectly able to defend himself.

All-Star Western's other mainstay was an already proven success. Johnny Thunder débuted in *All-American Comics* 100, created by Robert Kanigher and Alex Toth. Toth didn't follow him to *All-Star Western* in 67, but Gil Kane was an acceptable substitute. Johnny Thunder could have been your typical lightning-fast sureshot, but Kanigher introduced complexities, with Thunder promising his dying mother he'd become a schoolteacher, thus devastating his Sheriff father, who'd seen Johnny as his successor. Johnny circumvents his emotional conflict by adopting a disguise to fight crime at his father's side. Arch-enemy Silk Black was a regular visiting desperado and Kanigher introduced Madame .44 in the dying days. She was driven to ensure those who robbed and cheated others faced justice and ended up marrying Johnny.

The only other notable feature was Super Chief, by Gardner Fox and Infantino (whose art graces almost every issue), introduced in the title's death throes. Flying Stag is bestowed with a mystical stone (a chunk of meteorite) making him a thousand times stronger than the bear, with the leading prowess of the wolf and swifter than the deer. Wearing a rather fetching buffalo head mask, he protects his people.

In 1970 DC revived the idea of the Western anthology comic. Early issues feature a mixed bunch of strips, the best of which are the Gray Morrow-drawn El Diablo stories from 2. Paralysed in a wheelchair by day, by night he was a mystical spirit of justice. It was gruesomely disfigured bounty hunter Jonah Hex, however, who was to prove enduring. In comparison with what was to follow, his first two outings (10 and 11) are relatively tame, although they set the tone for the series, with people requiring Hex's prodigious gunslinging talents but unwilling to accept his company. With 12 the title was altered to *Weird Western*.~FP

ALL THE WRONG PLACES

Laszlo Press: *4 issue miniseries 1999-2000**

Nathan looks after his mother, who is dying of cancer, isolated in the family farmhouse except for visits from his friends, Richard and, more occasionally, Jessica, herself awaiting her boyfriend's return from the army. Tom Galambos has crafted a restrained story of grief and unrequited love, supported by a uncomplicated drawing style that conveys emotion without really stirring the reader.~NF

The ALLAGASH INCIDENT

Tundra: *One-shot 1993*

Recounting famous UFO abductions using clumsy computer-generated images. One for Forteans only.~HS

ALLEGRA

Image: *4 issue miniseries 1996*

Allegra leads a corps of warriors whose job it is to defend Midian against the sky colony of Kioram. Both of these societies live above a desolate Earth but Kioram's leader, Dr. Tullus, hopes to return to the surface eventually. Powered by armour invented by Dr. Huber, Allegra has been conditioned to believe that returning to Earth is a crime. Nevertheless she's continually drawn to the all-but-uninhabitable surface world. As Allegra starts to question the nature of her world clues are dropped that the whole is an elaborate virtual-reality creation and, as she remembers another name, that she's the unwilling subject of a weapons experiment. Intriguingly plotted by Steven Seagle, with good art by Scott Clark, it's not a bad mystery tale.~NF

ALLEY CAT

Image: *6 issues 1999-2000*

Playboy model Alley Baggett is credited as a creator of this series about a young woman (in Alley's likeness) who becomes the host for an evil costume once owned by the Marquis de Sade. Though her fiancé is drugging her and is also a serial killer, Alley resists the evil of the costume for a resolution in 1-3. In her second adventure (4-6), Alley investigates the deaths of a number of priests, apparently perpetrated by the brother of a friend. A strange mixture of fetishism, the supernatural and superheroics, the concept's let down by pedestrian dialogue and artwork. Limited editions include a Prelude and *Alley Cat vs. Lady Pendragon*.~NF

ALLEY OOP Adventures

Antarctic: *3 issues 1998*, 3 issues ('Quarterly') 1999*

How unexpected and brave of Antarctic to release that rarest of beasts, a warm-hearted children's comic, in the testosterone-saturated 1990s comic scene. Predictably, the world wasn't crying out for a revival of a 1930s comic strip legend, Alley Oop the time-travelling caveman, which is a shame since this is a well crafted, colourful and entertaining package. The prematurely curtailed second series was in black and white. No one is going to claim that this is a classic but, with the current newspaper strip team of Dave Grave and Jack Bender on board, there is a lot to enjoy here, particularly for younger readers.~DAR

THE ALLIANCE

Image: *3 issues 1995*

Superhero space opera in a distant galaxy with the usual tendency for ridiculously (and barely) costumed women. Don't bother unless you've read at least 90% of the other titles reviewed here, and the fact that the concluding issue was never published won't ruin any pleasure you may derive.~FP

Robert E. Howard's Ironhand of ALMURIC

*Dark Horse: 4 issue miniseries 1991**

Amateurishly drawn sword-and-sorcery clichés using Esau Cairn from the Howard novels. Far superior is the collection of the Roy Thomas and Tim Conrad story originally serialised in *Epic Illustrated*.~WJ

ALONE IN THE DARK

Image: *One-shot 2002*

Based on the computer game, this has turned out more like a substitute *Indiana Jones* adventure, and that's no bad thing. It looks good, offers a fair adventure and should appeal to the fans of *Tomb Raider*, comic, game, or film.~DB

ALPHA CENTURION

DC: *One-shot 1996*

After a run guest-starring in *Superman* titles, this tested the waters for an ongoing series. The idea of a Roman centurion returned to earth two thousand years later with alien armour and technology is novel. Everything else about this padded story has been seen dozens of times by anyone who's been reading comics for a while. Wonder if that's why there was no series?~FP

ALPHA FLIGHT

Marvel: *Series one 130 issues, 2 Annuals, 1 Special, 1983-1994, series two 20 issues 1997-1998*

Created by John Byrne and marketed largely on the novelty of being Canada's first superhero team, *Alpha Flight* featured the characters who first appeared in *X-Men* 120-121 and had already been established as Wolverine's original team-mates. The first dozen or so issues, until Byrne loses interest, are amongst his best solo work, with tight plotting and good characterisation. The death of Guardian, the team's leader, in 12, is particularly well handled although, this being a Marvel comic, it's not all that long before he's back. Unfortunately the title never found a direction without Byrne, lacking any outstanding creators for the rest of a surprisingly long run. The issues around 50, written by Bill Mantlo, are so cringingly bad, and have such ludicrous plots, that they become unintentionally funny. Alpha Flight tended to have a knack for ludicrous plots. In the issues leading up to 50 stories include Sasquatch trapped in a female body and (among other things) trying to get his ex-wife to vouch for him so that he can access his bank account, and the adventures of Beta and Gamma Flight, Alpha Flight's increasingly inept reserves. All this from a team who put their leader's widow in charge because they didn't know what else to do with her – and the real joy is that it's never intentionally a comedy series. 97-100 were also issued as a four-issue miniseries titled *Alpha Flight Special*. The series will, however, be remembered for introducing Marvel's first openly gay character, Northstar. Although the character's sexuality was obvious without being stated from about 30 onwards, it was not until 106, written by Scott Lobdell, that it was set in stone. For those who want to read between the lines, hints start to be dropped around the time Northstar tells the sex-changed Sasquatch that he preferred the old male body, carry on through a (too) long flirtation by team-mate The Purple Girl, and almost cumulated in what was expected to be an AIDS revelation in 50. Except that Marvel wimped out at the last minute in favour of a revelation far too stupid to have been planned (go on, read it yourself, a snip at 10p). An unimpressive *Northstar* miniseries followed, but despite the publicity the 'outing' brought, the book's days were already numbered. Most issues between 51 and 64 are notable for containing some of Jim Lee's earliest work for Marvel, but the best place to read about Alpha Flight is in the excellent 2-issue *X-Men/Alpha Flight* miniseries by Chris Claremont and Paul Smith.

The 1990s return produced 20 issues of readable but unspectacular run-of-the mill spandex adventures as writer Steven Seagle pretty much regurgitates the plots readers didn't like enough to keep buying first time. The interminable love hexagons between Vindicator and every (hetero) male member of the team continue, but not even the resurrection of her dead husband in the body of a teenager can make them too interesting. The same old villains return and the same old government conspiracies plague Department H. Things aren't helped by an unsettled run of pencillers resulting in wildly different styles from issue to issue. They range from Image-alike on the early numbers, through the Joe Madureira influenced sub-Manga of Duncan Rouleau (who takes a co-plotter's credit on later issues) to Vertigo-esque and back again. The early indication of a more individual style from Bryan Hitch on 6 is nice, but hardly enough to recommend what was a pretty pointless revival.~JC

ALPHABET SUPES

BigBadWorld: *One-shot 1999*

An engaging one-shot featuring a team of twenty-six super-hero wannabes, each representing one letter of the Anglo-American alphabet. These people, diverse in age, gender and ethnicity, have to perform virtual 'cheerleading routines' to 'spell out' whatever attack or tactic they want to use – F-I-R-E, I-C-E, F-L-Y, and so forth. The real ingenuity is in the personality traits author Jim Krueger extracts purely from the alphabetical position of the heroes – I and E are always wrangling about who "goes first" and leads the team, Q is co-dependent on U, Y doesn't know whether she belongs with the consonants and the vowels, and so on. Pure whimsy, and wouldn't sustain a repeat performance, but fun while it lasts.~HS.

ALRAUNE

Eros: *5 issues + 2001 to date*

After touching the impossibly proportioned member of a sideshow retard our heroine is cursed with an insatiable sexual appetite. There is an element of plot as she attempts to rectify her condition, but sex in all forms takes precedence. The cartoony grey toned art of Toni Greis has appeal, and anyone enjoying raunchy comics will probably like this.~WJ

ALTER EGO

First: *4 issue miniseries 1986*

A young boy is transferred to another dimension where comic book heroes are real, and he joins the heroic fraternity as Alter Ego. The comics and character are named after writer Roy Thomas' fanzine about 1940s comics, and the slightly disguised Golden Age characters who abound will provide diversion for nostalgia buffs.~HS

ALTERED IMAGE

Image: *3 issue miniseries 1998*

Jim Valentino's penchant for nostalgia is charming, but insufficient to justify this pointless team-up of characters from the various Image studios – Witchblade, Savage Dragon, Spawn, the Maxx, Majestic and Shadowhawk – in a homage to the 1960s Justice League of America. Run-of-the-mill is perhaps being too kind.~HS.

ALTERNATIVE COMICS Graphic Novels

The editorial outlook of these books is that of Jeff Mason, who's done a fine job in finding and promoting creators with an individual vision. The best of them is Nick Bertozzi. *The Masochists* displays assured storytelling and haunting themes over three pieces, two concerning social outcasts and the third about a successful soundtrack musician whose material comfort has overwhelmed the thrills of his performing past. The variety of tone and unflinching peeks into humanity's darker emotional recesses are very promising, and Bertozzi's visual inventiveness delights. He's not above a joke or two either, whereas jokes, albeit very black ones, are what Graham Annable's *Grickle* collection presents. His cartooning merges Matt Feazell with 1940s *New Yorker* cartoons for a simple effect, although there is no total consistency of style. Most strips have a decent laugh within, and the best of them, a nonsense rhyme about a sullen factory worker whose joys are at home, certainly deserves a wider audience. The mystifyingly praised and largely pointless, although well drawn, meanderings of James Kochalka occupy two books. The premise and possible purpose of *Quit Your Job* is summed up over two pages in what runs for over eighty, and the cover-promoted introduction by Jeff Smith appears to have gone missing, along with any plot or inspiration. The incongruous elements of *Fantastic Butterflies* offer marginally more life, but overall were Kochalka a teenage offspring you'd pat him on the back, say "well done" and go back to watching the football. There's also an element of wishing Leela Corman would pick up the pace on occasions, but at least she has stories to tell. *Queen's Day* takes its title from the most oblique of three tales within, the best of which is the wittily titled exorcism 'The Myth Of Never Being Sick A Day In Your Life', in which Alice searches for answers after a bereavement. That's bettered, though, by Corman's graphic novel *Subway Series*, in which the wistful Tina drifts through life with a largely absent boyfriend she cares little for, attracted to another boy, and with friends unable to see past the superficial. Drawn in a simple style, it's a sensitive exploration of the social pressures experienced by teenage girls, and very good. Better still, taken together, there's the certain knowledge that Corman's best work is still ahead of her. *Rosetta* is a well-designed, but disappointing anthology with an international theme reflected in its contributors, too many of whom have little to say, difficulty saying it or present the emperor's new clothes. The better pieces include a thirty page chunk of Megan Kelso's allegorical fantasy, David Collier contrasting Islamic and North American parental concerns, Malaysian cartoonist Yat recalling his school hostel, Matt Madden's multinational version of *La Ronde*, and Tobias Schalken's clever story about a failed relationship with unrelated images, some of which work in concert through the page. These are differing pieces sharing a common factor of being relatively simple stories or observations well told. A shame more of the contributors didn't take the opportunity.~FP

Recommended: *The Masochists*

AMALGAM COMICS

DC/Marvel: *12 one-shots 1996**

Following the events in issue 3 of the DC Vs. Marvel crossover, the two superhero universes got 'smooshed' together, and these odd titles, created as if they were part of an ongoing joint universe that had 'always' been that way, were the result. Think of them as issues 3a-3l of the 4-issue parent series. (Ulp!) Some of them work as stand-alone stories, others were deliberately created with references to fake previous and future issues, to enhance the illusion. The twelve, all numbered 1, are *Amazon* (a Storm/Wonder Woman hybrid), by John Byrne; Assassins (Catwoman/Elektra teamed with a female Daredevil/Deathstroke), by Chichester and McDaniel; *Bruce Wayne, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (Batman/Nick Fury), by Dixon and Nord; *Bullets & Bracelets* (Wonder Woman/Punisher), by Ostrander and Frank; *Doctor StrangeFate* (Drs. Strange and Fate), by Marz and Garcia Lopez; *JLX* (Justice League and X-Men), by Waid, Jones and Porter; Legend of the Dark Claw (Batman/ Wolverine), by Hama and Balent; *Magneto and The Magnetic Men* (X-Men/Metal Men), by Waid and Matsuda; *Speed Demon* (Ghost Rider/Flash), by Mackie, Falder and Larocca; *Spider-Boy* (Spider-Man/Superboy) by Kesel and Wieringo; *Super-Soldier* (Superman/Captain America) by Waid and Gibbons; *X-Patrol* (X-Force/Doom Patrol) by Kesel, Kesel and Cruz). Much to everyone's surprise, the gag worked brilliantly. Some were better than others – *X-Patrol, Bullets & Bracelets* and *Dr.StrangeFate* being the wittiest and grittiest, while the pompous *Amazon* and plodding *JLX* were definitely poorest, but all of them were much more fun than the lacklustre Marvel Vs. DC crossover itself.~HS

Recommended: *Bullets & Bracelets, Dr.StrangeFate, Spider-Boy, X-Patrol*

AMANDA AND GUNN

Image: *4 issue miniseries 1997*

It's 2036, and Montana has been partitioned as a nature reserve, with all those now living there doing so at their own risk. One of them is Amanda, attempting to forget her previous life, but forced out of retirement when townspeople are being murdered. Jimmie Robinson has produced a title that's part western, part science fiction and all enjoyable as a well-written and drawn adventure comic featuring a likeable cast. And there's plenty of plot surprises to boot.~FP

AMAZING ADULT FANTASY

Marvel: *8 issues (7-14) 1961-1962*

"The Magazine That Respects Your Intelligence". This mix of science fiction and fantasy stingers continues numbering from the first series of *Amazing Adventures* and differs from Marvel's other anthology titles in that it features stories by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko exclusively. This, plus the illustrated contents page and Marvel's earliest letters page, shows Lee's obvious pride in his story-telling formula. All issues run four or five stories and are of equally classic quality. 'The Icy Fingers Of Fear' in 7, 'The Terror of Tim Boo Ba' in 9, 'For The Rest Of Your Life' and the superb 'Secret Of The Universe' in 11 are all highspots. 14's 'The Man In The Sky' introduces Lee's concept of mutants, with several striking similarities with scenes in *X-Men* 1 a year or so later. The title changed to *Amazing Fantasy* for its famous final issue in which Spider-Man débuted.~SW

Recommended: 7, 11, 14

AMAZING ADVENTURES

Marvel: *Series one 6 issues 1961, series two 39 issues 1970-1976, series three 14 issues 1979-1981, one-shot 1988*

Dr Droom was the feature connecting *Amazing Adventures'* first run. He was a mystic seen by some as a putative Dr Strange, being written by Stan Lee and drawn by Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko. Although he appeared in every issue but 5, the covers instead depict one of the standard mystery tales inside. Droom's stories were no better than the surrounding material, but once the cult of Marvel hit full pelt in the 1970s he was revived as the more fortunately named Dr Druid. After six issues Marvel changed the title to *Amazing Adult Fantasy*.

The second series initially split the twenty-two pages, and, more eccentrically, the cover between The Inhumans and the Black Widow. Both were popular supporting characters, and neither really took off as a solo feature. The Black Widow's pages were competent but dull throughout, and despite Jack Kirby writing the Inhumans strip in 1-4, one of his few pre 1977 writing credits at Marvel, the highlight was the artwork of Neal Adams on 5-8, particularly excelling on Thor's guest appearance in 8. Roy Thomas tied his stories in tenuously with the 'Kree/Skrull War' story running in the *Avengers* at the time, and X-Men fans might be enticed to sample Magneto's appearances in 9 and 10, by which time the Inhumans occupied the full page count. Venture in with expectations low, though. It's hard to conceive a time when the X-Men were a commercial failure and consigned to limbo, but that was the case in the early 1970s. New writer Steve Englehart revived The Beast from 11, and, tapping into the prevalent mode for horror characters, transformed the mutant Hank McCoy into a character more in keeping with his alias. Now possessing the hirsute body of an animal, but retaining his human intellect, McCoy stars in a decent run, well illustrated by Tom Sutton. Sample 13, when some old X-Men villains come calling. Not a sales success, the Beast was ousted after six issues (and a reprint in 17), and plotlines were concluded in *Hulk* 161.

Although certainly not obvious from early appearances, the best strip to appear in *Amazing Adventures* saw the second series to a close. Roy Thomas conceived the idea of extrapolating on H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* from 18 (with Adams art) and having his Martians return for a second and more successful invasion of Earth in the mid-21st century. Luckily there was the charismatic and effective Killraven on hand to lead a band of rebels against the Martians. Alternating between being cover-featured as *War of the Worlds* and *Killraven*, it's a pedestrian feature until the arrival of Don McGregor. His 1970s work is often regarded as pretentious and over-written, but credit is due for attempting to inject a poetry into Marvel material, and for producing a story propelled as much by the interaction between the cast as by any conflict. He also eloquently conveyed the horror of a subjugated humanity. The series would probably have remained obscure had McGregor's original artistic collaborators continued. Luckily deadline problems introduced P. Craig Russell. Once given the opportunity to ink and colour his pencils, Russell matched McGregor's vision with his own to create stunning illustrations with an almost fragile line, and if his experimental layouts sometimes confused it was a small price to pay.

Killraven's band of freedom fighters attack the Martians and their agents wherever possible, but rarely without cost. A character called Skar is a proto-Terminator whose head features mouth and ears, but disturbingly and memorably only a gaping hole instead of nose and eyes. The camaraderie between Killraven and best buddy M'Shulla – far too often tweely referred to as "Mud brother" – is exceptionally well developed, and the surly Hawk, simple but strong Old Skull, and the only woman of the group, although far from a token, Carmilla Frost round out the regular cast. One dies in 34, a rare occurrence in the comics of the time, and the story remains excellent. Such was the detail of his work that Russell obviously had difficulty maintaining even a bi-monthly schedule, and fill-ins punctuate the run, but they're also interesting. Keith Giffen's first published work in 35 illustrates 'The 24 Hour Man', a weird take on an old science fiction concept, and he also illustrates 38, designed to pull in new readers, as it cover-features assorted familiar Marvel heroes. The series finale is a beautifully drawn, but ultimately empty Killraven solo, obviously intended as an interlude issue. Readers waited over five years for a conclusion among the first flush of Marvel graphic novels. Russell's art had progressed immensely by this point, and McGregor's florid tendencies diminished, but it's a muddled and disappointing affair.

The peculiar idea of reprinting *Uncanny X-Men* 1-8 over two issues apiece provided the third *Amazing Adventures* series. The stories are reprinted elsewhere with more care and attention. The one-shot anthology was seemingly issued to utilise material commissioned for cancelled titles, particularly *High Adventure,* as many stories have a historical bent. The lead story should have been the most appealing, combining the creative talents of Chris Claremont and Michael Golden (inked by Terry Austin). Unfortunately, it's nonsense. Anticipating *The Accused,* a woman is raped and afforded the opportunity to revenge herself on her rapists. So far, so good, except to do so she has to be transformed into a space warrior riding a dragon. It's a distressingly trivial and offensive solution to a ghastly experience. Mike Vosburg contributes a decent short about Reilly, Ace of Spies and 'Mata Hari', and 'The Grail' by DeMatteis and Ridgway also succeeds. In its entirety, though, this is only worth picking out of a bargain box.~FP

Recommended: 29, 31, 34-37

Atelier Lana's THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF PROFESSOR JONES

Antarctic: *2 issues 1996*

The wacky archeologist Professor Jones and his wacky assistant and their wacky demon have wacky adventures on wacky quests against wacky foes. While well drawn by Lana, the modicum of charm evaporates after five pages.~FP

THE AMAZING CYNICALMAN

Eclipse: *One-shot 1987*

Matt Feazell's photocopied minicomics were a revelation. Extremely confident from the off, Feazell's speedy stick-figure style of art and stream-of-consciousness plotting resulted in some very funny moments, the best of which are collected in Caliber's paperback volume *Ert.* Eclipse gave Feazell the opportunity to extend his talents over a complete comic, and despite some very funny moments and pointed comments, 'Cynicalman Sells Out' begins to ramble long before the end. There are several other minicomics creators backing up the lead strip, including one drawn by Bob Burden.~WJ

AMAZING FANTASY

Marvel: *4 issues (15-18), 1962 (15), 1995-1996 (16-18)*

Stan Lee knew that this series, previously titled *Amazing Adult Fantasy,* was heading for cancellation graveyard. With nothing to lose, he and Steve Ditko introduced a new and different superhero in the final issue. This superhero had real-life problems in his normal identity as shy, unpopular, teenaged Peter Parker. Thus Spider-Man was born. The rest is history.

Thirty-three years later the title was revived. Some concepts do take time to catch on. Kurt Busiek retrospectively conceived the tale linking *Amazing Fantasy* 15 to *Amazing Spider-Man* 1. This will grate on continuity buffs as inconsistencies inevitably result and the difference in sophistication between the 1960s and 1990s narratives is jarring. Nevertheless, his story is sensitively written and Paul Lee supplies moody, painted artwork. Surely no other title will ever undergo a 3192% price rise between consecutive issues.~APS

THE AMAZING SCREW-ON HEAD

Dark Horse: *One-shot 2002*

Whatever other talents he displays, the work of Mike Mignola isn't noted for its high comedy content, but after this a re-assessment is in order. Set in a fictitious 1860s, the Screw-On Head is a sentient metal head that screws into a metal body, after which he goes adventuring. Mignola's dialogue is arch, his characters ridiculous, and his art gorgeous. Handled straight, though, much of this wouldn't be far removed from Hellboy. Has Mignola been laughing at us all along?~FP

Recommended

AMAZING STRIP

Antarctic: *10 issues 1993-1994**

Sex and Drugs and Rock'n'Roll – well mostly just sex, actually as Ippongi Bang traces the coyly debauched careers of a trio of strangely wholesome rockstars. Unable to decide whether it's fictional reportage or a dirty version of *Spinal Tap* it quickly devolves into the cutesy mysticism and serial bonking. Less 'amazing', rather dull.~WW

Heroic Tales: AMAZON

Lone Star: *10 issues 1997-2000*

Matt Sears investigates an explosion in the desert and finds a mysterious woman called Faith, in a space suit. He buys her some clothes and starts to teach her English before an alien attacks. In 4-5, Faith has left Matt's protection and taken a job as a construction worker on the border, but answers "Yes" when asked whether she's an alien, leading to a fight in jail. After fighting Mr Muscles in 6, Amazon meets a fugitive, Gunslinger, who sends her on a mission to find other superheroes (7-9). Her adventures continue in *Force Seven,* as part of a government-sponsored team. Backups include Ace of Diamonds, another female hero (3, 5), Blackheart (6) and Pantheon by Bill Willingham (7). Written by Robb Phipps, with artwork from Bill Williams, who has a clean, bold style, Amazon tries not to be obvious, but in the end she isn't interesting enough in her own right. The last three issues feature Atlas, Gunslinger and Blackheart respectively on the cover instead of Amazon, who is also not actually in 10.~NF

THE AMAZON

Comico: *3 issue miniseries 1989*

American journalist Malcolm Hilliard becomes obsessed with discovering the truth about rumours concerning missing workers and disruptions at a Brazilian logging camp. The local tribes believe a physical manifestation of the Amazon occurs to protect the land in times of need, and the further Hilliard digs the more he's forced to question his beliefs. A remarkably assured comic début from writer Steven Seagle, and while Tim Sale's early art is less adept this is a rare instance of a series managing to wrap a forceful point in a well paced story.~FP

Recommended: 1-3

AMAZON WOMAN

Fantaco: *2 issue microseries 1995, 4 issue miniseries 1996**

When trouble comes calling Karol Hammel takes almost all her clothes off and uses her prodigious strength to fight it. Tom Simonton is a decent enough cartoonist, but there's more substance to an autumn dandelion.~WJ

Nine Princes In AMBER

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1996*

Roger Zelazny's *Amber* novels are gripping fantasy, and even diluted through the necessity of contraction for three comics their compelling page turning nature survives. The artwork is somewhat less satisfactory. Lou Harrison should be a very accomplished painter someday, but his static visualisations in the first issue aren't quite the finished article. Bryn Barnard concludes the story, and while a little more fluid is technically inferior, despite his impressive credit page resume. If you've any interest at all read the novels first, then look these out if your appetite for Amber remains unsated.~WJ

AMBUSH BUG

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1985, 6 issue miniseries ('Son of...') 1986, one-shot ('Stocking Stuffer') 1986, one-shot ('Nothing Special') 1992*

Introduced by Keith Giffen in DC Comics Presents 52, and given assorted guest appearances thereafter, Ambush Bug began as an inventive piece of irreverent whimsy. The first miniseries remains an energetic joke-packed romp, drawn by Giffen in his best Muñoz style, inked by Bob Oksner, with Robert Loren Fleming wittily filling the word balloons. The only problem is that it's so full of in-jokes and jibes at contemporary comics it will mystify any new reader. The jokes become ever more surreal in the second series, and wackiness wears thin long before the end. It's threadbare by the first Christmas themed special, while the second, despite the unlikely pairing of Lobo and Sandman in the same comic, is very much contractual obligation.~FJ

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* Available in a collected edition

AMELIA RULES

Renaissance Press: *7 issues + 2001 to date*

Jimmy Gownley takes the TV sitcom route of focussing on childhood with a knowing adult eye, and does it very well indeed. Nine-year old Amelia's parents are divorced, and she and her mother have moved to a new town to live with her mother's considerably younger sister. Amelia is wise beyond her years, and the friends and enemies with whom her world is populated are a well fleshed-out group. Gownley's cartooning is eloquent, with a touch of *Doonesbury* about the faces, and miles removed from his previous work, although Amelia's careworn mother is indicative of well conceived characterisation. His merging of computer techniques and simple, bold colouring, is a combination with widespread appeal, but although this is promoted as being "all-ages" it's unlikely that children of Amelia's age would draw much other than the obvious gags from it. All issues are self-contained, so sample any of them, and 1-5 are now available in book form.~FP

Recommended: 2-6

AMERICA VS THE JUSTICE SOCIETY

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1985*

Set on Earth Two, where DC consigned their 1940s heroes at one stage, Batman's diary posthumously accuses the JSA of murder. Dick (Robin) Grayson and Helena (Huntress) Wayne are on opposite sides of the judicial fence. Overly talky, inappropriately illustrated, and you know you're onto a loser when the text pages are much more interesting than the story they surround.~HS

The AMERICAN

Dark Horse: *8 issues 1987-1988*, 1 Special 1990, 4 issue miniseries ('Lost In America') 1992*

Well loved super-soldier 'The American' is a media darling and hero of the masses, but one determined reporter uncovers a fraud perpetrated over generations of false heroics, which has cost untold lives. He, and his loved ones, suffer the consequences, and despite help along the way, including catastrophic intercession from the former Kid American, the hero's sidekick, he stands alone against overwhelming forces. Deft writing from Mark Verheiden keeps the suspense tight, and the, at best, partial victory of the protagonist adds an unexpectedly realistic note of compromise. The second series focuses on the latest American himself, and his attempts to find an identity now that his cherished façade has been stripped away. This leads him to a strange cult – a carefully non-litigious blend of the Moonies and the Scientologists – and a disturbing series of revelations, about himself and the behaviour of the 'Average Man' from which he's been so carefully shielded for most of his life. An interesting sidenote is that the original *American* series was allegedly a proposal for Marvel's Captain America, rejected because the then Marvel management didn't want to drastically revamp their hero as a pawn of the government. Considering what they've allowed to happen to him since, it might have been kinder if they'd followed this proposal.~HS

AMERICAN FLAGG

First: *50 issues, 1 Special 1983-1988, series two 12 issues 1988-1989*

Howard Chaykin's *American Flagg* is a cynical, bitter satire on American culture, morality and politics, with a lot of attendant violence. Its 'underground' sensibilities arguably paved the way for the introduction of more mature themes in titles from otherwise conservative, US publishers. Chaykin's approach involves packing large amounts of information and reference into every page using TV reports to provide plot synopses, and background images of billboards or TV advertisements and shows. His tightly inked, stippled artwork is sharp yet still conveys the story's ambiguities and the lettering of Ken Bruzenak is worth mentioning as also being highly influential on the series' visual appeal. On the basis on the first two years of this series, *American Flagg* deserves to be measured against titles like *Watchmen*, as a highpoint of American comics.

Discarded actor, Reuben Flagg arrives in Chicago from Mars for a five-year tour of duty in the Rangers, a police force sponsored by the corporate government, the Plex. 1-4* introduce a large number of recurring characters and establish Flagg as a rebel against the status quo, pitting him against both the Plex (specifically, Internal Affairs agent Scheiskopf), and the racist and subversive, American Survivalist Labor Committee. Flagg 'inherits' a pirate TV station, Q-USA after his chief is murdered by Scheiskopf, which he runs while continuing to police Chicago. The supporting cast includes the glamourous Mandy Krieger, Raul, a talking cat, Mayor C.K. Blitz, a robotic deputy called Luther Ironheart, Bill, the rightful King of England and a large number of sexual partners, though noticeably fewer when Chaykin's not involved. Guest artists in 13 and 14 don't much detract from the story, which continues with an adventure amongst the communist cowboys of Canada (15-18), an election battle between Mandy and C.K. with unexpected results (19-22) and a trip to London, which involves Flagg in a conspiracy to overthrow the Brazilian government (23-26). A two-part backup strip about Flagg's on screen character, Mark Thrust, Sexus Ranger (19-20), is followed by one written by Alan Moore (21-26) focusing on the supporting cast and climaxing in the full-length 27. Moore is on the same wavelength as Chaykin as far as the storytelling goes, but Don Lomax's artwork is very unappealing.

Chaykin writes 28-30, drawn by Joe Staton, but takes on a co-writer, Steven Grant (31-34) before leaving it to him entirely. The Special appeared at this point, with Flagg and Raul transported to the world of Chaykin's Time2 and the story largely just a preview for that title. Grant produces a tale of Oklahoma under British sovereignty (35-37) and then gives way to J.M. DeMatteis who has Flagg resign from the Rangers, head off on a road trip across America with Raul and Luther, before returning to Chicago on hearing of the death of a major character (38-45). Mark Badger's artwork (31-45) is stylish, but is inappropriate after Chaykin's own. A backup featuring Bob Violence (a fictional TV shows) is in 31-40, Chaykin's initial involvement at least tempering his loss on the lead.

An attempt to redress the problems (angrily articulated in many of the letters) saw Chaykin plotting 47-50, drawn by Paul Smith (47-48) and Mike Vosburg (49-50) in an approximation of Chaykin's style for a crowd-pleasing finale. The second series continued where the first left off with Mike Vosburg art and Mindy Newell scripts, allegedly to Chaykin plots, but John Moore was quickly credited too and at the end, it was said to have always been intended as a limited series.~NF

Recommended: 1-12, 15-26

AMERICAN FLYER Funnies

Print Mint: *1 issue 1971*

Last Gasp: *1 issue (2) 1972*

Quite the strange subject matter for 1970s underground comics, as Larrys Sutherland, Todd and Welz have a try at superheroes with that counterculture twist. He's nowhere near as good, but Welz is drawing from the same well as Moebius for his Wyatt Winghead strips, particularly in 1, and his assorted mystics, The Holy Five, is a grin-inducing exercise in bathos. Sutherland's Right-On Squad ("They're righteous, they're revolutionary, they're so full of shit they can't see straight") is a good idea with feeble plots. The first issue at least was still being reprinted a decade later.~FP

AMERICAN FREAK, A tale of the Un-Men

DC/Vertigo: *5 issue miniseries 1994*

Army orphan Damien Kane discovers his true lineage as the offspring of procreation experiments between genetically engineered freaks. Discovering he's also mutating, Kane is befriended by the deformed Crassus, who promises a cure for Kane's condition and leads him to a community of others with deformities. Don't be put off by the preposterous covers and their glaring taglines. *American Freak* is a fine study of humanity's reaction to anyone different, and Dave Louapre's poignant script avoids sentimentality or a predictable outcome.~WJ

AMERICAN SPLENDOR

Harvey Pekar: *16 issues 1976-1991*
Dark Horse: *One-shot ('A Step Out of the Nest') 1994, 2 issue microseries ('Windfall') 1995, one-shot ('Comic-Con Comics') 1996, one-shot ('On the Job') 1997, One-shot ('Odds & Ends'), one-shot ('Music Comics') 1997, one-shot ('Transatlantic Comics') 1988, one-shot ('Terminal') 1999, one-shot ('Bedtime Stories') 2000, one-shot ('Portrait of the Artist in his Declining Years') 2001, 3 issue miniseries ('Unsung Hero') 2002*
Four Walls Eight Windows: *Graphic Novel (Our Cancer Year) 1995*

Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor* is a truly unique creation. Long before the fashion for autobiographical comics Pekar was documenting the trials, tribulations and trivia of being a filing clerk and part-time journalist in Cleveland. In magazine-size issues, illustrated by a host of artists including Frank (Foolbert Sturgeon) Stack, Robert Crumb, Spain, Joe Zabel and Gary Dumm and Jim Woodring, Pekar lays bare his life, from tiny crises about feeding the cat or meeting a college friend after twenty years to major upsets, like divorce and cancer. Rarely has anyone been willing to open up and show the world all their insecurities, stupid acts, fleeting moments of triumph, petty worries and often pettier hatreds like Pekar, joined in later issues by his current wife Joyce Brabner. Despite this many of his most beautifully scripted strips are about overheard conversations, jokes told to him by co-workers, or bits of local oral history, such as the Crumb-illustrated 'The Maggie' in 7, about Yiddish linoleum salesmen, that frequently top and tail the more dramatic pieces. As the series has developed the shorter pieces become fewer as Pekar settles down to chronicle his fears and worries over illness and old age. He kvetches constantly, whinges and whines and probes his own psyche like a kid unable to stop poking an aching tooth with his tongue. All his worst fears are realised on discovering he has cancer. The impact of his illness, on himself and all around him, is brutally explored in *Our Cancer Year*, an extraordinarily frank graphic novel co-written with Brabner. Pekar lays bare his deepest fears in this book, loosely but effectively documented by Frank Stack. It's the closest comics get to effective documentary, and is deeply moving.

After *Our Cancer Year* Pekar ceased self-publishing and has since concentrated on one-shots of varying quality. Most of the later ones collect gripes, recollections and biographical material on jazz musicians like regular issues ('Portrait', 'Bedtime Stories', 'Terminal', 'On the Job' and Odds & Ends', 'Comic-Con Comics'). 'Music Comics' is entirely about musicians. It's the single story issues that shine: 'A Step Out of the Nest' concerns a trip to do *The David Letterman Show* for the first time in years. He used to be a regular guest until he and David had a falling out. 'Windfall' is about a trip to Chicago to give a lecture, in which Joyce Brabner allows herself to be portrayed as a pushy, politically annoying woman who analyses her husband's every action. Fascinating. And probably the best, 'Transatlantic Comics', put together from a correspondence between Pekar and Colin Warneford, an autistic autobiographical cartoonist who contacted Pekar for advice. Warneford wants to communicate the complete difference in perception and response his autism gives him, without being patronised because of his "difference". 'Unsung Hero' is the very dull biography of marine, Robert McNeill, poorly illustrated by David Collier. The point Pekar may be making is that his subject isn't militant, enters the Vietnam War pointlessly and is an unexceptional soldier, representing an everyman viewpoint of the conflict. Unfortunately this makes for exceptionally mundane reading.~FJ
Recommended: 2, 3, 7, 12, 15, Our Cancer Year, 'Windfall', 'Transatlantic Comics'

AMERICAN WOMAN

Antarctic: *2 issues 1998*

Five pages of story stretched over twenty-one comprise the first issue, the extra being required to include as many full page or double page half-naked shots of our heroine as possible. Even in costume, madam is the worst kind of patriot's fetish, dressed up in frilly knickers and thigh length boots with breasts dangling from a star shaped chest cut-out, the entire ensemble in red, white and blue. There's more story (and costume) in 2, but not a very good one. Depressingly this was apparently Antarctic's top selling comic of 1998.~FP

64 Page Giant AMERICA'S BEST COMICS

America's Best Comics: *One-shot 2001*

Funny and playful scripts, full of in-jokes, by Alan Moore and Steve Moore, distinguish this bumper album of pastiches in various styles by many superb artists. The artistic highlights are Eric Shanower's *Promethea*, which is a homage to *Little Nemo*, Kyle Baker's Splash Brannigan, Humberto Ramos' Tom Strong, and Sergio Aragonés at his very best on 'The First First American'. Tremendous fun from front to back.~GK
Recommended

AMERICA'S BEST TV COMICS

Marvel: *1 issue 1967*

Certainly the oddity with edited reprints of *Fantastic Four* 19 and *Amazing Spider-Man* 42 sitting alongside a *George of the Jungle* strip and a tale featuring the characters from the TV cartoon *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. Surely no-one would want this today?~WJ

AMERICOMICS

AC: *6 issues, 1 Special 1983-1984*

One of publisher Bill Black's first attempts at crossing over from fanzines to small-press comics, this anthology is a very mixed bag indeed. It features several of the pneumatic heroines that would later comprise Femforce (Dragonfly, Tara), heroes who would become mainstays of AC continuity (Shade, Captain Freedom), and odd material created under a temporary licence starring discontinued Charlton heroes such as Blue Beetle. Seldom better than fair, Americomics showcases the early efforts of several folk who would progress to less embarrassing work, including Jerry Ordway, Will Nyberg and Vic Bridges. The special teamed Blue Beetle, Captain Atom, Nightshade and The Question as The Sentinels of Justice, a title later co-opted by Black for his own creations.~HS

AMEROTICA Graphic Novels

NBM's Amerotica line hasn't been productive as their Eurotica strand, either in terms of quality or quantity. While undoubtedly publishers of some of the finest European smut, the more inventive American output has gone to Fantagraphics' Eros line. Elaine Lee's series of erotic science fiction stories, which promised to be real tales rather than just excuses to bonk, turn out to be a load of clichés, indifferently and often poorly illustrated in two volumes of *The Skintight Orbit*, while Amerotica's big 'discovery', Michael Manning, creates a world of weird sado-masochistic creatures, aliens, horse people and dominatrixes. Pity he can't draw, but he's become a darling of the S&M crowd, particularly in the UK. *The Spider Garden* has some sort of plot about bitchy rivalries among not quite human sex mystics, *Hydrophibian* creates a world of bondage mermaids, while *The Lumenagerie* and *Cathexis* are reprint collections of shorts and sketches. In *Tranceptor* he returns to longer tales of intrigue among rubber-clad Dominas and, er, miners. Before the division, about the only saucy US creator they'd published was Will Desberg, whose *The Garden of Desire* is a sexy world tour about a man searching for his ideal woman, drawn in a simple, cartoony style.

Overall one can't help but feel that Amerotica is a line for rather mature wankers. Kiki Kjaer's *Retreat* and *Undertow* feel like they should be from the 1960s, but are set in the 1980s. Beardy blokes and liberal women enjoy sexual hijinx in a beach cabin and out in the woods. The artwork's fluid pen and ink work, and if you get off on surfer dudes, hippies and checked shirts then it's the book for you. *The Phoebe Chronicles* 1 and 2 are the ongoing adventures of a futuristic heroine escaping from her tyrannical father and the clutches of the uptight Purity League to enjoy untrammelled cum-guzzling drawn in a dynamic, superhero style. To keep things simple there are usually only two or three panels per page, so you don't have to strain to follow the plot, but escape from totalitarian anti-sexers is such a yesterday concept. Tim Fischer explores another hoary SF cliché in *Llisica*, who's some sort of super tracker on an alien planet, searching for a lost girl. The planet's full of mutants who secrete an irresistible pheromone (not to mention phallic plants and horny animals). Everything does everything. Yawn.

A genuine blast from the past is Kevin Taylor's *Girl*, which enjoyed a ten year hiatus between his original *Girl* strips (collected as, er, *Girl*) and his latest pair of graphic novels, *Girl:* 'The Second Coming', in which his demonic dabbler and go-go dancer heroine has become a successful business woman with a club empire and a sideline in sorcery. And gigantic juggs of course. There's also *Girl*: 'The Rule of Darkness', about her struggles to maintain order as a club manageress over both lap dancers and Satan's little helpers and *JILL: Part Time Lover*. As ever it's plastically drawn anal sex and cock sucking to the max, and should really be titled 'How I lost my job and became a prostitute'.

A little literary credibility is added by two volumes of stories by Robert Edison Sandiford, drawn by Justin Norman. Sandiford is a well-known contributor to America's literary porn fiction magazines (well, as literary as porn magazines can get). He understands there's more to erotica than thrashing around, and *Stray Moonbeams* and *Attractive Forces* both let the pictures tell the story in their own time, building atmosphere. Another interesting creator is Jack Munroe, although his *Ada Lee* graphic novels don't feel polished (or indeed finished). They're more like the notes for an interesting lesbian sex book. Ada's a teen prodigy writer who devotes her life (and royalty cheques) to getting drunk and shagging her friends. However the cluster of stories isn't worked out and stops and starts with no real structure. *You can never have too few teen lesbian stories, and The Adventures of a Lesbian College School Girl* by Petra Waldron and Jennifer Finch, does exactly what it says on the tin. It's fluidly if simply drawn, and nothing if not enthusiastic about its subject matter.

Finally there's *Sapphire* by Barry Blair and Colin Chan, only a hop and a skip away from Blair's *Elflord* and *Elfquest* work, full of child-like elfin creatures with exaggerated sexual organs. There is something deeply unwholesome both about the cuteness of the drawing and plot, full of tree-protecting warriors, sorceress/dominatrixes and sacred quests. Bondage and bollocks in equal measure.~FJ

Recommended: *Attractive Forces, Stray Moonbeams*

AMETHYST, Princess of Gemworld

DC: Series one 12 issues, 1 Annual 1983-1984, series two 16 issues, 1 Special 1985-1986, 4 issue miniseries 1987-1988

On her thirteenth birthday, Amy Winston discovers that she's also the twenty-year-old Princess Amethyst, rightful ruler of Gemworld and its twelve royal houses. She discovers this the hard way when she's abducted by the evil Dark Opal, who wants to dispose of her to make his domination of Gemworld complete. From the title and the covers, this looks all pastel colours and dressing-up-games, a truly girly girls' comic, providing yet another princess fantasy for those girls who are so inclined. But, no. It's a thoroughly intelligent adventure story, where the good characters have to work hard at it, facing some very tough decisions, and where the ultimate outcome owes quite as much to sub-plots among the villains as to our heroes' superior firepower, which makes for a particularly satisfying and logical ending. The writing by Dan Mishkin and Gary Cohn is terrific, with some wonderful characters (the swashbuckling Princess Turquoise striking a chord), and with pace and plot that make the twelve issues fly by. The story would probably have worked even without Ernie Colón's artwork, but with it, it's unforgettable. Goodness, that man can draw!

Maybe it's a testament to how very good the first *Amethyst* series was that DC were back the very next year to maul her beyond recognition. Mishkin and Cohn returned as writers (for the Annual, and 1-8), but this time they have no real story to tell, and they take out their boredom and frustration on the characters, ripping from them all integrity and zest for life. From 9, the writing team starts changing every few issues, and thereafter we all know that it's just a matter of time. Sad, very sad. And what can one say in favour of the miniseries? It's mercifully short, and the characters are so far from their 1983 versions that the sight of their zombie forms lurching through these pages is less traumatic than it might have been. The storyline is some gibberish about Amethyst returning to Gemworld to sort out a problem with the next generation, while the real problem – the devastating failure of self-esteem that's affected every one of the female characters – goes unacknowledged and unremedied. Hideous.~FC

Recommended: Series one 1-12

AMMO ARMAGEDDON

Atomeka: *One-shot 1993*

If some boys haven't got big toys then they'll write about them and draw them. An excellent Geof Darrow cover conceals a largely dull weapon-and-war anthology, although at least Warren Ellis and Phil Winslade have the wit to turn in a story about a mechanised penis.~FP

Gray Morrow's AMORA

Eros: *1 issue 1991*

While Gray Morrow's artwork is always decorative, it's only his ardent followers who should be investigating this. It's a ragbag of what seem to be samples for skin mags, well illustrated, but of no other value.~WJ

AMY PAPUDA

Northstar: *2 issues 1990, one-shot (Amy Papuda Returns) 1992*

As bizarre a series as has been seen in comics, *Amy Papuda* blends the spirit of *Beavis and Butthead* with an incredibly bleak sense of humour. The ugly Amy is the butt of many typical high-school jokes, and is abused by a drunken father, but when she arranges revenge she's jailed for her troubles. Her chief tormentor, jock Doug and his sidekick Wally, are suitably ghastly creations, and moments of triumph for Amy are few and far between. Writer and artist Michael Pearlstein's style bears a similarity to that of J.R. Williams (whose 'Bad Boys' strip would seem to be an influence). He's obviously enjoying himself, but the nihilistic approach and casual treatment of deeply upsetting subjects may render *Amy Papuda* thoroughly offensive to some.~WJ

AMY RACECAR Color Special

El Capitan: *2 issues 1997-1999**

The first of these is a retelling of sorts of the story told in *Stray Bullets* 6. Amy is the ultimate assassin and thief, target of everyone who's after the bazillion dollar reward on her head, including her boyfriend. In the second, having destroyed most of the planet, Amy is awakened, five hundred years later, by the pitiful survivors. David Lapham's anti-heroine is hard to dislike, though all other characters are portrayed as idiots or morons. Not exactly a laugh a minute, this is very black comedy, taking wild swipes at the manipulations of fame and popularity and the clichés of science fiction.~NF

A-NEXT The Next Generation of Avengers.

Marvel: *12 issues 1998-1999*

Conceived as part of Tom DeFalco's vision of a second-generation Marvel Universe, A Next missed the mark far more than its sister titles *J2*, *Fantastic Five* and *Spider-Girl*. Without the tight family soap of those books, which offered real opportunities to explore what it meant to have grown up in the superhero community, *A-Next* was little more than another dumb superteam book. One-dimensional characters and an over-reverence for the 'real' Avengers' villains (Loki in 1, Dr Doom by 5) provided the feel of a creative team going through the motions rather than looking to the boundaries of what this opportunity could have offered. Competent but resolutely house style artwork by Ron Frenz did little to raise the interest levels. 10 and 11, in which the team visit a Nazi-ruled alternate reality to which Captain America disappeared a decade before, pushes the right fanboy buttons, but there's nothing original in it. Even its plot of the Scarlet Witch-in-a-coma to seal a dimensional gateway is recycled. Dull, unoriginal and ultimately pointless ... unless the idea of anything original or different ever happening to the Avengers really, really upsets you, in which case you'll probably love its safe mediocrity down to the ground.~JC

AN ACCIDENTAL DEATH

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1993*

Originally serialised in *Dark Horse Presents* 65-67, artist Eric Shanower and writer Ed Brubaker's quiet but terrible story of teenage death and unspoken codes of secrecy among army brats in the 1970s is brilliantly observed and drawn. The military background is essential to the resonance of the story, particularly the conclusion, and Brubaker's distanced narrative serves to bring the reader closer to the horror.~WJ

Recommended

ANARCHY COMICS

Last Gasp: *3 issues 1978-1981*

A mixture of political and social commentaries, plus historical strips about various Anarchist actions, there's still room for poetry, humour and melodrama in this fine series. In the spirit of the title, the first issue of *Anarchy Comics* is numbered 2.

From Spain's excellent 'Blood And Sky' about anarchy during the Spanish Civil War to Melinda Gebbie's ornate story of Estelle Dufy, and Epistolier and Volny's 'Kronstadt' (reprinted from *L'Echo Des Savanes*), issue one sets a high standard, actually matched by the following issues. It also includes work by editor Jay Kinney, Paul Mavrides, Cliff Harper and Gilbert Shelton. 2 features Kinney and Mavrides' 'Kultur Dokuments', an Archie parody/parable, 'The Black Freighter', adapted by Cliff Harper from Brecht, another terrific history lesson by Spain about Spanish Anarchist leader Durruti (he of Column fame) and more work by Gebbie and Epistolier. 3 is more of the same, augmented by strips from Albo Helm, Gerd Seyfried, early Gary Panter, Sharon Rudahl, Greg Irons and Matt Feazell. Throughout *Anarchy Comics* squarely addressed its theme, prompting creators to produce work of the highest quality, and the inclusion of European material strengthens an already worthwhile package.~NF

Recommended: 1-3

ANARKY

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1997, 8 issues 1999*

It ought to be a treat to read a comic in which the script acknowledges the existence of books, but gosh it's tiresome when Alan Grant does it so assiduously. Self-made boy genius in V For Vendetta outfit Anarky gives first-year philosophy lessons to his dog and attempts to analyse evil with guest stars The Demon, Darkseid, and Batman. No turd was ever polished so dazzlingly as Norm Breyfogle's absurd abstractions by Kevin Nowlan's inks on the covers, a trick you would rightly not expect the hapless Joe Rubenstein to repeat inside. No doubt you get what you pay for. The regular series, by the same team (minus Nowlan, sniff) is less outlandish, though no less silly, and has plenty more guest stars, most notably The Haunted Tank and the USA's founding fathers in a pretty funny 'war is hell' story in 7.~GK

ANCIENT JOE

Dark Horse Maverick: *3 issue miniseries 2001**

Joe believes his recently dead wife has gone to hell and he wants to save her soul. The mood takes precedence over the plot, which fails to address the set-up in satisfactory fashion, or to offer compensation in the form of believable or endearing characters as it meanders to fill pages. This is Scott Morse's attempt at magical realism presented in a ponderous manner with highly stylised art, and it's difficult to imagine it appealing to anyone.~FP

ANCIENT WARRIORS

Caliber: *1 issue 1999*

Anthology dedicated to the greatest warriors of history. The main bulk of the issue features Genghis Khan by Steve Jones and Wayne Reid, not simply in his role as the greatest conqueror in history, but as the civiliser and lawmaker who largely founded modern China and whose innovations and reforms shaped Europe and the world. Competent but dull. Extra features include a look at Agincourt and Hannibal.~WW

ANDROMEDA

Andromeda Publications: *6 issues 1977-1979*

Stylish if somewhat hit-and-miss science fiction comic edited by Dean Motter combining comics talents with a selection of the prose genre's most notable talents. John Allison and Tony Meers adapt James Tiptree Jr.'s 'The Man Who Walked Home' in 1, supplemented by Motter's own 'The Escape and Pursuit of Jeanne d'Arc', and he returns as artist on A. E. Van Vogt's 'Process' in 2. That also has short pieces by Jeffrey Morgan and Ken Steacy, George Henderson, Gene Day and Jim Beveridge. B. P. Nichol and Paul Rivoche's adaptation of Arthur C. Clarke's 'Exile of the Eons' is the star of the third issue, but Nichol and Tom Nesbitt's treatment of Jack Vance's 'The Narrow Land' in 4 falls far short of acceptable quality. In 5 Nichol and Meers combine well to adapt Walter M. Miller's 'The Big Hunger', which is just as well as the rest of the issue is substandard. 6 is an Alan Dean Foster special with Nesbitt illustrating 'Metrognome', Peter Hsu putting pictures to 'Why Johnny Can't Speed', Don Marshall depicting 'Thrust' and Rivoche providing a visual for the very odd 'Where Do You Get Those Ideas?' Generally over-wordy, but book readers might not mind that much.~WW

ANGEL

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1999*, 17 issues 1999-2001*, 4 issue miniseries 2001-2002**

Technically surtitled, *Buffy The Vampire Slayer: Angel*, the first miniseries is the solo showcase for the vampire-with-a-soul in the TV spin-off, as Angel faces both a woman and a monster from his past, and Buffy and chums, while around, definitely play second bananas. Chris Golden's script exploited the opportunity to display monsters and effects beyond the budget of the TV show, and the art, while generic, was adequate. The ongoing series coincided with the launch of Angel's own TV series. Still with Golden scripting (in collaboration with Tom Sniegowski), it never took flight, and became a monster-of-the-episode cliché, without the charm of the parent programme. The art, largely by Christian Zanier, is indifferent, and only the final issue, a Cordelia spotlight, demonstrates enough wit to make a (not very good) TV episode. Joss Whedon, co-creator of Buffy and Angel, co-wrote the miniseries with Brett Matthew, and the Mel Rubi art, while better, was still not good enough. The four-issue battle with a fellow vampire who seeks a soul of his own wasn't sufficiently interesting to make up for the reader's tried patience with delays, and there are no plans for further Angel solo comics in the foreseeable future. Each issue of *Angel* has two variant covers; one artistic rendering of a scene from the story, and one photo-cover of the star of the TV show, the pouty David Boreanz, brooding into the middle distance, occasionally assisted in this arduous task by his supporting cast. Both variants were equally available, but, comics retailers having some insight into the series' appeal, the photo covers are much more commonplace.~HS

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* Available in a collected edition

ANGEL AND THE APE

DC: *7 issues 1968-1969, 4 issue miniseries 1990-1991*
DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 2001-2002*

A humour series débuting in *Showcase* 77 featuring private investigator Angel O'Day and her gorilla partner, Sam Simeon. Written by E. Nelson Bridwell and Howie Post, the series was illustrated by Bob Oksner, whose nice style was further improved by the inks of Wally Wood in 2-6. The cases they took involved them in the usual hairy detection adventures, with Sam holding down a part-time job as a comic strip artist for an editor named Stan Bragg, who dressed in a snappy Stars and Stripes costume. The final 1960s issue was titled *Meet Angel*. An unpublished story finally saw the light of day in the tabloid sized *Christmas with the Super-Heroes* in 1975.

The 1990 miniseries by Phil Foglio had a more realistic tone, and revealed that Dumb Bunny from the Inferior Five was Angel's half-sister and descended from the ancient Amazons. It's worth sampling, but the best series was the Vertigo one. Howard Chaykin and David Tischman write lashings of acidic dialogue and there's superb art by Philip Bond, who's mastered the technique of ape-expressions. Who killed poor model/dancer Bambi? That starts an outrageous murder mystery full of weird, wonderful and hideous characters. If it doesn't raise a smile you're a boring old fart.~HY

Recommended: Vertigo 1-4

ANGEL FIRE

Crusade: *3 issue miniseries 1997*

Spinning off from *Shi*, this is a tale of cross, double-cross and triple-cross as technologically-enhanced secret agent and hot babe Anastasia Pizer attempts to keep a soviet death-ray satellite out of the hands of organised crime. Woefully derivative twaddle.~WW

ANGEL HEAT

Amazing: *1 issue 1997*

Terrible wet dream fantasy story about a near-naked angel, female of course, landing on the bed of a teenage boy. There's a battle with Satan's minion during which she saves him, followed by a bubblebath. It's all nicely drawn by Richard Fraga, but only for the desperate.~FP

ANGEL LOVE

DC: *8 issues, 1 Special 1986-1987*

This was an unusual series by Barbara Slate, drawn in cartoon style, but with quite realistic settings involving the life of Angel Love, a young woman coping in modern society. The talking cockroaches in her apartment gave the series a nice kookie feel. This would have made a great TV series, and is worth a look.~ HY

ANGEL OF DEATH

Innovation: *4 issue miniseries 1991*

A judge and executioner and his immortal enemy arrive in 20th century USA to play a game of cat and mouse, involving a TV journalist along the way. A not quite professional standard of art mars an otherwise decent potboiler.~WJ

ANGELA

Image: *3 issue miniseries*, 1 Special 1994-1995*

Neil Gaiman fleshes out the background to the angel Angela in this *Spawn* spin-off. Angela is put on trial after her battle with Spawn and his appearance during the proceedings doesn't do much to restore her to the good graces of the rulers of her angelic homeworld, Elysium. Gaiman has fun with the odd couple's adventure in Hell and sets the stage for Angela to go solo in this enjoyable if lightweight series. Greg Capullo's artwork is, as ever, reminiscent of McFarlane's but his straightforward storytelling and attention to detail make the whole thing visually attractive.~NF

ANGRY YOUTH COMIX

Fantagraphics: *4 issues + 2000 to date*

Creator Johnny Ryan isn't so much an angry youth as an obnoxious, whining adolescent determined to offend. Each page of his comic is so full of racial slurs, misogyny and casual obscenity that it becomes difficult to endorse the Ryan 'aesthetic'. Lead characters Loady McGee and Sinus O'Gynus make Beavis and Butthead look like Gareth Gates and Will Young, while co-star Blecky Yuckerella is nothing more than a repulsive woman-thing who exists solely to torment 'the boys'. Ryan is a confident and clear cartoonist who certainly knows how to deliver a good gag, and in places *Angry Youth Comix* is laugh-out-loud funny, so your tolerance for this material could well depend on how close you still are to your inner Fred Durst. Ryan titles the fourth issue *Hot-Headed Cyborg Ass-Kicker!*~AL

ANGRYMAN

Iconografix: *3 issues 1992-1993*

Ned's life falls apart as he has dreams letting him view the actions of Angryman. There's a germ of a good idea hiding in *Angryman*, but the comic can't decide if it wants to be superhero parody or semi-autobiographical. The best issue is 2, in which Ned forms a new relationship and there's a well conceived back-up parody of the Fantastic Four.~WJ

ANIMA

DC: *15 issues 1994-1995*

Clumsy attempt at a superheroic Tank Girl. Grunge chick gets superpowers and stumbles off into unfocussed, forgettable adventures.~HS

ANIMAL CONFIDENTIAL

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1992*

Peculiar selection of short stories involving animals. Randy Stradley and Eric Vincent retell the legend of the Hartlepool monkeyhangers to hilarious effect, backed up by Rick Geary, Nina Paley, and parody text stories and ads. Spotty, but entertaining.~HS

ANIMAL MAN

DC/Vertigo: *89 issues, 1 Annual, 1988-1995*

Prior to Grant Morrison getting hold of Animal Man, his previous appearance had been in *Action Comics* 552-553, 1984, as part of a group called The Forgotten Heroes, which wasn't far off the mark. Before that he'd been a small-time 1960s superhero from a short run in *Strange Adventures*. His own title will prove more memorable, not least for the superb cover art of Brian Bolland on 1-63. Chas Truog's interiors in 1-32 are markedly less attractive, and strong scripts by Morrison made the comic a success despite Truog rather than helped by him.

1-4 is a tremendously confident opening story, reintroducing Buddy Baker and explaining his power to take on the abilities of any animal in the immediate vicinity. He's relaunching his superhero career, while living with his wife and two kids. This gives the title a lasting family flavour all its own. Another enduring issue is that of animal rights, introduced with the arrival from Africa of an even shorter-lived 1960s hero, B'wana Beast, to free animals from zoos and research labs. Animal Man fights B'wana Beast at first, but then realises he agrees with him. Such attitudes will complicate his relationship with the authorities, and thus his career (another lasting theme). 5 is a poignant tale of a Wile E.Coyote figure who comes from a dimension where animated cartoons are reality. Alternate worlds and the suffering of cartoon characters for our entertainment will be important later. Things really hot up in 10. *Secret Origins* 39 is a prologue to this story, which sees the reappearance of the yellow aliens whose exploding spaceship accidentally gave Buddy his animal powers. Animal Man's naïve 1960s origin is given the now-traditional late 1980s twist – it wasn't an accident, the aliens deliberately linked Buddy into the 'morphogenetic field' generated by all life on earth. But Morrison then goes as far beyond the 'realistic' superhero style of contemporary comics as they are beyond the 1960s, as characters in *Animal Man* start to perceive the comic-book nature of their reality. In 18-19, Buddy takes a peyote trip and sees the readers of his comic staring down at him. In 20-24 the reality of the DC Universe almost breaks down. It's a sequel of sorts to *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, but with built-in satire and comics criticism, aimed at grim'n'gritty modern superheroes. In 25-26's epilogue, Buddy meets his maker, Grant Morrison, and some of Grant's motivations in writing the series are explored. It's been a truly unique experience.

27-32 is Peter Milligan's underrated run, satisfyingly weird, in which the formerly vegetarian Buddy acquires a strong taste for raw meat, and has more alternate reality adventures. With 33 writer Tom Veitch takes over, with Steve Dillon artwork. Veitch brings a more superficially serious tone to the comic, but achieves less than his predecessors did with their apparently lighter-hearted romps. Case in point: Morrison's Native American character is a professor of physics who helps Buddy perceive the nature of reality, i.e. they are living in a comic book. Veitch's Amerindians are Carlos Casteneda-style mystics, the good guys in a struggle against evil corporate America with its arms factories, computers and killer clones. Which is the more radical, and which a case of seen it all before? Veitch gives us the kind of 'realistic' comic that Morrison mocked. Buddy's powers are explored in tedious detail, and the yellow aliens are revealed as a childish rationalisation of Animal Man's true Native American mystical roots. It's a slim story spread out too thin. Not all that bad, just not in the same league as what came before.

In 51 Jamie Delano arrives to prove that 'serious' doesn't have to mean 'dull'. He integrates Veitch's settings and characterisations respectfully, as with Buddy's daughter Maxine's inherited superpowers (climaxing in 1993's annual, crossing over with The Children's Crusade). He also develops *Animal Man* into something new, if decidedly gloomy in outlook. Animal Man dies in 51, struggling back to a new form of life via the morphogenetic field in 56. Meanwhile his son Cliff suffers at the hands of the sadistic Uncle Dudley, another well developed Veitch element: no supervillains here, but some very dark human evil. In the urban jungle, wife Ellen is almost raped and joins some lesbian feminists in 57-60. 61-63 introduces the idea that the natural world has had enough of mankind's abuses and is going to fight back. In 71, Buddy mutates into a hideous, gargoyle-like form, remaking himself as Mother Nature's champion. He starts a new natural religion, the Life-Power Church, and gathers around himself an army of the dispossessed – hippies, punks, slackers and grungers. The State, of course, fights back. At 79's huge religious meeting/rock festival/love-in Animal Man commits ritual (and overtly messianic) suicide. He thinks that a martyred dead hero will be better remembered than an embittered one living on. With strong art from Steve Pugh and others, Delano takes elements from Morrison and Veitch, plus some familiar to readers of Moore's *Swamp Thing*, and stirs them into his own potent brew, with confrontation of difficult real-world issues, and refusal to find easy answers. Grim'n'gritty to be sure, but in a unique way, with high quality and a mordant wit. Sadly, Buddy Baker couldn't be allowed the peace of the grave, and once again his connection to the Life Web brings reincarnation. From 80 it's writer Jerry Prosser and artist Fred Harper who take on the thankless task. They have a pretty fair stab at it. The Animal Man experience is looked at from the Shamanistic point of view, and the travails of the Life-Power Church continue. It doesn't really go anywhere, though, and it's all over by 89. Ten issues too late.~GL

Recommended: 1-5, 17-32, 51-63, 72-79

ANIMAL MYSTIC

Cry For Dawn: *4 issue miniseries 1995**

Sirius: *6 issue miniseries ('Water Wars') 1996-1997**

Cutesy adventures of Nikki Roanokke, seemingly ordinary California chick revealed as not only the Queen of a tribe of Amazons who live in the Rain Forest (Gettit?), but she's also slowly becoming an animal goddess and saviour of a whole bunch of universes across time and space. Short on sense, and treading a fine line between a Benny Hill chase scene and the last ten minutes of a *Star Wars* movie, but with an honest ecological sensibility, its an okay read if you don't want to be challenged. Dark One is the named creator, and has a strong art presence, in the style of Vaughn Bodé.~WW

ANIMANIACS

DC: *One-shot 1994, 59 issues 1995-2000*

Animaniacs was the longest-running TV cartoon tie-in for several decades (barring *Batman*). The reason is far from clear. Transferring the animated anarchy to comics was troublesome, and while the irreverence and fast gags are present and correct, plots are a problem. Throughout it's the more straightforward humour of the initially sporadic Pinky and the Brain segments that succeeds. From 13 to issues in the mid-twenties occasional specific pop culture targets are satirised, although the target audience surely took little but the gags from 13's *Seven Samurai* pastiche in manga style. Other noteworthy parodies include *James Bond* (14) and *X-Files* (19), including pages from that comic's artist Charles Adlard, but the best issue of the period is 16's wrestling mayhem.

Yakko, Wakko and Dot star in most issues, but rarely occupy the entire comic. Slappy Squirrel is the most frequent back-up feature, but all the TV supporting features have their own strips during the run, all well drawn, but not matching the wit of their cartoon counterparts. In 50 Hello Nurse drops in on all the characters who appear in the show, and they're united again in 59's finale. Their own title cancelled, Pinky and the Brain are cover-subtitled regulars from 43. From this point the Animaniacs feature is only one of three strips, the third slot being occupied by assorted back-ups. The comic is better for the variety, and for Pinky and the Brain requiring a plot rather than being slapstick vehicles. Try their singing version of Evita in 47. Of the later issues 54 is a good sample with the Animaniacs subverting *Leave It To Beaver*, Minerva Mink encountering lecherous dwarves and a decent Pinky and the Brain story.~WJ

ANNEX

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1994*

It's quite an achievement to write a strip featuring a 1990s state of the art technology based superhero with the contemporary sophistication of 1940s comics. Jack C. Harris pulls off this feat with aplomb.~FP

ANOTHER DAY

Raised Brow: *2 issues 1995-1997*

A young man discovers he has telekinetic powers, but spends most of his time trying to prevent his sexist friend from being beaten up by various women he's offended, or avoiding the sex games of an all too sociable couple. Charming, funny, underplayed comic that's keenly observant of relationships. If the title continues it deserves a wider audience.~HS

Recommended: 1- 2

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ANT BOY

Steeldragon: *2 issues 1988*

Originally self-published minicomics from creator Matt Feazell, these are drawn in a pleasingly loose style. Ant Boy is a human boy raised by ants, and therefore has a skewed view of humanity, their habits and their artefacts. It's very silly, particularly the battle with the lawnmower in 2. Further stories can be found as back-ups in *Captain Confederacy*.~WJ

ANT-MAN'S BIG CHRISTMAS

Marvel: *One-shot 2000*

Considering he's one of Marvel's oldest heroes, Ant-Man has rarely seen the spotlight since the early 1960s in *Tales to Astonish*. There were seven issues of *Marvel Feature*, an artistically impressive solo in *Avengers* 93 and a *Marvel Premiere* outing for his successor, who also starred in *Marvel Comics Presents* 131. This, however, was worth waiting for. The original Ant Man and the Wasp make good use of their shrinking abilities to transform a boy's Christmas and give his odious relatives much-needed lessons. Phil Winslade's art is excellent, and Bob Gale's script witty and well conceived. Apparently a rare flop for the Marvel Knights imprint, rectify this mistake by pulling it out of the bargain bins and giving it a home. No-one with a sense of humour will be disappointed.~WJ
Recommended

ANTARCTIC PRESS JAM

Antarctic: *One-shot 1996*

Bite size snippets of *Ninja High School*, *Tigers Of Terra* and *Twilight X*, with the former celebrating ten years of publication. Ostensibly tackling the subject of a coherent real world timeline, the strip also serves as a guide to the cast. There's no such concessions for *Twilight X*, which is labelled 'chapter 07', or the incomprehensible *Tigers of Terra* chapter.~FP

ANTARES CIRCLE

Antarctic: *2 issues 1990*

Third-rate science-fiction that hedges its bets by also going for that furry appeal. Artist Shepherd Hendrix would one day be very good, but you'd not guess it from this.~WJ

ANTHRO

DC: *6 issues 1968-1969*

Not the usual prehistoric/jungle series that it appeared to be. Starting life in *Showcase* 74, *Anthro* was a well written, witty account of a Stone-Age family, the titular character being the eldest son. Howie Post wrote and drew the strip and his wonderful art style suited the setting perfectly. If you want to read something different, try this series, but don't expect *The Flintstones*.~HY
Recommended: 1-6

ANTIETAM The Fiery Trial

The Heritage Collection: *One-shot 1997*

Wayne Vansant's story of the Civil War battle succeeds in bringing it to life by adding small stories of heroism or the effects on the civilians whose homes became part of the battlefield. By contrast, his artwork is not dynamic enough, leaving too much to the accompanying text, itself already compressed to fit a single-issue format.~NF

ANYTHING GOES

Fantagraphics: *6 issues 1986-1987*

Fund raiser featuring some top talent delivering short stories. Among the contributors are Bob Burden, Eddie Campbell, Mark Martin and Dave Sim. Look out 4 with Gilbert Hernandez contributing a 'Heartbreak Soup' vignette, Peter Bagge and a *Journey* short, and 2 with Jaime Hernandez, a disappointing Jack Kirby and Joe Sinnott *Captain Victory* and Alan Moore and Don Simpson's excellent 'Pictopia'. It's a fondly observed lament about the monopolisation of comics by superheroes with thinly veiled guest appearances.~WJ
Recommended: 2, 4

Edward Pun's A-OK

Antarctic: *4 issue miniseries 1992-1993*

So-so miniseries from Edward Pun (sic) based on and spinning-off from *Ninja High School*, although not as charming or funny. For diehard fans only.~WW

APACHE DICK: The Dick and the Doll

Eternity: *4 issue miniseries 1990**

Spun-off from *The Trouble With Girls*, this highlights the normally ultra-cool Native American best friend of Lester Girls in a tale of seduction and double-cross as he falls for an angel with murder in her heart. Apache's cousin Private Dick embroils the suave ladykiller in a plan to trap a suspected female Bluebeard who has murdered seven previous husbands. Typically, Apache falls for her despite all the warnings and has to eventually redeem himself and catch the hidden silent partner of the murderous black widow Baby Doll. Never as funny as *The Trouble With Girls*, the series relies on decreasingly funny Dick jokes and obvious surprise twists. For *Girls* completists only.~WW

APACHE SKIES

Max: *4 issue miniseries 2002**

The Rawhide Kid is drawn into a vendetta between Rosa and Billy Tyler, when the latter kills the Apache Kid, Rosa's husband and the Rawhide Kid's friend. Things escalate after Billy's death, when his father demands vengeance and hires Colonel Trask to kill anyone in the way of his revenge. This is a terrific western adventure from John Ostrander, only occasionally let down by too loose, or too dark, artwork from the otherwise impressive, Leonardo Manco.~NF

APATHY CAT

Entity: *1 issue 1996*

Superficially, this is by the book anthropomorphic hijinx. Actually, it's the tale of a cat who does... well, nothing much. But for him, apathy is an act of rebellion against the status quo. Clever, inventive and quite charming in an insidious way.~HS

APE CITY

Adventure: *4 issue miniseries 1990*

Charles Marshall writes a far livelier and more interesting version of the apes in this miniseries than he does in the *Planet of the Apes* parent title. Mixing monkey gangsters, ninja apes, heavily armed human killers and a fair amount of humour, Marshall is forced to write with a beginning, middle and end, and proves he can do so. The thrust of the plot is the chase for a crystal that powers the humans' craft, but also offers unlimited energy for the apes. The artwork, though, deteriorates as the series progresses, becoming slipshod and amateur by the conclusion.~FP

APE NATION

Adventure: *4 issue miniseries 1991*

Mixing the concepts from *Planet of the Apes* with TV show *Alien Nation* might not seem a sensible idea. They've little to link them beyond both races being subjugated by humans at some stage, and the comic rights for both series being in the hands of Adventure. Featuring the cast from Adventure's regular *Planet of the Apes* series, the stories have Tectonese forces landing on the apes' planet and forming an alliance with the renegade General Ollo. Joining forces they march on Ape City, on the way encountering a party of apes led by Heston (!) sent to investigate the strange craft. It's lacklustre stuff ending in one big battle. There, saved you buying it.~FP

APHRODITE IX

Image/Top Cow: *4 issue miniseries 2000-2002*

Aphrodite is a synthetic human, possibly the ninth in a series, and assassin, who forgets what she's done after each kill. The mysterious Burch sets up her missions and new acquaintance, Neville Stewart, clearly know more

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than they're telling while Aphrodite's past is starting to reveal itself through her dreams. David Wohl provides the bare bones of an interesting story, but the revealingly posed heroine and muddled storytelling offer little support. David Finch (1-2) and Clarence Lansang (3-4) contribute similar, ornately rendered artwork that has surface attraction, but doesn't hold up under closer inspection.~NF

Miracleman APOCRYPHA

Eclipse: *3 issue miniseries 1991-1992*

This series of short six-eight page vignettes from the past and present of the Miracleman family, by various creators, suffers as all such projects do from fluctuating quality. Okay for die-hard collectors, but the whole idea was largely superfluous.~JC

Underworld Unleashed APOKOLIPS Dark Uprising

DC: *One-shot 1995*

Tying in with both *Underworld Unleashed* and *New Gods*, Darkseid is, temporarily, among the deceased. This offers arch-tempter Neron the opportunity to set the next tier of the Apokolips hierarchy at each other's throats, promising them all that they're destined to succeed Darkseid. It's all reasonably well produced, but merely tangential to both the series with which it's tied, and not a strong enough story to be worth having for itself.~WJ

APORIATICA

Cyberosia Publishing: *One-shot 2001*

This collection of Marcel Guldemond's strips indicates the development of his comics storytelling technique: almost linear for 'In The Dark', the intertwining of texts in 'Resonating Transparent', the nearly wordless, linear, smoking a pack of cigarettes, 'Bill', and the experimentation of 'Under A Slowly Spinning Sun'. Here two separate visual threads compete for attention with three textual threads, only one of which appears to be related to the pictures. There are some excellent drawings here, even some decent storytelling, but the combinations are just so much useless navel-gazing.~NF

THE APPARITION

Caliber: *One-shot ('Abandoned') 1995, one-shot ('Visitations') 1995, 4 issues 1996*

In 'Abandoned', the angel, Adriel helps a young boy abandoned in a forest by his parents. When the angel causes the parents car to crash, killing the evil dad and severely injuring the mother, Lucifer appears and tries to convince the angel that he too has been abandoned by Heaven and takes him on a trip though Hell. All of this before a life-affirming ending... 'Visitations' (with some new stories and others reprinted from *Negative Burn*) and the regular series continue the theme of more people (particularly children) saved in some way by the presence of Adriel. Creator James Pruett tries to avoid sentimentality but ends up with clichéd scenarios and a simplistic manipulation of the reader's emotions.~NF

APPLESEED

Eclipse: *Book one 5 issues 1988-1989*, book two 5 issues 1989*, book three 5 issues 1991*, book four 4 issues 1991**

This translates Masamune Shirow's manga epic set in the aftermath of a non-nuclear World War III. The main characters are Deunan Knute, cute girl soldier who's only really happy when inside an exoskeleton, and Briareos, cyborg warrior and Knute's partner and lover. At the beginning of Book one, the pair are invited to Olympus, a 'utopian' city with ambitious plans for world peace and for the refinement of the human race. Books one and two concentrate on this 'refinement' plan, and this means a lot of factional meetings and parliamentary debates, conducted throughout in fluent gibberish masquerading as philosophical profundity. Meanwhile, Knute and Briareos join the local police force, so each issue has many pages devoted to frenzied and incomprehensible fight sequences, particularly Books three and four, which take a break from the refinement plan in order to spout gibberish about international relations.

Shirow seems incapable of telling a story in a direct, interesting or believable way. One suspects he doesn't really know what the refinement plan involves or what the nations are intriguing about, and to avoid the effort of working out the details, he just has his characters talking about things in vague and pompous terms. Hellishly dull. To call his cast characters, by the way, is to be generous. You can tell them apart only by gender (i.e. bambi-eyes or scars), or by the make of their cyborg parts, or by whether their nose is drawn badly or really badly. With this shaky foundation, it's not surprising that they have problems conducting conversations along the you-make-a-statement-I-make-a-related-response lines favoured by mentally competent adults. Surely the translators could have helped Shirow out here? A thoroughly unrewarding and irritating read – though if you're mad keen on exoskeletons you may get a buzz from skimming through and looking at the pictures.~FC

Not APRIL HORRORS

Rip-Off: *One-shot 1992*

A misleadingly repackaged collection of Doug Wheeler's 'Classics Desecrated' stories from *Negative Burn* and other sources. Kind of, well, a rip-off.~HS

AQUA KNIGHT

Viz: *Part one 6 issues 2000*, part two 5 issues 2000-2001*, part three 5 issues 2001**

When a young knight, Ruliya, is saved from death by lighthouse keeper Arrabarus, she promises to make his son, Ashika, her squire. Before she can do so, however, Arrabarus is killed and Ashika is kidnapped by Alcantara, an inventor searching for a cure for the disease that is killing one of his companions, Zykey. What follows is a series of adventures that further define these characters whilst examining the fantasy world of Marmundo. Yukito Kishiro's story is full of wondrous beings and increasingly important conflicts. His artwork has continued to develop away from manga traditions but this is not as extreme as his previous Ashen Victor. The series ends rather abruptly, leaving the story of Ruliya and Ashika stillborn but there's plenty to admire in what's here.~NF

AQUAMAN

DC: *Series one 63 issues 1962-1971 (1-56), 1977-1978 (57-63), 4 issue miniseries 1986, one-shot 1988, one-shot (The Legend of Aquaman) 1989, 5 issue miniseries 1989, series two 13 issues 1991-1992, 4 issue miniseries ('Time and Tide') 1993*, series three 75 issues, 5 Annuals, 1 Secret Files 1993-2001, one-shot 1998, series four 1 issue + 2003 to date*

Aquaman is one of DC's longest running heroes, making his first appearance in *More Fun Comics* 73 in 1941, created by Mort Weisinger and artist Paul Norris. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s he appeared in *Adventure Comics, Detective Comics* and *World's Finest Comics*, and was one of only five DC superheroes to survive the death of such characters in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Aquaman was born Arthur Curry, the product of a human and a princess from the underwater world of Atlantis. He can communicate with marine life and the ability to withstand the enormous pressures of the sea grants him great strength and speed on the surface. Despite his long career Aquaman was never a member of DC's 1940s supergroups, and never tried as a headliner until 1961, at which time he could also be found in *Detective* 293-300. *Showcase* 30-33 were written by Jack Miller and Bob Haney, and illustrated by the artist of most 1950s Aquaman strips, the superb Ramona Fradon. 31, though, had art by Nick Cardy, another artist who would play an important role in developing the character, drawing the new title from its inception. These stories all featured Aquaman's sidekick Aqualad, and promoted Aquaman to king of Atlantis. The early issues didn't impress, having the feel of back-up features, and to make matters worse there's the introduction of a 'humorous' water spirit called Quisp. Notable issue among the mediocrity is 11, which introduces Mera, an underwater character from another dimension able to create hard substances from water, a powerful talent never fully utilised. It's a short courtship when Aquaman and Mera marry in 18, and it wasn't too long before Aquababy (that's right, Aquababy) turned up in 23. When Cardy began drawing *Aquaman* he approximated Fradon's cartoony style, but there over the issues his art becomes bolder and more fluid: he drew the most luscious lips on any female character! Another positive side to Aquaman now being a headliner was that he slowly built up a cast of recurring villains, most prominently his evil half-brother, Orm, the Ocean Master, who débuted in 29. It was the first sign of his dysfunctional family. A better supporting character was Tula the Aquagirl, a bit of a wild girl who liked to party, and led Aqualad astray on her first appearance in 33, luring him with her two-piece swimsuit. Or, as Aqualad put it, "Wowee. I like. You're some chick, Tula. In fact that's what I'm calling you from now on, Aquachick!" Well, it was the 1960s. Not all stories were as trivial, with 37's excellent. It begins with a superb cover depicting a rotting seabed with Aquaman holding Mera in his arms. Inside the sea king battles Ocean Master and the Scavenger, a villain who's slowly polluting the Earth's oceans.

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* Available in a collected edition

From 40 writer Steve Skeates and artist Jim Aparo take over. They produce what remains *Aquaman*'s finest run, starting with a multi-part story, very rare for DC at the time, culminating in 48. Mera is kidnapped in 40, and while trying to find her Aquaman encounters various adversaries. Aparo began by emulating Cardy's style for the sake of continuity, but his unique rendering soon shone through. He was a master of the zip-a-tone effect (pre-computer toning) and his style had a superficial similarity to that of Neal Adams, who drew some wonderful Deadman back-ups in 50-52, tying in to the Aquaman story. Alas, quality doesn't always equate with sales, and the series was cancelled in 1971.

The sea king returned to *Adventure Comics* with 435, and a successful run led to a revived title, in which Aquaman comes to terms with Black Manta murdering his son in *Adventure* 452. It wasn't a long run, and although competent, produced little of note. Aquaman returned to eight years of back-up roles in *Adventure*, *Action* and *World's Finest*, before his next solo run. Neal Pozner wrote and Craig Hamilton worked wonders with a complicated new blue costume intended to camouflage Aquaman in the sea. Atlantis is on the verge of war with humanity over a stolen Atlantean seal, in what's a well-plotted series and very impressive visually. The 1988 special contains nothing of note, and 1989's outlines the revised history of Aquaman, with an expanded origin, and sets up the 1989 miniseries, also written by Keith Giffen and Robert Loren Fleming. Curt Swan and Al Vey, who turn in a wonderfully illustrated story in which Atlantis is taken over by alien creatures. The main thrust, though is the relationship between Aquaman and his estranged wife, with 3 featuring a magnificent battle between them. It only ranks below the Skeates and Aparo run in Aquaman's history.

The 1991 series celebrated Aquaman's 50th anniversary, and takes the previous miniseries as a starting point. Politics and ecological problems feature strongly in Shaun McLaughlin's plots. 'Time and Tide' was written by Peter David, and pencilled by Kirk Javinen, once more recounting Aquaman's origin and chronicling his turbulent life, and was successful enough to prompt another monthly title. Peter David continues as writer, with Martin Egeland illustrating, and they certainly get to grips with Aquaman's personality. He had slowly been changing since the 1970s, becoming more aggressive, and from the start of this series it's no more Mr Nice Guy. In line with DC's policy of giving their older characters more bite, Aquaman grows his hair and a beard necessary to maintain his body weight, since he loses a hand in 2. It's replaced with a form of an adaptable harpoon, and there's another new costume, this time armoured. David populates the series with some old characters, and Aqualad gains new mystic ice/fire powers, and a new costume and name, Tempest. David's most significant addition is Dolphin, a mysterious water-breather introduced in *Showcase* 79, and here Aquaman's love interest. An unwelcome addition is a teenage son, a product of Aquaman's first love. He's a chip off the old block with a chip on his shoulder. Mera returns in 12 (though doesn't hang around for long), prompting domestic strife. David enjoyed himself exploring Atlantean life and history, but none of his plots are memorable. His artistic partners didn't help. Egeland's style never seemed to fit the strip, and his replacement from 32, J. Calafiore was even more miscast. David concentrated too much on the tedious relationship between Aquaman and Dolphin, and by giving her a distinctive personality the whole mystique of the character was ruined. And Aquaman's permanent frown became unbearable. Mera returns in 47 and Erik Larsen takes up the scripting from 50, with more suitable art from Eric Battle (but the frown's still there). It's an enjoyable run up to 61, which puts a new emphasis on the Aquaman/Mera relationship. Luckily his ex-lover, Dolphin hooks up with his ex-sidekick, Tempest and they tie the knot in 60. The excellent team of writer Dan Jurgens and artists Steve Epting and Norm Rapmund arrive in 63 and end the series in fine form. 63-70 is told in flashbacks from the future by a grown-up Tempest to his granddaughter, chronicling the events of the war between Atlantis and a rogue state. After a story featuring another bearded character, Warlord, the series ends on a happy note with happy families, now joined by Tempest and Dolphin's child. And at long last the frown is gone! What makes this work is the sheer readability of the story, coupled with an interesting premise and decent art.

The annuals were based on the theme of the year. 5 featuring the 'Gorilla Warfare' story line was mildly amusing, and you can catch up on Aquaman's past and cast of characters in the *Aquaman Secret Files*. 2003 saw another new series with Aquaman cast out from Atlantis. It's an interesting storyline from Rick Veitch, and the stylised art by Yvel Guichet and Mark Propst works quite well, even though that bloody frown is back again! He gets a new look in 3, but will it be enough to guarantee a long run?~HY

Recommended: Series one 37, 40-52, *The Legend of Aquaman*, miniseries two 1-5, series three 63-70

ARAK, Son of Thunder

DC: *50 issues, 1 Annual 1981-1985*

It was quite a surprise when Roy Thomas, former editor-in-chief and long-time writing mainstay of Marvel Comics, elected for a career and company change with their rivals. DC already had properties in place able to cope with his particular interests – World War II, super teams, tightening up continuity – except for a title to replace *Conan* in his schedule. Not to worry, though, because with a few tweaks and nudges Roy came up with a Native American wandering the globe during the Dark Ages. Unfortunately he'd run through every possible permutation of sword and sorcery while writing two *Conan* titles, and there's nothing to distinguish *Arak* from any other attempt at the genre – not even when the relatively fresh Dann Thomas comes on as co-plotter. It says something for DC's faith in Thomas' ability that they let this meander on for four years, eschewing the neat ending when Arak's heart stops beating in 32. Instead it begins a new sequence with our man now a full shaman. Viking Prince fans may want to investigate his back-up strip in 8-11. Although artist Jan Duursema tries hard to live up to Kubert's version, writer Robert Kanigher certainly holds up his end.~HY

ARCADE

Print Mint: *7 issues 1975-1976*

This was the transition between the often indulgent underground of the 1960s and the idea of producing comics as intelligent material for an adult audience as the class of 1968 grew up. After a trial run with *Short Order Comix*, editors Art Spiegelman and Bill Griffith merged the vitality of the undergrounds with an ambition that far outstrips them and is possibly the finest anthology comic ever produced. Every issue contains work from Bob Armstrong, Robert Crumb, Kim Deitch, Justin Green, the under-rated Willy Murphy, Spain Rodriguez, Griffith and Spiegelman. More than half also play host to Aline Kominsky, Gilbert Shelton, Robert Williams and S. Clay Wilson. Encouraging the top underground creators to flex their talents beyond what they'd produced before results in startling work like Crumb's 'Modern America' (2) and 'That's Life' (3), Justin Green's Brooklyn adaptation of *The Winter's Tale* casting Karl Malden as Polixenes (1), Griffith's biography of Henri Rousseau (3) and Spain's memorable 'Stalin' (4).

The editorial care taken by Griffith and Spiegelman is represented not only in the almost impeccable choice of material, but also in the design, with every contents page presenting a new self-portrait from all contributors. The balance is also perfect. Each issue features vital contemporary material and the work of a top cartoonist or illustrator from the early part of the century, a short strips section, and prose fiction from the likes of Burroughs and Bukowski, illustrated by Crumb or Green. Arcade matches the mixture indicated by the title with humour, polemic, questioning, introspection and plain lunacy from the top talents of the day. If you feel inclined to sample only a single issue, try 2, but you shouldn't stop there.~FP

Recommended: 1-7

ARCANA

Wells & Clark: *11 issues 1994-1997*

The reclusive Clorinda flees a tragedy and meets small-time con merchants Flagg and Foxglove. They journey together revealing more about their pasts and the purpose of their journey to Lorn. It was apparently chance that the cast was portrayed in anthropomorphic style, instantly creating a set of genre expectations that are never played out. There is a very leisurely pace to the writing of T.S. Wells, which picks up a little with 9 when Lorn is reached, and a very understated quality to the storytelling and pastoral covers of Rob Clark. His interior art is heavily crosshatched. Nebulous and obvious clues are dropped that there's a far wider story than was ever told in these issues, but conversely 11 issues should be more than enough to tell a very good story indeed. Instead of building towards the bigger picture in tiny steps, a series of smaller pictures with fewer talking heads might have been a better idea. This will still intrigue and appeal, though, and you can still be drawn in by the characters.~WJ

ARCANUM

Image: *8 issues 1997-1998*

Having conceived a potentially interesting plot about the universal nature of magic, and its tendency to bend those it possesses to one of its extremes, Brandon Peterson then reduces the entirety to pages of crash, bang and wallop between superheroes. The plot was hardly original, but had a far greater potential.~WJ

ARCHANGEL

Marvel: *One-shot 1996*

This black and white one shot, written by Peter Milligan and drawn by Leonardo Manco, was an unusual package for a Marvel X-comic, and one that didn't really work. Instead of giving the story an air of sophistication, as was presumably the intention, the scratchy art looks amateurish and out of place on a Milligan script which is no better suited to the subject matter. The dialogue is stilted, and the plot about the ghost of a woman whose mutant powers draw birds to her is predictable and contrived. Best avoided.~JC

ARCHER AND ARMSTRONG

Valiant: *27 issues (0-26) 1992-1994*

Archer is an ascetic teenage martial arts expert raised in a Buddhist monastery and Armstrong is a bulky immortal carouser. The well conceived and engagingly mismatched characters make for an entertaining run of comics as Archer is incredulous at Armstrong's indulgent lifestyle, and Armstrong is forever the tempter. The first issue, confusingly numbered 0, introduces the pair along with a centuries-old single-minded religious sect who believe Armstrong to be Satan and seek his death, with 1-2 jumping straight into the Unity crossover. Earlier issues are the best, being written and drawn by Barry Windsor-Smith, who stays just the right side of dropping into farce. In 8 (also issue 8 of *Eternal Warrior*, Armstrong's brother) Smith introduces the interesting idea of showing Armstrong's earlier escapades, accompanied by a suitably naïve character in the Archer role. The resulting *Three Musketeers* plot is the best of the run. Mike Baron writes most issues from 13, with Mike Vosburg art from 17. Their run also entertains, but doesn't quite match the Smith issues. The final issue is again combined with *Eternal Warrior*.~FP

Recommended: 0, 3-8, 12

ARCHIE

MLJ/Archie: *530+ issues 1942 to date, plus countless spin-offs, related titles, one-shots, annuals and specials.*

Archie Andrews, a well-meaning but maladroit teenager, was introduced in MLJ's *Pep Comics* 22 in 1941 as a back-up feature to some tolerably successful superheroes. He became a money-spinning juggernaut who, by the end of the 1940s, had ousted all MLJ's heroes, and netted the publisher so much revenue that the company was renamed in his honour. Red-haired, freckle-faced Archie is in love with Betty Cooper, the blonde, virtuous (but spunky) girl down the road. He's also in love with Veronica Lodge, the rich, spoiled (but sweet) brunette who lives in a mansion on the outskirts of Riverdale, USA. His best friend is Forsythe P. 'Jughead' Jones, fervent omnivore and woman-hater. Archie's rival for both Veronica's and Betty's affections is Reggie Mantle, a braggart and schemer with a well-concealed heart of gold.

And that's all you need to know to comprehend virtually any of the thousands of Archie stories. Within a year of Archie's début, all these pieces were in place, and the essential dynamic of the series was established. There are many more supporting characters, but these key players have kept an eternal, ageless soap opera spinning for over sixty years. Hairstyles and clothing trends change; a polite nod of recognition is given to whatever fashion, music or media fads are 'in', but nothing really alters. The Archie gang have been secret agents, superheroes, pop idols and actors; they've been recast as tiny tots, as pre-teens, as their own prehistoric ancestors and futuristic descendants, but the relationships remain the same, and at the end of every story, whatever events may have occurred, the status quo is lovingly restored. To feed the unending demand for Archie material, countless writers and artists have laboured in the Riverdale sweatshops; among the most prominent being co-creator Bob Montana, Harry Lucey, Samm Schwartz (who virtually specialised in Jughead stories for forty years), Stan Goldberg, and the illustrious Dan DeCarlo. He arrived at the company in the 1950s, and although he may not have created Betty and Veronica, certainly created the definitive version of them, which has been the template for all subsequent illustrators. Those are the people primarily known for their Archie work, but some surprising artists who have more 'serious' pedigrees, including Kurt Schaffenberger, John Rosenberger, and Gene Colan, have not been averse to adopting the Archie style from time to time for a few extra bucks. And, of course, it mustn't be forgotten that Neal Adams owes his professional debut to Archie Comics, in 1959's *Archie's Joke Book* 41!

Archie has spawned countless spin-offs bearing his name and also *Jughead*, (series 2, 146 issues to date, 1987-present). See other entries for *Betty* and *Veronica*, but they've also co-starred in two series of their joint title, 347 issues (1950-1987) and 182 issues (1987 to date), plus the supplementary Betty & Veronica Spectacular (58 issues to date, 1992-present). Archie's Weird Mysteries (23 issues, 2000 to present) is a mild adventure title spinning off from an animated TV version of the character, and an ensemble title, *Archie & Friends*, (67 issues to date, 1992 – present) features any and all of the characters. There have also been scads of previous Archie titles. Some of the longer-running ones you may encounter are *Pep, Laugh, Life With Archie, Archie at Riverdale High, Archie's Pals n' Gals, Archie Giant Series, Archie's Christmas Stocking, Archie's Vacation Special, Archie and Me, Betty & Me, Reggie & Me, Reggie, Reggie's Wise-Guy Jokes, Archie's Joke Book, Archie's TV Laugh-Out,* and many, many more, including a line of hugely successful paperback-size Digest Comics that have been busily recycling old material since the early 1970s. Since they all have the same cast and premise, this review encompasses them all. The Archie gang are archetypes – some would say stereotypes – whose ageless, unchanging façade is curiously reassuring to those of us who have seen all our childhood heroes mutate into murderous psychopaths. Long may they reign.~HS

AREA 88

Eclipse: *36 issues 1987-1989*
Viz: *6 issues (37-42) 1989*

One of the first Japanese comics to be translated for the American audience, and the choice was a wise one. Kaoru Shintani's story is about Shin, a mercenary fighter pilot who's been tricked into signing a three-year-mission contract to fight as part of a force embroiled in a fictional African nation's civil war. Shin's the best pilot at the base, but tormented by his circumstances. Within a simple structure the stories address complex emotional issues, particularly once the focus expands beyond the airbase and skies from 17. At that point we learn more of Shin's past, his friends and his enemies. The introductory issues tend towards aerial combats, which, while dynamic and varied, don't thrill as they should. 9's story of a war correspondent trapped behind enemy lines is a good starter, and 13 goes a long way to explaining the circumstances of the war and the isolated airbase.~FP

AREA 52

Image: *4 issue miniseries 2001*

Corporal Monica Lane is assigned as security officer to Antarctic military storage facility Area 52. Nothing's happened there for decades, but when a crate from Roswell is accidentally sundered mysterious deaths occur. The other storage crates house the means to deal with the problem, including a magic ring and a lantern that recharges its green energy beams! There's a battle royale in 4. Brian Haberlin dialogues over a familiar plot: John Carpenter's *The Thing*. The characters are well-portrayed and often funny. Clayton Henry's artwork is the semi-manga Image blend we've come to expect and is tastefully offset by Ian Hannin's restrained colour. With a number of strikes against it, this series' gradual development of its characters is still remarkably entertaining. Very readable.~SW

Warrior Nun AREALA

Antarctic: *3 issue miniseries 1994-1995, 6 issue miniseries ('Rituals') 1995-1996, series one 6 issues 1997-1998, 3 issue miniseries ('Resurrection') 1998-1999, Series two 19 issues, 1 annual 1999-2001, 4 issue miniseries ('Ghosts of the Past') 2001, 3 issue miniseries ('Dangerous Game') 2001, Series three 12 issues + ('Books of Peril' 1-4) 2001 to date*

The first miniseries introduces a world where the Vatican, like other religions, has an élite fighting force of warrior Nuns, whose job is to aid the Magic Priests in defending Earth against demon attack. Sister Shannon, recently assigned to New York, meets former nun Shotgun Mary and together they thwart the latest Hell-born invasion (with a little help from the spirit of the original Warrior Nun, Areala, and a wayward demon princess, Lillith). 'Rituals' introduces more characters and builds up the background to the series, including warriors from other religions and guest appearances by other Antarctic characters.

The first ongoing series retreads much the same ground until creator Ben Dunn returns to draw 6 and a vengeful Valkyrie, Helga creates a recurring enemy for Areala's avatars in Nebelhex. 'Resurrection', again by Dunn, adds a purpose by giving Sister Shannon a quest to find the God Armor used by Areala and reusing Nebelhex. Series two has Brian Farrens (1-8) writing with Dunn illustrating 1-4, in which Shannon must prove that the Warrior Nuns are still needed when political forces within the Vatican suggest that the Magic Priests can do everything themselves. A Crimson Nun story is told in 5-6 while Lillith and Shotgun Mary return in 9-12. At this point Chris Allen ends his run as writer (9-12) and artist (5-12). With 13, Nathan Lumm becomes writer, and there's another attempt to find a direction for the character. Shannon is now missing and Eleanore must take her place. The artwork, by Craig Babiar is more stylish here, clearly influenced by manga and the success of animations such as Batman Adventures, though the black and white issues (17-19) are less effective. A back-up story in 14-19, Silver Cross, by Dunn, is based in an academy for trainee Warrior Nuns and Magic Priests. In the annual Kevin Gunstone and John Haward tell the story of a Frost Giant's daughter, Agaberte and her clash with Areala, but the effect is weakened by the pages being printed out of order.

'Ghosts of the Past' and 'Dangerous Game' essentially just continue the storylines, though Craig Babiar takes over story and artwork for the latter, as Sir Charles Westlake decides to do some Nun-hunting. Series three (still by Babiar) begins as another miniseries, 'Books of Peril', introducing new villains, Ivan Seethe (who manages to infect Areala with a techno-virus in 10-12), and Pillage and Plunder, but the numbering has continued beyond the title story's end. Dunn's creation is not quite as bad as it sounds, though the artwork's often rough and there's little depth to the scripts. However, if you like plenty of action performed by beautiful women with superpowers, swords and guns, then this might be to your liking. Issue 3 of the first miniseries has an alternative version that came with a CD soundtrack.~NF

Warrior Nun AREALA Miniseries and one-shots

Antarctic: *One-shot ('Warrior Nun vs Razor') 1996, one-shot ('Portraits') 1996, 4 issue miniseries ('Scorpio Rose') 1996-1997, one-shot ('Warrior Nun Areala and Glory') 1997, 2 issue microseries ('Frenzy') 1998, 2 issue microseries ('Rheintöchter') 1997-1998, 4 issue miniseries ('Angel of War') 1998-1999, one-shot (Warrior Nun Areala/Razor: Revenge') 1999, one-shot ('Manga') 2000, 3 issue miniseries ('Brigantia') 2000*

Drawn by Areala's creator, Ben Dunn, the first Razor issue is full of textual errors that distract from the fight against a demon-possessed child-killer. 'Revenge' appears to be Dunn's homage to Jack Kirby as our heroes try to rescue a missing doctor from some monstrous aliens (several other meetings between the characters have been published by London Night). 'Portraits' is a collection of pin-ups by the usual Antarctic artists, but with the addition of some unexpected names. Among them are Bob Burden, Colleen Doran, Stan Sakai and Evan Dorkin. Steve Englehart's 'Scorpio Rose' has a more entertaining and challenging script (both for the reader and for Areala's own beliefs) as the pair take on demons within the Vatican over a four hundred year period. Dunn's erratic artwork makes it hard going, however. Dunn overwrites and draws the comedy meeting with Glory in which comic writer, Rod

McLarsen sells his soul and brings his strangely familiar creations (such as Demonspawn) to life. Esad Ribic's autumnal, painted palette of 'Frenzy' makes it worth looking for. The story, by Miljenko Horvatic, teams warrior nuns, Frenzy and Shannon to stop a spate of church burnings. In Yanick Paquette and Michel Lacombe's 'Rheintöchter', mermaid-like creatures become the focus for an overzealous priest until a warrior nun arrives with some tolerance. 'Angel of War' is Areala's origin, covering her youth as Auria, her death and rebirth as a Valkyrie, and her rebellion against Odin and adoption of Christianity. Though the story hinges on her conversion, taking after her mother rather than her Viking father, and little attempt is made to examine religious differences. Craig Babiar's art is not served well by the transition from colour with 3. The 'Manga' issue was originally produced in Japan by fans of the series. Run Ishida's Japanese nun, Sakura, meets a demon who forces her to think about the true origins of the evil she faces. The dull and poorly drawn, 'Brigantia' is set during the Second World War and sees Churchill send Brigantia to recover the head of King Bran which allegedly protects Britain from invasion. For fans of the characters, 'Frenzy' and 'Manga' offer the most rewards, though Englehart almost rescues 'Scorpio Rose'.~NF

ARGON The Savage

S.Q.P. Inc.: *2 issues 1991*

Displaced from his own time, Argon is a powerful telepath, thrust into a warring galaxy. With Professor Drakosky and warrior-woman, Cara, Argon searches for a near-mythical super-weapon on the dead planet, Mather, to which the female cult of Nejas has been flocking, and where the Confederation believes it can capture them. This is fast-paced science fiction fantasy from Fernando Fernandez with fine artwork, but it's very much an all-action adventure with little time for anything but plot.~NF

The ARGONAUTS

Eternity: *4 issues 1988-1989*
Alpha Productions: *2 issues ('System Crash') 1993*

The Argonauts are a team of adventurers including a mathematician, a test pilot, a spy, and a female special effects expert who combat the Advanced Bio-Engineering Concepts (ABEC) Corporation. In 1-2 a scientist breeds mutated humans in an underground bunker, convincing them they survived a nuclear holocaust. Former Argonaut, Lila Haven leads an attack on the Vector Foundation where they're based (3), and a vigilante group also sets its sights on ABEC in 4. The story is incomplete at this point, with the Alpha Productions issues starting afresh. Writer, Bill Spangler, is clearly working hard to give his characters personalities, while Patrick Olliffe's art on the Eternity issues was still unpolished.~NF

ARGUS

DC: *6 issues 1995*

Another of the heroes created during 'Bloodlines' tries out for a regular series. Argus is an undercover cop in the mob whose childhood links to the underworld have given him a position of power as second in command to D'Angelo, a mob leader. With super strength, invisibility and some mysterious visual powers, Argus finds himself fighting to prevent D'Angelo using satellite technology to create his own empire. Mark Wheatley and Allan Gross tell a good story, making Argus' character a pivotal aspect of the plot and showing how it influences his powers. Phil Hester's artwork on 1-4 is stylish and makes excellent use of blacks for atmosphere, but Luke McDonnell's two issues are less adventurous.~NF

ARIA

Image/Avalon Studios: *4 issue miniseries 1999**
Image: *2 issue microseries (Aria Angela) 2000, 6 issue miniseries ('The Soul Market') 2001-2002, one-shot ('A Midwinter's Dream') 2002, 2 issue microseries ('Summer's Spell') 2002*

The glamourous Kildare is an Irish faerie princess living in New York, a practitioner of the magic of which the wider world remains ignorant. Brian Holguin writes everything, the one-shot apart avoiding the cloying sentimentality often associated with faerie stories, liberally and imaginatively adapting his cast from myth and legend. They're engaging eccentrics who compensate for slim plots. The alluring airbrushed work of Jay Anacleto, is on all covers, the first and fourth issues of the first miniseries, the one-shot and the first microseries, which co-stars the fallen angel from *Spawn*, Angela. David Yardin's first professional artwork appears in the second miniseries, and his growth can be charted over five issues, during which he contributes less and less, leaving the concluding chapter to other artists. That series has the disruptive sprite Robin Goodfellow come to New York to sell souls captured in paintings. He may be a mythical character, but here he's all too obviously *Hellblazer*'s John Constantine. The series builds well, but the conclusion disappoints. The poor one-shot is two-thirds the height of a regular comic, with Holguin's text accompanied by Anacleto's portraits. There's the germ of a fair story to 'Summer's Spell', set in 1960s London, but in dropping in every cultural reference he can, Holguin ensures anyone over twenty-five will have stopped paying attention long before the end.~FP

ARIANE & BLUEBEARD

Eclipse: *One-shot 1989*

One of P. Craig Russell's series of opera adaptations, in this case Maurice Maeterlinck's allegorical poem and Paul Dukas' music/stage-play. Russell's ornate artwork is always a delight and he manages to capture both the beauty and the drama of the original work (the colouring doing much to offset the lack of sound).~NF
Recommended

ARIK KHAN

Andromeda: *3 issues 1977-1979*

One of the earliest independent titles, and seemingly a labour of love from creator Franc Reyes. He put a lot of work into creating a real world for his character, which makes it a shame that this is nothing but bog-standard barbarian material. Except the back-ups, which are sub-standard barbarian material.~FP

ARION

DC: *Lord of Atlantis 35 issues, 1 Special 1982-1985, 6 issue miniseries (The Immortal Arion) 1992*

Introduced as a back-up in *Warlord* 55-62, the first series is sword-and-sorcery-based, with Arion as Lord High Mage of Atlantis in 45,000 BC, a period of mystical transition as a great civilisation begins a slow decline. Paul Kupperberg and Jan Duursema are responsible for most issues (although Doug Moench donates Arion's origin in 4 & 5), and provide quests, sorcery, dragons and other standard fantasy trappings. If that appeals, look at 12, featuring most of the cast and a fair feel as to the rest of the series despite Arion being temporarily bereft of power. The first series concludes in the 1985 *Arion Special*. The second series has a very different flavour. The age of magic is long past, but the immortal Arion remains, barely surviving as a card sharp in New York and telling true stories about his past that no one believes. Magic returns, tensions in the Middle East escalate, a familiar foe is back and Arion has to figure how to make a twenty year old woman love an immortal. The ideas are better, and this series makes for a more satisfying read.~WJ

ARISTOCRATIC XTRATERRESTRIAL TIME-TRAVELLING THIEVES

Comics Interview: *One-shot 1986, 12 issues 1987-1988**

Small alien Fred and human Bianca are the best thieves any time any place, and in their two first issues steal the formula for Coke and artwork for the *Dazzler*, which indicates the way the series is. Fred and Bianca are likeable, gags abound and entertainment is a priority for creators Henry Vogel and Mark Propst. Quality varies, but

* Available in a collected edition

no issue is dull. Try 3, in which the pair steal a Mom robot without understanding what it is. Created during the fad for adjective-heavy titles, the joke had worn thin by 7 when the title was contracted to *X-Thieves*.~FP

ARKAGA

Image: *1 issue 1997*

Promising science fiction saga that looks good, in spite of artist Arnie Tang Jorgensen's sometimes odd mix of eastern and western styles. Writer David Meikis' script doesn't appear particularly challenging – our heroes are trying to stop the evil Lord Arkaga who is attempting insurrection from 'The Empire' – but there's enough in this single issue to warrant reading the next.~NF

ARKANIUM

Dreamwave: *2 issues + 2002 to date*

Ridiculous, portentous dialogue, at times incomprehensible storytelling and ghastly computer colouring. It takes its inspiration from the Tony Wong school of martial arts comics, but without the imagination. Topping off the whole package, Dreamwave have a terrible company logo.~WJ

ARMAGEDDON

Chaos!: *4 issue miniseries 1999-2000*

Company crossover in which the whole Chaos! Universe is about to be destroyed by Armageddon, the Father of Fear. The Chosen, Bedlam and Chastity appear to be humanity's only hope while Lady Death, Evil Ernie and Purgatori play out their long-standing personal conflicts in connected issues of their own titles. Written by Brian Pulido and Len Kaminski, drawn by Luke Ross, this works well as the comics equivalent of a disaster movie.~NF

ARMAGEDDON: THE ALIEN AGENDA

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1991-1992*

The middle part of DC's *Armageddon* trilogy sees Monarch and Captain Atom whizzing about through time fighting hideous aliens. The pick of the four is issue 3, where writer Jonathan Peterson has lots of fun with DC's western heroes. It's well drawn by Al Weiss, and Dick Giordano acquits himself well in 4, but there's nothing essential here.~DAR

ARMAGEDDON: INFERNO

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1992*

Written by John Ostrander different chapters are drawn by Luke McDonnell, Tom Mandrake, Art Adams, Mike Netzer and Walt Simonson. The whole ties in to DC's multi-part crossover from the previous year, *Armageddon 2001*. Some strange combinations of characters (including the bizarre grouping of Guy Gardner, Starfire, Orion, Lobo and Enemy Ace) are sent to stop the evil Abraxis and his daemen but about the only significant aspect of the series is that it's the basis for the release of the JSA from their battle to prevent Ragnarok.~NF

ARMAGEDDON: INFERNO

DC: *2 issues 1991*

A time-traveller from 2001 knows a 1990s DC hero has turned bad, but doesn't know which one. 1 introduced the idea, which ran through all DC annuals in 1991 before concluding in 2. By Archie Goodwin, Dan Jurgens and Dick Giordano, it was never going to be bad, but neither is it essential reading.~FP

ARMATURE

Olyoptics: *2 issues 1996-1997*

A strange, self-published fantasy created by colourist Steve Oliff, set in 'the only holographic alternative reality theme park on the planet' (LSD fuelled). It owes something to Jim Woodring's *Frank* and Sam Kieth's Maxx (who makes a guest appearance in 1). That said, Armature, a mute, twisted, skeletal figure, looks to be a playful but potentially more serious character, as he wanders the park and meets Limbo and talking dog, Redgy, who can walk between dimensions and are searching for Shadow Marks, herself looking for the ghost of her mother. Unfortunately, the series has not been continued.~NF

ARMOR

Continuity: *Series one 13 issues 1985-1992, series two 6 issues 1993*

Even amongst a company that prizes artwork as much as Continuity, Armor stands head and shoulders above its companion titles. Pencillers Tom Grindberg (1-4), Sal Velluto (12-13, series two 1, 2 and 4) and particularly the excellent Brian Apthorp (7, 11 and series two 3, 5, 6) all produced some fine work, but it was the superlative inks of Rudy Nebres (2-10, 12, 13, Series two 1, 2) that raised this title to its lofty artistic heights. Sadly the fine art was saddled with Continuity's typically addled stories and English-as-a-second-language dialogue. The title's nadir came with 10's hard-hitting drug exposé 'Kracky The Clown's Krack House', which was every bit as stupid as you'd imagine it to be. The second series is chapters of the company crossover 'Deathwatch 2000', but, as with the first, a comic to savour visually but on no account to be read.~DAR

ARMORINES

Valiant: *13 issues (0-12), 1994©1995*

A bunch of U.S. Marines are equipped with armoured suits and weaponry derived from the X-O Armour, and become pawns of various factions within the government and military. A mostly action series lacking well defined characters, launched when Valiant was in decline, and an early victim of their 1995 cutbacks. 0 was released as a separate premium item, but is more commonly available bound into X-O Manowar 25.~HS

ARMORINES

Acclaim: *4 issue miniseries 1999*

Feeble and histrionic re-hash of the super-armoured soldiers refitted and reunited to fight invading spider aliens. Slick pictures can't save this cynical tie-in to yet another computer game shoot-'em-up.~WW

ARMY AT WAR

DC: *1 issue 1978*

The "exciting new idea" proclaimed on the cover banner appears to have been cancelling this ordinary war anthology title after a single issue.~WJ

ARMY ATTACK

Charlton: *Series one 4 issues 1964-1965, Series two 10 issues (38-47) 1965-1967*

A routine war anthology with US fighting men winning World War II, although most feature fine artwork from Sam Glanzman. The second series increasingly featured vivid and realistic stories (probably by Joe Gill) of the then ongoing Vietnam conflict, with Glanzman illustrating at the top of his form.~WW

Recommended: 46

ARROW

Malibu: *One-shot 1992*

Malibu's archer type has a chance to rectify a mistake from five years previously in this rather pointless one-shot. Artist Lee Moder progressed to better things.~FP

ARROW ANTHOLOGY

Arrow Comics: *4 issues 1997-1998*

An eclectic mix of comedy, superhero and fantasy, with some characters appearing out of or previewing separate series, such as *Dark Oz* and *Tales from the Aniverse*. The best and most interesting strips are 'Crimson and Clover' (a *Night Streets* tale) from Mark Bloodworth (1-2), in which the Black Dahlia and Blonde Venus apprehend a serial killer, and Andrew Pepoy's funny detectives, Simone and Ajax (2-4), though their origin story is left unfinished by the non-appearance of 5.~NF

ARSENAL

DC: *Special 1996, 4 issue miniseries 1998-1999*

Green Arrow's sidekick, Roy (Speedy) Harper, grew up, diversified into a weapons expert, fathered a daughter with an international nuclear terrorist, and started to call himself Arsenal. The one-shot has him going off to capture a drugs baron in a convoluted tale where there's little difference between the good guys and the bad guys. All this grim and gritty nonsense is such a bore. Give it a miss. It's back to heroics for the miniseries by Devin Grayson and Rick Mays, who hit the target as far as the character's happy-go-lucky attitude goes. Harper and offspring are related to immortal bad guy Vandal Savage, who's looking for some spare body parts to keep himself going. Hasn't he heard of cloning? It's a serious, but fun tale that also explores Arsenal's past, his drug addiction, relationship with Green Arrow, and native American upbringing.~HY

ARSENIC LULLABY

A Silent Comics: *14 issues, 1 Special 1998-2001*
AAA Milwaukie Publishing: *1 issue 2001*

Describing *Arsenic Lullaby* as a comic that takes the horrors of the world and makes you laugh at them is either doing a great or appalling job, depending on your outlook. A sample: two flies are watching a TV appeal for the starving commenting on how great the conditions are what with fetid water, open sores and sewage on the street. Another strip is the sitcom like (and wrongly spelled) 'The Devil Your Nieghbor', in which Satan, later downgraded to a witchdoctor, sorts out neighbourhood problems. Babies feature heavily, both in numerous abortion clinic gags, and in a strip where federal agents have to kill them in order to ensure the continuing accuracy of census statistics. If you don't find anything remotely funny in this, stay well away from the rest. Like Ivan Brunetti and Bob Burden, Doug Paszkiewicz has a unique view of the world, and like them it's not for everybody. If your sense of humour is black enough, though, *Arsenic Lullaby* is hilarious. Most of the comics along with some new pieces are available in the collection 'The Devil's Hat Trick'.~FP

Recommended: 1-14, Special

ART D'ECCO

Fantagraphics: *4 issues 1990-1992*

Art D'Ecco contains various strips by the Langridge brothers, Andrew and Roger. Andrew 'generally' writes them, and Roger "generally" draws them, in a variety of angular styles, if the introductions are to be believed. The title character, a Frankenstein's monster lookalike, and his triangular friend Gump engage in various surreal and zany adventures interspersed by short strips. Throughout *Art D'Ecco* is clever and considered and has an extremely good line in visual slapstick. And which other creators would box off congratulatory letters from fellow artists and writers and call it 'Wank Corner'?~FJ

ART SCHOOL SUPERSTARS

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1998*

Simon Grennan and Christopher Sperandio have succeeded in the fine arts world by appropriating the form of comics and applying a decent sense of design. Should they be applauded for exploiting the gullibility of the art world, or should we be appalled at the notion that any old tosh can be considered art? This slim, but well-produced volume consists of full page head shots and snippets of interviews with art school students. "Are they art stars of tomorrow?" asks the blurb. It's unlikely, and no-one should care about this until they are.~FP

ARTBABE

Fantagraphics: *4 issues 1996-1999**

Jessica Abel is a very earnest writer attempting to find some answers about human emotion through her comics. Each issue is a self-contained story about twenty-somethings, and in each her protagonist is lacking something, possibly indefinable, in their life. Abel is adept at capturing the mundanity of real life conversation, including a wealth of small details, but page after page of such conversation or similar captioned introspection results in detached and dreary comics. The art is expressive, but also out of proportion and overworked.~WJ

ARTESIA

Sirius: *6 issue miniseries 1999*, 6 issue miniseries ('Afield') 2000-2001, 2 Annuals 1999-2001*

The daughter of a witch, priestess of dread goddesses and a magician with power over spirits, Artesia is also the Captain and concubine of Branimir, King of the Highland citadel of Dara Dess in Daradja. Jealous of her military victories, though all in his name, Branimir conspires with emissaries from the Middle Kingdom, worshippers of Islik, the Divine King, to kill Artesia. After taking a bloody revenge on Branimir, Artesia learns that the Middle Kingdom has been invaded by the forces of the Empire of Thessid-Gola. Exhausted after their own campaigns, the other Citadel Kings of Daradja appoint Artesia their representative and she rides with her forces against the invaders, eventually accepting the title and responsibilities of Queen of Dara Dess.

Mark Smylie's epic fantasy is richly detailed and far more complex than such a short plot synopsis would suggest. Each issue offers a textual essay providing background information on the history, politics and mythology of Artesia's world. The annuals contain short stories complementing the main series as well as information about the culture and character of the different peoples that populate them. Smylie's sympathetic watercolour artwork is enhanced with coloured pencil and ink. The writing is thoughtful and mature, as concerned with the nature of war, leadership and their consequences as with the characters, intrigues and conflicts that propel the story forwards.~NF

Recommended: 1-6, 'Afield' 1-6, Annuals 1, 2

ARTHUR: KING OF BRITAIN

Caliber: *5 issues 1997-1998*

Stripped down re-telling of the Arthur legend basing itself on the Geoffrey of Monmouth version rather than the better known *Morte D'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Mallory. All that means to you and me is post-Romano Britain rather than Camelot, so no Knights or Grail Quests, just brutes slaughtering each other. Adequate drawing and predictable writing from creator Michael Fraley but its all been done before and better.~WW

ARTISTIC COMICS

Golden Gate: *One-shot 1973*

Although published in comic format, this is not a comic per-se, rather a collection of sketchbook pages from Robert Crumb. Of course, Crumb is no typical artist and his sketchbooks are a delight, mixing fragments of strip with outrageous doodles and beautifully realised life studies. Underground fans and Crumb afficianados should search out a copy.~DAR

ARTISTIC LICENTIOUSNESS

Starhead: *1 issue 1991*
Comix Bitch: *2 issues (2-3) 1994, 1997*

The original impetus for this, before Roberta Gregory's success with *Naughty Bits*, was to produce a quickie porno comic to make easy money. Gregory took every opportunity to introduce sex between her characters. Despite this it grew into an organic soap opera about which Gregory rapidly became obsessive, hence the long gap between issues. Reading a sex comic about human-looking, normal people who don't have perfect chiselled fantasy bods and are as fucked-up as the rest of us still has great appeal even if the original prurient motivation didn't quite come across. Pressed for time to work on *Naughty Bits*, Gregory brought the series to a semi-conclusion with 3, though she promises to revisit the characters someday.~HS

ASCENSION

Image/Top Cow: *22 issues 1997-1999*

Two races, the Dayak and the Mineans, have been living alongside but unknown to mankind, and are at war over a formula that can resurrect an ancient evil. Coming into contact with a few pages of this formula causes Lucien Barnes and Andromeda Weaver to gain strange powers as they try to rescue a young, winged girl who turns out to be heir to the Minean throne. Security chief Vladimir Gregorieff is also affected but uses his powers to aid the Dayaks and succeeds in resurrecting Voivodul. After the conclusion of the Voivodul storyline in 6, Gregorieff becomes leader of the Dayaks but his genetic experiments eventually have unforseen consequences, while Lucien and Andromeda become involved in a power struggle over Minean sovereignty.

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* Available in a collected edition

Created by David Finch and Batt the artwork begins with a fluid, ornately rendered style and the story tries hard to be more than just another angels versus demons fantasy. However, the storytelling's both hard to follow and difficult to care for while Finch's departure after 13 produced a different artistic team with almost every subsequent issue. A new creative team in 20 simply brought back Voivodul.~NF

ASH

Event: *6 issues 1994-1995*, one-shot ('Zero') 1996, 2 issue microseries ('The Fire Within') 1996-1997, 6 issue miniseries ('Cinder & Smoke') 1997, 2 issue microseries ('Fire and Crossfire') 1999*

Ashley Quinn is a fire-fighter whose life is saved by a genetically enhanced warrior from the future. Ashley is given power over fire and he takes on the task of preventing the alien, Adam, from destroying the world. Written and drawn by Joe Quesada and Jimmy Palmiotti, the mix of science fiction with 'real-life' heroics and amusing characterisation holds the attention. The artwork's at it's best, however, before 'The Fire Within', which was never finished. For 'Cinder & Smoke', Mark Waid and Brian Augustyn take over the scripting with Humberto Ramos on pencils. The future-threat is dropped in favour of more straightforward superheroics. Ashley's policewoman sister, Maureen, investigates the death of their father (in a fire) while a villain called Molotov sets fires in a mob war and an assassin called Smoke tries to kill her as she gets closer to the truth. Ramos' characters look too young but this is a well-told story that doesn't overly rely on fights to establish character. Quesada and Palmiotti return as artists for 'Fire and Crossfire', which James Robinson writes. It begins with the near death of Ashley's mother and the return of a previous villain. From there it reverses the subtle ending of 'Cinder and Smoke', and with Quesada appointed to Marvel has never been heard of again.~NF

ASH/22 BRIDES

Event: *2 issue microseries 1996-1997*

Enjoyable enough adventure as the Brides and Ash get drawn into a chase to possess a key to some secret technology (that may or may not be related to Ash's origin). Girl gang the Brides are portrayed in the usual light-hearted way by writer Fabian Nicieza but fireman Ash is more of a cipher. Humberto Ramos provides good, tight pencils which give the work a harder edge, nicely undercutting the comedy-thriller basis of the story.~NF

ASHEN VICTOR

Viz: *4 issues 1998**

This is a tale from the world of *Battle Angel Alita*, set before her arrival and participation in the Rollerball-like sport of Motorball. Snev's a competitor who's never recovered from the death of a member of the audience, killed after running into his path during a race. Beretta, Snev's prostitute girlfriend, is brutally murdered by an assassin possibly hired by the Megil Corp, which has been secretly using Snev as the guinea-pig for a new drug. Now Snev must find a missing bag that might hold the answers to this mystery. The story's a good action-adventure thriller, but the artwork is what makes this compelling. Taking a lead from Frank Miller, Yukito Kishiro has produced some marvellous, shadow-driven drawings. Relying less on swathes of black than Miller, Kishiro switches effortlessly between characterisations in negative and more delicately rendered line-drawings.~NF

Recommended: 1-4

ASHES

Caliber: *6 issues 1990*

A selection of short stories by John Bergin (with occasional writing assistance), mixing reprints from his arty self-published zine Brain Dead and new material. Bergen circles round the same themes like a vulture: religious guilt, vampires, torture and doomed love surface again and again. Amateur psychologists will have a field day counting the number of times a vagina dentata (women's bits with teeth) crops up in the artwork. Ashes is an angry book that broods on the unfairness of life without becoming tiresome. Some of the stories attain an almost transcendent sense of magic realism; others come over like Hammer horror. It deserves to be read for the inventiveness of Bergin's drawing, from spiky inks to soft charcoal, if nothing else.~FJ

ASKANI'SON

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1996*

Following the first series of *The Adventures of Cyclops and Phoenix*, *Askani'son* continues the story of the boy who will one day grow into the man called Cable. Scott Lobdell and Gene Ha once again weave an intricate tale which is part fantasy, part superhero, mixed with liberal dashes of science fiction. As young Nathan continues his journey towards his destiny as the saviour of a desperate world, more of the pieces fall into place, among them the first meetings with his mysterious mentor Blaquesmith and his wife-to-be Alyia.~JC

ASRIAL VS CHEETAH

Antarctic: *2 issue microseries 1997*

Also collected into a single issue, you basically get what it says on the cover, poorly drawn and with little plot. Those already familiar with the characters from *Gold Digger* and *Ninja High School* might not object, but it won't win any new readers.~WJ

ASSUME NOTHING

Slab-O-Concrete: *1 volume 1997*

Leanne Franson's Liliane minicomics were a highlight of the early 1990s. Autobiographical pieces, they dealt for the most part with being bisexual, firstly coming to terms, then the politics involved. These were no dry diatribes, though, and issues were handled in witty and understanding fashion, all drawn in a simple, expressive style. This reprints and reworks some of the minicomics alongside new strips, although there's a broader scope to the topics. A second volume titled *Teaching Through Trauma* is more of the same, and equally good. Sadly all too few of Franson's comics have seen a wide circulation, so these are to be cherished.~FP

Recommended

ASTER

Entity: *3 issues 1994-1995*

Filipino produced fantasy about a Celestial landing on a primitive planet and forging his destiny. It's unremarkable with over-rendered art until the first work for the American market by Leinil Francis Yu in 3.~WJ

ASTERIX

Hodder and Stoughton/Orion: *33 volumes 1961 to date*

Created for the weekly French anthology comic Pilote in 1959, Asterix has become one of the few globally recognised comic characters through worldwide circulation of the collections. The stories are set in the Roman-occupied Gaul of 50BC. One coastal village remains beyond Caesar's reach due to the magic potion brewed by village druid Getafix. Those drinking the potion are endowed with great strength, speed and invulnerability, the exception being the giant Obelix, who requires no potion, having fallen in the brew as a baby, with lasting consequences. Artist Albert Uderzo's open and expressive cartoon style is ideal for conveying René Goscinny's largely slapstick scripts.

Asterix the Gaul, although primitive by later standards, sets the premise and introduces most of the recurring cast. The best of the early titles is *Asterix the Gladiator* (4), as Asterix and Obelix fight in Caesar's arena to free their village's captured bard Cacofonix. The Asterix formula develops early, with most stories involving Asterix on a quest accompanied by Obelix, often in a foreign land, enabling the creators to take easy swipes at national stereotypes. Running gags include a band of inept pirates whose ship invariably sinks on contact with Asterix, the fearsome Roman legionnaires reduced to a bruised mass, and modified speech balloons conveying mood, nationality or character. By *Asterix and Cleopatra* (6) Goscinny and Uderzo are finding their feet, stepping beyond mere farce to address wider concerns, and the series begins to gel as both children's entertainment and social satire. Uderzo's art has become more detailed and researched, and the main characters have solidified into their final forms.

1967's *Asterix the Legionary* (10) begins a golden era, with both creators hitting peak form and inventive plots flowing for the next five years. Oblelix volunteers to rescue the boyfriend of a girl he himself yearns after in a story satirising military bureaucracy and inflexibility. It temporarily exhausts the national stereotype jokes, as Asterix and Obelix encounter assorted other foreign legionnaires. It's noticeable that there are only two foreign adventures in the following nine albums, *Asterix in Spain* (14) and the excellent *Asterix in Switzerland* (16), with its hilarious portrayal of a corrupt official.

The problem with an invincible village is that their indomitability works against the strip after a while, requiring Goscinny to conceive ever more inventive ways to circumvent the easy answer of the magic potion (although it invariably saves the day eventually). In *Asterix and the Big Fight* (7) Getafix becomes amnesiac and is unable to brew a potion, and in *Asterix and the Soothsayer* (19) the villagers' own superstitions almost cause their downfall. In the best album of the series, *Asterix and the Roman Agent* (15), Caesar, realising force alone won't prevail, enlists a Roman with a particular talent for sowing discord wherever he travels. His arrival has the villagers at each other's throats, and the book ends with a mass battle involving all local Roman garrisons and the village, masterfully condensed to a single page. Developing the area around the village is Caesar's plan in *The Mansions of the Gods* (17). It's an uncharacteristic tale castigating urban development and promoting conservation: not only is Asterix omitted from the title, but the Gauls only play a small part for much of the story, planting magic acorns to replace trees removed by the Romans.

By 1972 Goscinny appears to have overdosed on Asterix. Stories now only appeared on an annual basis, and although always professional, some were more contractual obligation than inspiration. *Asterix and Caesar's Gift* (21), with a challenge to Vitalstatistix's position of Chief, is excellent, but only Obelix and Co (23) otherwise displays much spark. Goscinny died after completing *Asterix in Belgium* (24), and Uderzo continued the series alone. His first efforts, *Asterix and the Great Divide* (25) and *Asterix and the Black Gold* (26), were shaky, but by *Asterix and Son* (27) he'd mastered the formula. *Asterix and the Secret Weapon* (30), with the arrival of feminism in the Gaulish village, while tending to deride the central concept, stands alongside the best Asterix stories. With Uderzo in his mid-70s as of writing, it's largely assumed that *Asterix and the Actress* (32) will be the final Asterix story. It has a valedictory feel in returning several characters from previous books and introducing the parents of Asterix and Obelix.

A portion of the credit for the English-language success of *Asterix* must go to Anthea Bell and Derek Hockridge. Avoiding the cardinal sin of literalism, their sympathetic and inventive translations deftly convey the verbal dexterity and anachronistic references to contemporary culture in the French originals. The back cover running order on Hodder and Stoughton's editions is not the chronology of the series, referred to with the numbering here, and includes illustrated text adaptations of *Asterix* films. The *Asterix* books are available as large-format hardcover and softcover editions, and, more recently, as small-size paperbacks and collected three stories to the volume.~FP

Recommended: *Asterix and Cleopatra, Asterix and the Big Fight, Asterix the Legionary, Asterix at the Olympic Games* (12), *Asterix and the Cauldron* (13), *Asterix in Spain, Asterix and the Roman Agent, Asterix in Switzerland,* The *Mansions of the Gods, Asterix and the Soothsayer* (19), *Asterix and Caesar's Gift, Asterix and the Secret Weapon*

ASTONISHING

Atlas: *61 issues (3-63) 1951-1957*

Astonishing started life as *Marvel Boy* at the very end of the Golden Age. Despite better than average superhero tales from Russ Heath and Bill Everett the title changed with 3, as the teen wonder began losing space to an increasing number of mystery stories (including a rare non-*Superman* short by Wayne Boring in number 4). By 7 the conversion to a horror anthology was complete, with content consisting of the usual blend of Vampires, Mad Doctors and Evil Aliens, albeit drawn by some of the best artists in the industry. It's with the middle years that the title became really memorable as editor and chief writer Stan Lee moved away from tales of inevitable doom and began to run stories that owed as much to wit and satire as to whips and Satan. The protagonists became ordinary folk: farmers, salesmen and housewives, not He-Men heroes or scientists, and the threats were to home and values, not country and life. Joe Everyman could outwit the aliens or murder his neighbour. There was usually a scientific explanation for the weirdest events and a seemingly benign providence was making sure that good and bad got what they deserved.

Gathering a stable of top artists such as Bill Benulis, John Tartagloine, Mac Pakula, Bill Everett, and Bob Powell, joined in later issues by Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, Lee changed the style of his horror comics to such an extent that when the Comics Code began with 38 (April 1955) there was no appreciable difference.~WW

Recommended: 3-6, 37, 39-41, 43, 48, 54-56

ASTONISHING EXCITEMENT

All Jonh Comics: *3 issues (501-503) 1995-1996*

Well produced humour comic presented as if part of a long running series, and just one of a large list of titles, complete with fake ads and editorial pages. Lead strip 'Sandwich High' concerns a group of super-powered teenagers who are guardians of the school sandwich, lest anyone sit on it and inherit the power to rule the galaxy. It's a daft take on TV school dramas, and anyone who likes the idea of that will probably enjoy the remainder of the strips.~WJ

ASTONISHING TALES

Marvel: *36 issues 1970-1976*

This started life splitting the title between Ka-Zar and Dr Doom strips before spotlighting a single character with 9. Ka-Zar proved to be the longest lasting feature, though its assorted creators continually changed the strip's direction resulting in a very inconsistent series. 1 and 2 were typically exciting superhero fare from Jack Kirby, but Gerry Conway switched locales to Ka-Zar's native Savage Land with 3, and with an emerging Barry Smith's art in 3-6 and 10 it was Conan in all but name. Roy Thomas and Gil Kane produced a superb origin story in 11, and 12-13 were early Man-Thing appearances with 12 featuring a lovely re-cap of the monster's origin drawn by Neal Adams. In 15 things switched back to the urban jungle of New York for a couple of 'relevant' stories before devolving into a humdrum superhero strip. Being unable to retain a creative team for more than a couple of issues notwithstanding, Ka-Zar was popular enough to be promoted into his own title.

His companion feature proved less successful, though the Dr Doom story in 1-4 by Thomas and Wally Wood was terrific and collected in *The Marvel Art of Wally Wood*. Sadly the tale of Latverians rising up to depose the evil Doom used up all the decent plot ideas in one swoop and 5-8 are inconsequential despite some nice Gene Colan art in 7-8. It, The Living Colossus by Tony Isabella and Dick Ayers in 21-24 was an unsuccessful attempt, both commercially and artistically, to revive the feel of Marvel's old monster comics.

Far more memorable was Deathlok in 25-36, interrupted by 29 reprinting the Guardians of the Galaxy's origin. In classic 1970s exploitation style it was a mixture of *Six Million Dollar Man*, *Dawn of the Dead* horror and conspiracy theory paranoia, but amazingly managed to rise above that to become a strip of real quality. Set in the lawless future of 1990 (!), Colonel Luther Manning's long dead remains were 'enhanced' with bionic prosthetics and a computer implant in his brain to create a super soldier. Subsequent issues dealt with his fruitless attempts to regain his humanity and raised questions of identity in a surprisingly mature way. Of course, it was also a Marvel comic, so Deathlok also had to kick copious amounts of butt at every opportunity. Created, plotted and drawn by Rich Buckler (with scripts by Doug Moench and Bill Mantlo), this was certainly his finest hour, despite a reliance on assistants. From 33 Klaus Janson's superb inks raised the quality level another notch, but sadly the title was cancelled soon after. What was to have been 37 later appeared as *Marvel Spotlight* 33, but despite guest appearances and revivals the original series was never satisfactorily resolved.~DAR

Recommended: 1-6, 11, 12, 33-36

ASTOUNDING SPACE THRILLS

Day One Comics: *3 issues 1998*
Image: *4 issues 2000*

Steve Conley's gentle space opera is aimed firmly at fellow fans of 1950s science fiction. Homages to the pre-space flight era's fascination with the cosmos abound, from the name of lead character Argosy Smith onwards. Combined with Conley's crisp, clear-line style and bold colours, the comic is an absolute delight, although unless you already love this kind of thing it doesn't really have anything new to say. The first series has pulp magazine influenced painted covers by Jim Steranko, the Hildebrandt brothers and Drew Struzan and the second series continues this trend with Kelly Freas on 2 and an unimpressive effort from Dave Gibbons on 4. Conley's love of the comics and science fiction extends to online promotion on his excellent website: www.astoundingspacethrills.com. However, if this labour of love was going to succeed, it really needed something to say for itself rather than simply retreading all the old clichés, no matter how fondly they were being remembered. It'll be missed, but never mind, there's bound to be something just like it along again soon. Back-up strip Marty Baumann's 'The Crater Kid' is a humourous space-western in the same vein.~JC

ASTRA

CPM Manga: *4 issues 2001**

An amazingly cliched story of a planet of women who run out of banked sperm and must send their beautiful teenaged princess in search of a good man. It's based on an idea for a theatrical musical from Jerry Robinson, the Batman artist who created The Joker. Jerry seems to have been a bit stuck in the Golden Age but this is an enjoyable quick read if you don't mind some perhaps rather outdated sexual schemas. The excellent art is by Shojin Tanaka.~GK

ASTRIDER HUGO

Radio: *2 issues 2000-2001*

Inspector Regina Bennett of the Orbital Guard is tasked with the capture of flamboyant space pirate Hugo, who's a bit of a handful with a secret agenda in this overwrought translated manga series.~FP

ASTRO BOY

Gold Key: *1 issue 1965*

American artists try adapting the then popular Japanese cartoon. It all ends in tears. Only for hardcore fans of the TV show.~WJ

The Original ASTRO BOY

Now: *20 issues 1987-1989*

Japan's most famous comic character, Tetsuwan Atom, is known as Astro Boy in the USA and, due to regular screening of his cartoon series, is familiar to most Americans under forty. Ken Steacy provides light children's adventure in 1-16, but our kind-hearted super-strong robot chum suffers with Steacy's departure. Astro Boy's origin is in 8.~FP

ASTRO BOY

Dark Horse: *10 volumes + 2002 to date*

Tetsuwan (Mighty) Atom was created in 1951 by Osamu Tezuka, and renamed Astro Boy when Tezuka's 1963 animated show was translated and broadcast in the U.S. Tezuka drew Astro Boy for eighteen years, but when it came to be collected (in the twenty-three volume series that Dark Horse is translating), he redrew parts of the story that he felt weren't up to standard. He also added to many of the individual stories, a brief introduction, with himself addressing the readers, explaining the story's place in continuity or how it came to be written. So though this is not a chronological printing, the original dates are given for each strip, and a new strip explaining who Astro Boy is was added at the beginning.

The robot, Tobio, was built (in 2003) by a scientist grieving for his dead son. Understanding that Tobio would never grow any older, however, led him to sell the robot to a circus, where he's renamed Astro Boy as part of a strongman act. He's eventually discovered by another scientist, who becomes his guardian, placing him with a robot family, which includes a brother and sister (Cobalt and Uran), who occasionally help him in his adventures. Astro Boy also enrols at school, where he develops another surrogate father in teacher (and amateur detective), Mr Moustache.

There are usually at least two stories in each volume, depending on the length of the main feature, and Astro Boy's opponents are usually robots of one sort or another. In 1, Grand Duchess Anta Maria builds an army of robots using the brains of dogs, in a plan to mine diamonds on the Moon, only to find that the original inhabitants have left a giant robot to repel all visitors. 2 features the first elected robot President, who's threatened by an anti-robot society. The robots in a theme park are abused in 4, and a robotic Cleopatra is intent on recreating the glory of ancient Egypt in 9.

As well as robots, however, Astro Boy meets and battles aliens, is lost in the past and gradually losing power in an extended sequence (6-8), which includes a brief encounter with the war in Vietnam. Tezuka's themes are always evident in his pleas for peace and tolerance for all creatures (and even plants). Astro Boy himself is always courageous and eager to do the right thing. Full of action, adventure and inventiveness, it's impossible to imagine the sense of wonder that must have greeted their first publication, and yet there is still a freshness to them that makes them engaging, fun and thought-provoking.~NF

Recommended: 1-10

Kurt Busiek's ASTRO CITY

Image: *6 issue miniseries 1995-1996**
Homage: *22, 1/2 issues 1996-2000*

On first appearances this seems to be set in a 1950s-style futuristic city, but Astro City is in fact a modern-day American city inhabited by ordinary and extraordinary people. With his work on *Marvels*, Kurt Busiek created a niche for exploring the world of the superhero through the eyes of ordinary people, but *Astro City* offers more. We see the human side of superheroes, with their aims and personalities confidently and intelligently explored, and they're a marvellous set of characters, some with obvious resemblances to the icons of the comics world. Even if Busiek denies it, regulars like the First Family are based on the Fantastic Four. Homage or satire? There's a very thin line, but Busiek manages to pull it off. Costumed characters, however aren't always the stars of the comic. The city's non-powered inhabitants whose lives are affected by the activities of the superheroes are featured heavily, usually to good success. 4's tale of a secretary whose office becomes a battleground won an industry award for Best Story, and is a fine example of the series.

The Homage series (1 also available jumping at you in 3-D) switches focus as Busiek concentrates on the costumed characters until 20. 4-9* concern a young lad becoming Altar Boy, sidekick to the Confessor, who himself has an unusual secret. Add in some shapeshifting aliens and you have an interesting and unusual story. 13 spotlights cartoon character, Loony Leo, come to life and now a restaurant owner. 14-20* is a murder/mystery tale, where Steeplejack, an ex-supervillain is hired to find the killer of small-time supervillains like himself and stumbles across a shocking secret. Alex Ross provides the covers, but the interior art by Brent Anderson is also of a high standard, with Will Blyberg inks providing a more polished look in the Homage issues. The oddly-numbered 1/2 first saw print as a special from *Wizard* fan magazine. If you had to live in a world full of superpowered beings you couldn't do better than to move to Astro City, but as you probably don't settle in for a good read instead.~HY

Recommended: Image 1-6, Homage 1-9, 13-20

ASTRONAUTS IN TROUBLE

AiT/Planet Lar: *5 issue miniseries ('Live from the Moon') 1999*, one-shot ('Cool Ed's') 1999, 3 issue miniseries ('Space 1959') 2000*, one-shot ('One Shot One Beer') 2000*

Cool, blackly comic tales set fifty years from now, revolving around a billionaire's attempt to restart the space program by setting up a base on the Moon. Of course it's not as simple and altruistic as that, and as the story unfolds through the eyes of an independent news team events spiral to a spectacular and gripping conclusion. Follow-up tales take the brave step of ignoring the main cast to focus on complementary stories that develop from the aftermath of the main miniseries. Witty and engaging blend of action and drama from Larry Young and artists Matt Smith, who draws1-3, and Charlie Adlard who draws everything else. 'One Shot One Beer' is an expanded version of 'Cool Ed's', and there's also *The Making of Astronauts in Trouble*, which provides the script for the first series.~WW

Recommended: Live from the Moon 1-5

ASYLUM

Millennium: *3 issues 1993*

With mystery anthologies extinct by 1993, Millennium were able to attract an impressive batch of A-list contributors wanting to produce short stories. John Bolton covers grace 1-2, and he has a story in 1. Others participating are Neil Gaiman and Mark Buckingham (2), Steven Seagle (1) and P. Craig Russell (1-2). Very little of the material is of much consequence, though, and it's padded out with poorly reproduced reprints from Archie's short-lived 1970s Red Circle line drawn by Al McWilliams (1), Vincente Alcazar (2) and Howard Chaykin (3). The one poignant highlight is almost an afterthought in 2, written by Faye Perozich concerning an old lady trading memories, and there's some nice early art from Pia Guerra in 3.~WJ

ASYLUM

Maximum Press: *11 issues 1995-1997*

A showcase anthology for Rob Liefield's Extreme Studios, the major redeeming feature of this series is the occasional appearance of Larry Marder's Tales of the Beanworld. There are new colour stories, albeit only four pages per issue, in 1-6. Using the anthology as a way of premiering new titles or characters, Liefield gives us the adventures of Starbuck from *Battlestar Galactica*, Avengelyne, Warchild (drawn by Art Adams in 1), Deathkiss (art by Mike Deodato) and Christian (script by Robert Loren Fleming, art by Pop Mhan). Megaton Man replaces Tales of the Beanworld (7, 8, 11) and if it's not as interesting, it's better than its companion pieces. Surprisingly concluding some stories from elsewhere, Kid Supreme shares 9 with Jim Krueger's Foot Soldiers and Terry Moore's Lady Supreme story concludes in 10.~NF

AT THE SEAMS

Alternative Press: *1 issue 1997*

Three stories by Ed Brubaker about relationships: starting them, ending them, sifting through the debris afterwards and, perhaps, learning something useful about yourself. The stories are all similar in content and tone but the lessons in each are different, making the comic as a whole read like a nicely rounded three-part story. Perceptive and well above average, but short of remarkable.~FC

ATARI FORCE

DC: *20 issues 1984-1985, 1 Special 1986*

Space adventure that's far better than it had any right to be considering it originated as a corporate promotion for Atari, which in the comic stands for Advanced Technology and Research Institute. Engaging characters and compelling plots from Gerry Conway and never less than excellent art from José Luis Garcia-Lopez, inked by Ricardo Villigran and Bob Smith, ensure that the first thirteen issues are a roller-coaster ride. 1-5 introduce and unite the Atari Force under Martin Champion, leader of a previous incarnation, in order to battle a being calling himself the Dark Destroyer. Despite the stupid name, he's a threat that lasts until 13, after which Mike Baron and Eduardo Barreto take over and keep the quality up for the remainder of the run. Light-hearted back-up stories from 13 focus on individual members of Atari Force, but the 1986 special with none of the regular creators didn't pave the way for a revival as hoped.~FP

Recommended: 1-3, 8, 11, 14, 15, 19, 20

ATHENA

A.M. Works: *14 issues 1995-1997**

Antarctic: *One-shot (0) 1996*

Dean Hsieh tells an intriguing if muddled tale blending Greek mythology, science fiction and punk rock. Athena looks like a tough bitch with a foul mouth and a bionic arm but she's actually The Goddess Athena, who, like the rest of her pantheon has been forced out of her job and sent to live in a crappy retirement home, Earth. She isn't taking retirement too well and spends most of her time fighting, drinking and playing thrash guitar very badly. There's a weak plot involving an attempt by Apollo and Nemesis to supplant their successors and get their old jobs back but it's really incidental to the soap opera antics of the Olympians and their grungy teen friends in and around the local fetish bar. The Antarctic one-shot reprints the two original appearances from *Absolute Zero* 1-2. Engaging but lightweight.~WW

@THENA INC.

Image: *One-shot ('The Beginning') 2001, 4 issues + 2002 to date*

'The Beginning' introduces black ops organisation Athena Inc., which hides behind the benevolent front of charitable acts. In sending one of their genetically modified assassins (able to completely alter their appearances) to kill a hacker, they encounter opponents, who have the power to kill them. In 1-4, Gwen (a celebrity), known as Mary when a manhunter, walks into a trap, created because Mary knows about Gwen, which is not supposed to happen. Seemingly designed to allow Jay Anacleto to produce as few photo-realistic, but passionless drawings as possible, the pages are filled with dialogue (by Brian Haberlin) that must carry the burden of the storytelling. Too much, however, appears out of context in relation to the rest of the page.~NF

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* Available in a collected edition

ATLANTIS CHRONICLES

DC: *7 issue limited series 1990*

Peter David details the fables and history of the lost continent of Atlantis, or at least the DC history thereof. This seemed a labour of love for him, but to most readers it may just seem a bit laboured. At forty-eight pages for seven issues it's stretched too far to keep the interest up. David fleshes out the characteristics of all the major players in recording the history of the turbulent continent, beginning before it sank, featuring Arion, up to the present day and Aquaman. In brief, there are two warring factions, the humanoid water-breathers who come to occupy Poseidonis and the mer-people living in Tritonis, and along the way there's plenty of intrigue and treachery. Esteban Maroto's fluid art is well suited to the period pieces. Each issue can be read independently, and anyone wanting to sample it should try 3, a well-paced story combining much wit and violence.~HY

Recommended: 3

ATLAS

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1994*

Writer and artist Bruce Zick has a fair turn at producing a Jack Kirby homage, swiping the title from an old Kirby creation. Zick's art strives for the Kirby grandeur, and there are plenty of interesting ideas packed alongside Kirby-style themes, but there's also the often terrible Kirby-style dialogue as well. This distracts from what would otherwise be a good miniseries.~FP

ATLAS

Drawn and Quarterly: *1 issue + 2001 to date*

Dylan Horrocks continues laying bare mythical comics of the past with plenty of references to his work in *Hicksville*. This time, in a long opening sequence, Horrocks himself is interrogated by the state police of Cornucopia for associating with subversives, in this case renowned cartoonist Emil Kopen. Thereafter comics journalist Leonard Batts, star of *Hicksville*, returns to an old friend and announces his intention to produce a biography of Kopen. The skillful weaving of fictional elements into a familiar world is disorienting (as is the concept that comics are taken seriously anywhere) and Horrocks intrigues with his world. This first issue also includes work by James Kochalka set in the legendary comics library at Hicksville, but you can't have everything.~FP

Recommended

ATLAS

Avatar: *1 issue + 2002 to date*

At one time his day job was holding up the world, but freed from that task he's now a superhero. Introduced in *10th Muse*, Atlas is a lantern-jawed musclebound God, unlikely to succeed without screwing up in some fashion. In this first issue he's employed as a security guard and makes a strange discovery. Not quite as funny as the creative team seem to think, this is nonetheless a decent modern-era superhero title so far.~WJ

The ATOM

DC: *Series one 38 issues 1962-1968, series two (Power of the Atom) 18 issues 1988-1989, 2 Specials 1993-1995*

Using a white-dwarf star fragment, scientist Ray Palmer developed a method of shrinking himself down from six foot to sub-microscopic size. This was another case of DC recycling the name from one of their 1940s superheroes, and the new Atom was another successful graduate of try-out title *Showcase* (34-36)*. Editor Julius Schwartz was always interested in imparting scientific knowledge as part of his comics, and The Atom was particularly science-heavy, with most of his adventures being science-fiction-based with an emphasis on detection and characterisation. Unusually, very few supervillains turned up, the most notable among them being nutty botanist Jason Woodrue, who would later be beefed up as the Floronic Man in *Swamp Thing*, and the time-obsessed Chronos. He was a ludicrous figure in black and white striped tights, and yellow cape, gloves and boots, yet, when unmasked, drawn by Gil Kane to resemble Richard Nixon! The most noteworthy of the earlier issues involved the Time Pool, through which the Atom was able to meet historical figures such as Jules Verne and Edgar Allan Poe. The character's early adventures are now available in DC's *Atom Archives*.

With the exception of the final issue, the first series was written by Gardner Fox and drawn by Gil Kane, so there are no complaints about artistic quality here. And with Sid Greene inking Kane's pencils the Mighty Mite was a six-inch powerhouse of pure muscle. A perfectly acceptable standard was maintained throughout, but few issues jump out as particularly noteworthy until the end of the run. Then the comic became more action-oriented, with the issues starring the 1940s Atom, 29 and 36, standing out. Hawkman dropped by for a guest slot in 31, foreshadowing the future of the title, which became *Atom and Hawkman* with 39.

When that run ended the Atom spent fifteen years as a little-used cog in Justice League of America before returning in the radically different Sword of the Atom (dealt with as a separate entry). He returned in a straight superhero series titled *Power of the Atom*, originally written by Roger Stern. A good sample issue is the John Byrne-drawn 6, which beefs up Chronos considerably. The most persistent and mysterious of the villains introduced, though, is Humbug, who débuts in 11 and becomes a particular thorn in Atom's side. The CIA are background players throughout the series, and 16-18 tie up all plots, including some left over from *Sword of the Atom*. Never spectacular, but always solid, Graham Nolan draws most issues. The first of two specials is a worthy effort by Tom Peyer and Steve Dillon featuring recurring baddie Chronos. The second focuses on his coping with being seventeen again (don't ask). He's currently back as an adult and a member of the JLA.~HY

Recommended: 29, 36, special 1

THE ATOM AND HAWKMAN

DC: *7 issues (39-45) 1968-1969*

Editor Julius Schwartz's idea of making the eponymous heroes here best buddies (like the Flash and Green Lantern) seems to have led to the merging of their titles (continuing Atom's numbering) at a time when split books were all but extinct. Both crossover and solo stories were featured. Unusual but distinguished artwork and some interesting stories by Bob Kanigher, Denny O'Neil and Gardner Fox characterise this curious, doomed title. High points are Fox's 'Panic Button' stories in 40-41 drawn by Joe Kubert, a memorable villain in 43's spectral 18th- century highwayman The Gentleman Ghost, and Kubert's superb covers.~SW

Recommended: 40, 41

THE ATOMIC AGE

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1990*

A renegade alien called Nimbus appears in this retro look at the 1950s, which contrasts the fears of the age (alien invasions, communism) with mom's-apple-pie rose-tinted nostalgia. More aliens arrive and it all becomes rather silly.~WJ

ATOMIC CITY TALES

Black Eye: *3 issues, 1 Special 1994-1995**

Kitchen Sink: *3 issues 1996**

Jay Stephens' Atomic City is a strange and wonderful place to visit, populated by a vast selection of imaginative superpowered characters who behave as most real folk would if they had abilities beyond the levels of everyone else. They go about their business as usual, living, loving and holding parties, except that every now and then there's a planet to save, a robbery to carry out or a score to

settle. Stephens even incorporates himself into the strips as official cartoonist to Big Bang, near omnipotent, but also shallow and self-centred. The disjointed aspects of Stephens' *Sin Comics* have been discarded, but, in the manner of a Ronnie Corbett monologue, don't expect a strictly linear structure. Stephens weaves all over the place, creating the impression of a stream-of-consciousness comic with wit and artifice, at times knowing and at times seemingly naïve.~WJ
Recommended: Black Eye 1-3, Special, Kitchen Sink 1-3

ATOMIC OVERDRIVE

Caliber: *2 issues 1997*

A stylish pastiche of 1950's America by Dave Darrigo and Peter Grau. A mysterious glowing zombie is wandering through Van Doren county. Two-Fisted Detective Broderick narrates tales that abound with cool clichés, and the villains Tony The Punk and Doctor Guido Haiti are excellent. Of course, it all takes place near the local atomic testing ground, as everything did in 1950's America, and the tagline is to die for "Fast Teens, Fast Cars, Big Slow Monsters".~WW

ATOMIC TOYBOX

Image: *1 issue 1999*

Nice art and an entertaining script from Aaron Lopresti as a teenager is given a box that can make his dreams reality. Sales seem not to have matched expectations and there was no continuation.~FP

THE ATOMICS

AAA Pop: *15 issues 2000-2001**

Spinning off from *Madman*, Michael Allred's zany superfreaks get the chance to shine in their own series. This is Allred's usual mix of gentle homage to the Lee/Kirby comics of the 1960s with liberal seasonings of the more ludicrous characters and situations you'd expect to find in the *Batman* or *Doom Patrol* comics of the same era. If you're being uber-cynical then yes, it is mostly style over substance; the plots meander and often seem to be more an excuse to introduce a new bonkers idea than an attempt to tell a story, but who cares when it's this beautifully drawn and executed? No fanboy with a soul, that's for sure. Unrequited hopeless love, low self-esteem, the tragedy of monstrous transformations, cover lines such as "My Mom ate my Dad! How do you think I feel!" and "One will die!! But who? And for how long?!" could be mistaken for parody, but Allred clearly loves these comics too much to be poking fun. And his propensity to encourage his readers to cut up their comics in a two-fingered salute to the collectors' market just HAS to be commended. A real treat for any ageing fanboy on a rainy afternoon.~JC

ATTACK!

Charlton: *Series one 7 issues (54-60) 1958-1959, series two 3 Annuals 1962-1965, series three 48 issues 1971-1984*

Anthology war comic that ranges from excruciatingly bad to extremely good as American soldiers fight for freedom and democracy, winning every battle, even those they lost. Probably the best of Charlton's combat comics, the stories were always generic and dependant upon the artwork to fail or succeed. Contributors include Pat Boyette, Sam Glanzman, Montes and Bache, Simon and Kirby, and Wally Wood.~WW

ATTITUDE LAD

Caliber: *One-shot 1993*
Slave Labor: *3 issues 1994*

Paul Tobin scripts and various artists deliver short outbursts from the male answer to Bitchy Bitch. See a mouthy, aggressive, cowardly, obnoxious squirt sound off on a host of topics such as religion, feminism, actors, and practically everything else, but still be unable to do anything about it. Originally ran as a back-up feature in *Fringe*, so Phil Hester fans might be interested in seeing some of his earliest work. With the second outing the cast grows and the Lad is more aggressive as Tobin, Hester, Vincent Stall and Colleen Coover downsize the one-note antics in favour of an expanded range of short stories. All are in your face and out of touch, obnoxious self-indulgences. Strident and visually uninspired. ~WW

THE AUTHORITY

WildStorm: *29 issues, 1 Annual 1999-2002, one-shot ('Kev') 2002, one-shot ('Scorched Earth') 2003*

After sixty years, a new take on superheroes is increasingly rare. Developed when writer Warren Ellis tired of the constraints of *Stormwatch*, where many of the cast were introduced, The Authority operate on a universal scale against menaces inconceivable for most superheroes, and characters such as The Engineer and The Doctor have planet-altering capabilities. They inhabit a vast sentient carrier (which exists out of space and time, yet orbits Earth!), and consider themselves representing a higher moral authority with an agenda to interfere for the betterment of humanity. Among other innovations, while not being responsible for the first gay superheroes in comics, Ellis gives his couple a realistic gloss not previously seen, all the while maintaining a sly smile at Apollo and Midnighter being Superman and Batman substitutes. 1-8* form two four part stories, the first introducing the cast and their capabilities amid a particularly nasty revenge plot on a global scale, while 5-8 have the world invaded by an other-dimensional Britain under alien control. This is very much Ellis' vision, but unsympathetic art could have easily sabotaged it. Thankfully the team of Bryan Hitch and Paul Neary provide spectacular scenarios to match the ambitious scope, with colourist Laura Dupuy essential. Hitch had moved away from his slavish imitation of Alan Davis, but learned well how to define a cast.

The entire creative team departs after a disappointing story about the return of God in 9-12*, although it's not without surprises and tension, and Ellis takes pivotal character Jenny Sparks with him. As the comic was infused with her abrasive, yet appealing personality it might have been expected that *The Authority* would flounder, but if anything the new creative team of Mark Millar and artist Frank Quitely (13-16*, 19, 20, 22) raise the quality a notch. Announcing their intentions early, Millar has the team overthrowing despotic regimes, and presenting themselves as celebrities for the betterment of their agenda. Predictably enough, this doesn't sit well with those believing themselves the powers behind the throne, and has later repercussions in disturbing fashion. Millar proves as adept as Ellis in conjuring up astoundingly powerful threats and imaginative methods of dealing with them, and artistically Quitely is always excellent with his simulacrums of the first Avengers team in 13-15 particularly impressive. Assorted deadline problems rapidly lead to fill-ins, though. Chris Weston, unusually sub-par in places, pencils 17 and 18 as Earth itself rebels against humanity, then Tom Peyer and Dustin Nguyen produce 23-26. They introduce an even more obnoxious Authority in thrall to American corporate interests, and while not quite matching the remainder of the run, these are very good superhero comics. Along with Doselle Young and John McCrea's prologue to *The Monarchy* in 21, the annual is inessential, and it's not very good either. Also inessential, but a lot of fun is 'Kev', wherein a hapless S.A.S. agent is sent to kill The Authority. By Garth Ennis and Glenn Fabry, it injects a slapstick sense of humour, and as such may not appeal to previous readers.

'Scorched Earth' provides a widescreen plot (the sun is attacking Earth), and returns someone unseen since the final days of *Stormwatch*. As superhero comics go it's okay, but expectations are set high for *The Authority* and as the prelude to a new series it doesn't bode well.

It should be noted that aspects of *The Authority* in all incarnations may offend. Those who like their heroes clean-cut, morally unambiguous and radiating positivity

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*Available in a collected edition

should stay away. It is a particularly violent comic, with the violence often gratuitous and sometimes sadistic, although equally often very imaginative as per the legless giant that opens 15. It was the violence that led to the first run's premature demise, reflecting a seemingly new thought for the average American post September 2001 that persistent interference with other cultures might have violent consequences.~WJ
Recommended: 1-8, 13-16, 19, 20, 22, 27-29

AUTO-BE RECYCLED

Last Gasp: *One-shot 1980*

This is an eco-friendly, public service project that explains how and when to use recycled car parts. Tim Boxell, Corrine Pettys and Vince Ballard essentially take turns telling the same basic story of someone in need of car repairs, who's ready to abandon the car or can't afford new parts, but is shown the enlightened path to recycling (whilst avoiding stolen parts, of course). Worthy, informative and, occasionally, amusing.~NF

AUTOMATIC KAFKA

WildStorm: *4 issues + 2002 to date*

Android, Kafka, takes some nanotecheroin, allegedly a drug that even his mechanical brain will feel, and the reader is treated to flashbacks of his life as a superhero. It seems that Kafka was one of the Strangers with Helen of Troy, The Constitution and Saint Nick, and that he's wanted by Agent Stahl of the National Park Service. Then Kafka becomes a game show host (with, ho hum, hilarious consequences). Unfortunately, Joe Casey's script contains some of the most remorselessly pretentious claptrap that's been committed to print outside of a Grant Morrison title, and the whole experience is made even worse by the unremittingly ugly (and pretentious) 'artwork' of Ashley Wood.~NF

AUTOMATON

Image/Flypaper Press: *3 issue miniseries 1998*

Three automatons, sent to Mars to provide scientific information about human capacity to survive the trip, are possessed by the alien beings, Sherzad, Bront and Konak. However, Konak is driven insane by the trip back to Earth and on arrival sets off on a mass killing spree. Only with the help of their creator and his estranged wife can Sherzad and Bront prevent the nuclear destruction of mankind. R.A. Jones' science fiction thriller throws up a few clichéd characters, but it's entertainingly done and solidly drawn by Peter Vale.~NF

AUTUMN

Caliber: *3 issue miniseries 1995*

This is an unusual World War II serial killer story, written by Chris Dows and Colin Clayton, and illustrated by Horus in a rather lumpen but striking black and white style. The emphasis is on a young boy who becomes obsessed with a killer who only strikes during the autumn, and only murders in the London Underground, rather than on police procedure and tracking him down. However, by the end of 2 it's turned into a historical version of the *X-Files*, with the boy, grown up, donning a costume to track down the inhuman creature he thinks has been living down the sewers. In the final issue, although it's atmospherically drawn by Horus, things go further astray as the serial killer is revealed. After a effectively short and unspectacular struggle, and a great deal of emotional language, there's a neat and poetic end to an interesting but rather wavering storyline.~FJ

AUTUMN ADVENTURES

Disney: *2 issues 1990-1991*

An annual collection of seasonal stories that revolve around Halloween and Thanksgiving. American and European reprints of Donald Duck, Uncle Scrooge, Mickey Mouse, Pluto, Chip'n'Dale and the whole Disney pantheon including the Gummi Bears are featured in these 64-pagers. Carl Barks fans will be pleased to find Donald stories by him in both issues. Brilliantly crafted lightweight entertainment.~SW

A-V IN 3-D

Aardvark-Vanaheim: *One-shot 1984*

If you were looking for the best independent anthology in the world you might well feel that one that included *Cerebus*, *Journey* and *Flaming Carrot* would be hard to beat. That this sampler of A-V's comics line also includes *Neil The Horse*, *Ms Tree* and *Normalman* ought to be the spur that has you rushing to find a copy. This is certainly the best of the mid-1980s 3-D comics fad, partly, at least, because all creators were drawing for 3-D and incorporated special scenes to take advantage of it, while retaining the integrity of the stories.~NF
Recommended

AVALON

Harrier: *14 issues 1986-1988*

Cheap and cheesy mainstream anthology full of sub-standard artwork. The occasional one- or two-page gem fails to make this grim array of bargain-basement superheroes and reprinted fan strips worth a look.~FJ

AVATAARS

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 2000*

Pointless redress of the Marvel Universe, primarily the Avengers, in faux-mediaeval, Dungeons and Dragons 'drag'. Someone, presumably writer Len Kaminski, was shooting for an ongoing series with this 'Alterniverse', but serendipitously the general public were more discerning.~HS

AVATAR

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1990-1991*

TSR role-playing game spin-off. At ninety-six pages extra thick! More absorbent! Well meaning but stodgy stories with some nice art.~HS

AVENGELYNE

Maximum Press: *Series one 4 issues (1/2-3) 1995, one-shot (Avengelyne/Glory) 1995, 3 issue miniseries (Avengelyne/Power) 1995-1996, one-shot (Avengelyne/Warrior Nun Areala) 1996, one-shot (Avengelyne/Glory: 'Godyssey') 1996, 2 issue microseries ('Deadly Sins') 1996, series two 15 issues (0-14) 1996-1997, 2 issue microseries (Avengelyne/Prophet) 1996-1997, 3 issue miniseries ('Armageddon') 1996-1997*
Awesome: *1 issue 1999*
Avatar: *One-shot (Avengelyne/Pandora) 2000, 3 issue miniseries (1/2-2) ('Bad Blood') 2000, one-shot ('Revelation') 2001, 3 issue miniseries (1/2-2) ('Dark Depths') 2001, 2 issue microseries ('Dragon Realm') 2001, one-shot (Avengelyne/Shi) 2001, 2 issue microseries ('Seraphicide') 2002*

An angel is sent to Earth, as punishment for her sins, to help redeem mankind, seemingly by striking appallingly drawn cheesecake poses and carrying a big sword. Originally conceived by Rob Liefeld, she was a short-haired brunette who wore a skimpy, but barely feasible, tiny tunic arrangement. Devoid of almost all her angelic power (apart from a degree of superhuman strength), she had to make her way in the sinful world, aided by a young priest and hindered by her 'baby sister' Divinity, who keeps dropping in from Heaven to see how big sis is doing. All this makes it sound much more interesting than the sub-literate drivel it actually was. The second volume of the series was run in tandem with a series of one-offs either featuring inept 'swimsuit' poses, or teaming Avengelyne with other Liefeld creations or any busty heroine who happened to be passing. After Liefeld's Maximum Press imprint collapsed, and following a fleeting attempt to relaunch her at the also Liefeld-owned Awesome Press, Avengelyne fell into the hands of Avatar. They promptly launched a series of one-offs or microseries, calculated to appeal to readers with short attention spans, in which our fallen angel was given a makeover. Her hair became long, flowing and blonde, and she gained a 'uniform': a leather crucifix whose arms reach out to (just) cover her nipples and crotch, and a fishnet body stocking with, no doubt, unperceived religious connotations. Despite being riddled with cheesecake (angelcake?), the Avatar stories are better than Liefeld's own work. Avengelyne is given a network of friends and confidantes in the other Avatar heroines – Pandora, the Lookers – who function effectively as a supporting cast, and the art, while variable, generally isn't bad; Rick Lyon, for example, could get a job in proper comics if he wanted to. Still not something you should read unless you're pretty desperate, though.~HS

THE AVENGERS

Marvel: *Series one 402 issues, 23 Annuals, 5 Giant-Size, 1 Graphic Novel 1963-1996, series two 13 issues 1996-1997, series three 59 issues +, 4 Annuals 1998 to date*

Initially conceived of as a way of uniting most superheroes in the then nascent Marvel comics line, *The Avengers* has grown to incorporate almost every major Marvel superhero and plenty of minor ones besides. The combination of writer Stan Lee and pencil artist Jack Kirby created the title, teaming Iron Man, Thor, Giant Man, the Wasp and the Hulk, and reviving 1940s character Captain America in 4. Although entertaining enough, it lacked the inspiration of other early Marvel comics. 8, the best of the Lee/Kirby run, introduced recurring time-travelling villain Kang the Conqueror and was Kirby's swansong (although he returned as layout artist for 14-16). Replacement artist Don Heck never approached Kirby's dynamism, but, with inker Dick Ayers maintaining the house style, turned out adequately rendered action until 36. 1-30 are collected in three hardcover volumes of *Marvel Masterworks*, and the cheaper black and white *Essential Avengers* gathers 1-68, stopping just short of a golden era.

The first indication that the *Avengers* were anything other than superheroes by numbers came with the brave decision to replace the founding cast with three characters from the Marvel school of well-intentioned-but-misunderstood villains. Hawkeye, Quicksilver and the Scarlet Witch arrived in 16, establishing a long tradition of rotating membership (although everyone returns sooner or later). Lee relinquished the writing to Roy Thomas with 34, and Thomas established a tradition of Avengers writers taking a year or so to settle. Joined by pencil artist John Buscema with 37, he gradually became more adept and imaginative and gave a hint of what was to come with issues in the mid-50s introducing another recurring adversary, Ultron. Of particular note were 57-58*, introducing the android Vision, the first character created specifically for the title. From 69 onwards Thomas crafted stories that stand among the best *Avengers* issues to date. He introduced a take on DC's Justice League of America in both evil (70-71) and benign (85-86) versions as the Squadron Sinister/Supreme, and dealt with topics such as race-hate groups (73-74) and land rights and corporate greed (77, 80-81). It's best to look on his feminism issue (83) as well meant but misguided, although it's an entertaining superhero comic. Sal Buscema took over the pencilling from brother John until 92, and many regard the space opera of the Kree/Skrull war, largely illustrated by Neal Adams in 93-97*, as Thomas' finest moment. 93's trip by Ant-Man is stunningly rendered by Adams, but overall the story drags and suffers from a deus ex machina ending implausible even for superhero comics. It was reprinted as a miniseries in 1983. Far superior are 98-100, drawn by Barry Smith, dealing again with the fermentation of hate groups and reprinted complete in 48 of the third series.

Steve Englehart wrote from 105. Struggling initially, and suffering throughout his run from changing art teams and fill-ins, he evolved into possibly the best *Avengers* writer. His forte was mixing and matching characters to provide the thrust of the plot, then throwing in adversaries to complicate matters. Englehart's first big story was the Avengers/Defenders War in 115-118*, crossing over into *Defenders* 8-11, a portent of the multi-title crossovers to follow fifteen years later, but then a noteworthy event. He later made logical use of the time-travelling Kang, who would attack the team, retire defeated and return next issue to fight the exhausted Avengers, having rested for ten years. Kang's attempt to kidnap an Avenger destined to become the all-powerful Celestial Madonna and her subsequent transformation occupied 129-135*. It incorporated *Giant Size Avengers* 2, featuring the touching death of a team member, 3 reviving assorted 'dead' characters and concluded in the appallingly drawn Giant Size 4 (an unwelcome return for Don Heck). Having dealt with the future, Englehart changed the cast again and sent the Avengers into the past and an alternate world to meet Marvel's cowboy characters and the Squadron Supreme in 141-144 and 147-148. George Pérez débuted as penciller in 141, and would become the longest-running artist since the Buscema days, but Englehart was replaced from 152, having revived another *Avengers* mainstay, Wonder Man, believed dead since 9.

Jim Shooter, with artists Pérez, and later John Byrne, turned out a succession of fast-moving stories, mixing Thomas' flair for superheroes with Englehart's deft characterisation. The battle against a superstrong Count Nefaria (164-166) is highly entertaining, but his peak was 'The Korvac Saga', in which almost every Avenger to date combats a being determined to impose a peaceful autocracy (167,168, 170-177*). Also of note is *Avengers Annual* 7, where Jim Starlin concludes his laudable Warlock series. David Michelinie adhered to the Avengers template, producing solid stories that fell short of previous quality, with 194-196 the exception. A highspot during this run was the tenth *Avengers* annual by the team of Chris Claremont and Michael Golden, introducing future X-Person Rogue. Sadly, the subsequent return of Jim Shooter (both alone and collaborating with Michelinie) was less successful. A protracted plotline saw the gradual mental dissolution of founder-member Hank Pym, once Giant Man, now Yellowjacket. His marriage dissolves and he's later framed and jailed. It has fine moments (particularly the single issue 224 and the finale 229-230), but lacks the dynamic artwork that graced previous *Avengers* epics.

Roger Stern, from 231 onwards, was also hamstrung by lacklustre art throughout the early part of his run, but didn't lack for ideas. He bowed to popular demand by inducting Spider-Man (232), had the Vision attempt to take over the world (253-254), and returned Kang in fine fashion (267-269), by which time the old art team of John Buscema and Tom Palmer were back on board. His best story took the obvious idea that the villains always failed against the Avengers singly or in pairs, but an army should succeed (274-277*). Stern's departure heralds a dismal period during which no writer managed to stamp any personality on the title, despite consistently fine art from the Buscema/Palmer team. The situation lasts until the emergence of Bob Harras in 343. In the company of highly regarded pencil artists Steve Epting and Mike Deodato, Harras was adept at creating new adversaries, sustaining mystery and the soap-opera aspects of the title, but also at stretching a single issue of plot over five issues. Initially he wrote the most entertaining *Avengers* comics in years, his best being the one-issue examination of the Vision in 348, but his conclusions to multi-part stories consistently fail to deliver the pay-off. Longer plots see alternate-reality counterparts of the Avengers emerging to kill Sersi (355-375), and in 'The Crossing' (391-395, plus one-shots 'Timeslide' and 'The Crossing') Tony Stark near-enough destroys the team and a long-gone former Avenger returns with a vengeance. An unwelcome development is that to follow individual stories assorted issues of other titles and one-shots are necessary, and almost all the oversize anniversary issues are disappointing. By the conclusion drastic surgery was required, although if he'd been allocated more than three issues writer Mark Waid might have rectified matters. The graphic novel 'Death Trap: The

Vault' is a pedestrian affair as the Avengers team with Freedom Force to prevent the escape of dozens of supervillains.

The initial issues of the second series struggle to earn a designation of merely appalling, with daft plots, grotesque art, ill-advised character redesigns, and wretched dialogue. This combination is exacerbated by their status as a much heralded and excessively promoted relaunch under the aegis of Rob Liefeld. The arrival of Jeph Loeb as co-plotter improves matters slightly, but later writer Walt Simonson is bequeathed a complete mess that he can't rectify. The highlight of the run is the pencilling of Michael Ryan in 7.

By contrast the third series is well handled to date, and anyone whose experience of *The Avengers* extends back no further than the late 1980s will probably consider the issues by Kurt Busiek and George Pérez masterpieces. Busiek's scripts to 56 are occasionally a little too knowing, but his retro-style certainly has appeal, echoing the work of Thomas and Englehart. Pérez pencils fluid and dynamic pages, gracefully inked by Al Vey, and is always keen to illustrate the maximum number of team members. 1-3* give him that opportunity along with the chance to design medieval counterparts, without the story ever seeming crowded, as decent a sample of the run as any. 5-6 feature The Squadron Supreme, who return in the best of the recent annuals, 1998, illustrated by Carlos Pacheco. New faces include former New Warriors Firestar and Justice (1), the frankly best forgotten Silverclaw (8), DC's Beast Boy/Changeling in all but green skin, and a rather hokey update of the old 3-D Man in Triathalon (8). He's tied in to a suspicious religious cult who long outstay their welcome, and the eventual revelations about their leader (50) are not worth the wait. There are also unexpected returns for the original obnoxious Yellowjacket (30) post *Avengers Forever*, and the long among the missing Jack of Hearts (35). Jerry Ordway's filler story in 16-18 is surprisingly ordinary. Pérez departs with 34, the conclusion of a story crossing over with *Thunderbolts* 43-44, and while Alan Davis and Mark Farmer (38-43) provide decent art, there is no stable penciller until the arrival of Kieron Dwyer with 46. While Busiek is fine with characterisation and dialogue, his plots often lack twists or spectacular pay-offs, although a grinding battle with Ultron in 19-22 is well executed. A lack of direction is particularly apparent during what is to all intents and purposes Busiek's finale, encompassing 40-55, featuring the return of Kang as the most dangerous of several simultaneous problems that tie-up almost all plot threads he's set in motion. Unusually, the villain wins for once, and 51 is a good issue set in a prison camp, but overall, the story drags. Better a failure with ambition, though, than retreading familiar ground yet again. Geoff Johns writes from 57, bringing a good track record with team comics. While fine on characterisation, his first story to 60* is ordinary, and in that (and since) his focus is very much on characters thus far peripheral to the Avengers like Ant-Man, The Falcon and Jack of Hearts.~FP

Recommended: 57, 58, 71, 73-82, 85, 86, **98-100**, **116-122**, 129-132, 139, **141-144**, **147**, 148, 160-168, 170-177, 254, 267-269, 274-277, Annuals 2, 7, 10, Giant Size 2-3, series three 1-5, 10, 11, 19, 21, 22, 51

The AVENGERS: Celestial Quest

Marvel: *8 issue limited series 2001-2002*

Thanos kills various aspects of Mantis, the Celestial Madonna in order to locate her son Quoi. A number of Avengers – Thor, Vision, Scarlet Witch, Silverclaw – and Haywire from the Squadron Supreme, journey into space with Mantis to protect Quoi, who's been living with his father on Tamal, home of the Cotati. Along the way, three pirates find themselves drawn into the conflict, two granted god-like power by Thanos, the other romancing Quoi. Inoffensively drawn in a fluid, if featureless style, by Jorge Santamaria, the major problem with Steve Englehart's story is the incredibly irritating character of Quoi, but the use of Thanos is hardly innovative either.~NF

AVENGERS FOREVER

Marvel: *12 issue limited series 1998-2000**

Though dismissed as "Avengers Algebra" because of the vast number of characters and references to Avengers lore, this is, in fact, a straightforward plot with a lot of elaborate garnish.

Seven Avengers are snatched from different points in the team's lengthy history by Immortus, and enlisted in a battle to thwart the schemes of Kang, who, as usual, is trying to twist time to best serve himself, in this case, to avert his own destiny. During the course of events, our 'core' of heroes travel back, forward, and across in time to meet different incarnations of the Avengers. Penciller Carlos Pacheco and inker Jesús Meriño dextrously juggle a cast of around a thousand. Every character who has ever been in the team makes at least a cameo appearance, as do a couple of hundred who've never (as yet) been Avengers. By keeping the focus tightly on Immortus' reluctant temporal crusaders, writers Kurt Busiek and Roger Stern present an epic adventure without losing sight of the human element. Characterisation is deft and accurate, emphasising inherent emotional conflicts. Some of the time-tossed Avengers are complete strangers to each other, some well-acquainted (too well, in some cases) and have to be on their guard against disclosing each other's futures. Both script and art display an admirable clarity and strength given the myriad characters involved, and you don't, as has been asserted, need "A degree in Avengers" to read the series. Knowledge of the team's history is a bonus, and will enable you to appreciate the extra touches the creators have put into the story, but only the most cursory acquaintance with the Avengers is needed to enjoy the tale purely as a straightforward superhero saga – albeit a rather superior one.~HS

AVENGERS: Miniseries and One-shots

Marvel: 4 issue miniseries ('The Terminatrix Objective') 1993, 2 issue microseries (Avengers/Ultraforce) 1995, one-shot ('The Crossing') 1995, 4 issue miniseries ('The Domination Factor') 1999-2000, one-shot ('Timeslide') 1996, 2 issue microseries (The Last Avengers Story) 1995, one-shot ('Timeslip') 1998, one-shot ('Ultron Unleashed') 1999, one-shot (issue $1^{1/2}$*) 1999, 3 issue miniseries (Avengers Two: Wonder Man And Beast) 2000, 4 issue miniseries ('Infinity') 2000, one-shot ('The Ultron Imperative') 2001*

The Avengers have been poorly served by spin-offs, and very few are worth investigating. 'The Crossing' and 'Timeslide' are connected with an interminable story towards the end of the parent title's first run, 'Terminatrix Objective' is a fight against old enemy Kang, and 'Domination Factor' ties into a Fantastic Four miniseries of the same name. They're all poor, while the teaming of Wonder Man and the Beast, and 'Infinity' hardly stretch the imagination, although the latter stars rarely seen Avengers Moondragon, Photon, Quasar, and Tigra locating long among the missing Jack of Hearts. 'Ultron Unleashed' is a cheap way of obtaining Avengers 57, 58, 170 and 171, all very good, and 'The Ultron Imperative' is an early sidebar to the long story running in Avengers (third series) 41-55 and in hindsight an early indicator of how that story would drag. There are guest artists galore, but none nearing their peak. *The Last Avengers Story* is a dark future and slapdash story in expensive format, although Peter David fans might want it anyway, while *Avengers/Ultraforce* is a rushed re-run of *Avengers* 70 with Ultraforce replacing the Squadron Sinister. It precedes *Ultraforce/Avengers*, which can, and should, be read separately. Largely an excuse to let George Pérez draw alternate versions of Avengers and Ultraforce members, it's a decent enough, if eventually cramped plot from Warren Ellis. Alternative Avengers, and Asgardians, also feature in the bleak 'Timeslip', wherein Jim Krueger weaves a different origin for the team with other heroes on another Earth that Odin is attempting to destroy. Matt Smith's craggy art is very good, if largely bereft of backgrounds, and overall it's a spirited revision with a neat twist ending. *Avengers* $1^{1/2}$ is a curiosity prepared as if set between issues 1 and 2 of the original *Avengers* series, complete with fake ads. Roger Stern effortlessly apes Stan Lee, while Bruce Timm finds imitating Jack Kirby a little harder, but comics had moved on, and the joke wears thin after a few pages.~FP

AVENGERS SPOTLIGHT

Marvel: *20 issues (21-40) 1989-1991*

Previously *Solo Avengers Starring Hawkeye*, this also splits the pages between Hawkeye and other Avengers, the back-ups being used as try-outs for new creators. Many later worked on regular Marvel titles, but here the only exception to the appalling material is Dwaynes McDuffie and Turner's 'Acts of Vengeance' tie-ins in 26-28, which show some wit and spark. This was absent from Howard Mackie's writing on Hawkeye, but 30 institutes changes. The strip expands to occupy two-thirds of the comic, and Steve Gerber becomes writer. This is nowhere near his best work, but he immediately throws in one logical plot element, it being unlikely Hawkeye would survive a shooting. This leads to a beefed-up costume, and a vendetta against drug gangs concluded in shocking fashion in 36. Al Milgrom and Don Heck's art is adequate, but no more. The other change from 30 is continuing back-ups with USAgent (31-34) and Gilgamesh, although only the staunchest of fans – if there is such a thing as a Gilgamesh fan – are advised to seek them out. 'Avengers Reborn' is the tagline for 37-40, with Hawkeye ousted in preference for complete issues returning a neglected character for new use. The stories by Roy and Dann Thomas are universally slapdash, the best being the Greg Capullo-drawn Black Knight in 39.~WJ

AVENGERS: UNITED THEY STAND

Marvel: *7 issues 1999-2000*

An Avengers team not seen before thanks to the constraints of this being a tie-in with the Fox animated Cartoon. The team is led by Hank Pym and consists of Wasp, Hawkeye, Scarlet Witch, Tigra, Falcon and Wonder Man before the Vision kills him in 3. Most costumes have been redesigned, often with new colour schemes which jar a little. Guest stars include Black Panther in 1, 6 and 7, a clever melding of Swordsman and Black Knight in 4, Captain America in 6-7, Black Widow in 2 and 5, and not forgetting Devil Dinosaur in the last issue! For someone writing a piece of merchandising, Ty Templeton excels, making the comic more entertaining than the cartoon ever was. Derec Aucoin's artwork keeps things cartoony (as does Jason Armstrong's Kirbyesque work in 2) but is often hampered by ugly colouring. Fans of the original comic will find it hard not to be entertained by this title's light-hearted alternative reality.~SW

AVENGERS UNPLUGGED

Marvel: *6 issues 1995-1996*

An editorial decision seems to have been made that as this title sold for a third less than the regular *Avengers* comic there was little point in bothering about such standards as coherency, plot or basic artistic knowledge. Absolutely worthless.~FP

AVENGING WORLD

Bruce Hershenson: *One-shot 1973*

Avenging World was the best of the four mid-1970s Ditko solo titles. As with *Mr A* and *Wha..!?* the point of the title was to get across his right-wing views. Less of a strip than an illustrated essay narrated by the world himself, this contains some of Ditko's most startling imagery and fevered philosophy. In fact, as the comic progresses the text becomes ever heavier until we're left almost solely with Ditko's incessant ranting. Mad, but compelling.~DAR

Recommended

AVENUE D

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1991*

A collection of Glenn Head's previously self-published strips showing the sordid underbelly of New York. An excellent cartoonist, Head portrays sadly true-to-life seedy characters with brutal lives and no hope.~FP

Recommended

AVIGNON

Image: *One-shot 2000*

A fairy tale about the clockwork Avignon, who yearns to escape from the plush, but empty surroundings her creator maintains to see the wider world. This is a stylish, but melancholy, story with Jimmie Robinson's stretched figures bringing to mind the look of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Seemingly originally intended to be serialised elsewhere, that might have been a better solution, as there's not enough story here to warrant the price.~WJ

AWAKENING

Void: *2 issues ('First Cycle') 1996*

Black Hound: *1 issue ('Goethe Garden') 1998*

The first series is about the world after the Apocalypse with Earth Angels (vampires) rebelling against the angels of Heaven. One of the vampires is Johnny Angel, servant of Lusipher. In the second, it's now 2051 and Johnny has abandoned the service of others and finds himself looking after a young woman, Angeline, whose suicide attempt fails when she lands on top of him. This is a confused and confusing strip, but does have some good fine-lined drawing from creator, Chen-Jeh Chen, who is clearly not working in a first language.~NF

THE AWAKENING

Image: *4 issue miniseries 1997-1998**

A woman shot, in hospital, dreaming as she recovers, struggles to the surface only to find that someone's trying to strangle her. Released into the care of Uncle David, she's thrown off a building, but saved by a ring that seems to enable flight. There's an underlying tale of misunderstanding, love and loss explored through the surreal landscapes of dreams before the final issue unravels their hidden meaning. Creator Stephen Blue has a very detailed style reminiscent of the Schuiten Brothers in its realist approach. This is an intriguing series but its deliberately haunting images ultimately fail to deliver as strong an emotional response as the revelations would seem to demand.~NF

AWAKENING COMICS:The Everwinds Awakening War

Awakening: *3 issues 1998-1999*

Surreal tale of a confluence of realities called Everwinds and the plot to conquer them all using Virtual Reality. Steve Peters draws well but it's a little confusing having ninety-eight characters whizzing about. Full of left-over Hippie grooviness, so if you hate that you'll despise this.~WW

AWESOME ADVENTURES

Awesome: *1 issue 1999*

Intended as an umbrella title to use unpublished scripts Alan Moore had written for Awesome, only the single issue appeared, presenting what was *Youngblood* 3 under another name. It's a good superhero comic of the type Moore can seemingly turn out in his sleep, competently drawn by Steve Skroce (whose name is mis-spelled on the cover). Alas, the money ran out, and the conclusion never saw print, leaving Youngblood wiped out in both story and reality.~FP

AWESOME HOLIDAY SPECIAL

Awesome: *One-shot 1997*

For fans of *Fighting American, Youngblood, Kaboom* and *The Coven*, this special features short stories with a Christmas theme. The strips are entertaining, good-natured superhero tales with artwork by the regular teams but only Alan Moore's Youngblood offers anything more by way of plot and continuity. Otherwise, they all serve as representative samplers for their individual series.~NF

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* Available in a collected edition

AWESOME MAN

Astonish: *1 issue + 2002 to date*

Little Joey's favourite TV cartoon is Awesome Man, while his extremely bright near teenage brother has other things on his mind, and they won't progress if he has to babysit his brother. There's not inconsiderable charm to this first issue in terms of character, dialogue and art, although it might have been nice if Joe Mateo had bothered erasing his pencil lines.~WJ

The Man Called A-X

Bravura: *6 issue miniseries (0-5) 1994-1995*
DC: *8 issues 1997-1998*

A heavily armed behemoth rampages through Bedlam City, wiping out gangsters infesting the place. Apparently indestructible, the survivor of numerous deathtraps, and able to regenerate to an extent, his major concern is that he's unaware of who he is and why he's killing gangsters. Meanwhile, the local gangsters have to club together to stand any chance of dealing with him, and a newspaper reporter is on his trail. In his introduction writer Marv Wolfman compares A-X to a Hong Kong action movie, and it's certainly got that fast-paced, relentless, over-the-top feel, but Wolfman is also canny enough to avoid presenting the clichéd big bloke with bigger guns. The gangsters are colourful, and artist Shawn McManus, usually known for subtler projects, proves very adaptable. The zero issue starts to offer the explanation as to what A-X is, and slots in between 3 and 4, rather than starting the series.

At DC A-X concentrates on discovering his true identity, a plot that's a little prolonged. All the while one of Bedlam's ten gang leaders is manipulating his adversaries. It's every bit as good as the previous series, but for a stand alone sample try 5, in which there's a touching and unconventional reunion of mother and son amid the ongoing quest. It's a mystery why an action thriller this good, seemingly completely in tune with the times, was a commercial failure.~WJ

Recommended: Bravura 0-5, DC 1, 4-8

AXA

Ken Pierce: *9 issues 1982-1988, one-shot ('Color Album') 1985*
Eclipse: *2 issues 1987*

Axa leaves the comfort of her post-holocaust dome to seek freedom, and, occasionally, on missions at the behest of the dome's Director. Axa is a sword-wielding adventuress, battling the customs and prejudices of the world as much as the mutated creatures, exploitative humans and even aliens. The story of Axa's birth is told in 8, and her first boyfriend, Jon shares some adventures, but her more constant companions are Matt and Robot Mark. The nine issues reprint all of the newspaper strip, written by Donne Avenell and drawn by Enrique Romero (perhaps better known for his work on *Modesty Blaise*) that ran in the British Sun between 1978 and 1985. This includes the final, unfinished storyline in which a group of robots have taken to Robot Mark as their leader against mankind. The 'Color Album', was originally produced in Spanish by the same creative team, with Axa alone against a gang of Hell's Angels besieging a lighthouse and its father and daughter occupants. The two issue series, distributed by Eclipse, features all new stores by Chuck Dixon and Romero, as Axa and friends escort children to the Starwatchers whilst protecting them from the Engineers (1) and then return to the dome in 2. It's always good to see a strong female character in an adventure strip, but these are not the most imaginative of stories despite Romero's decorative drawings.~NF

AXEL PRESSBUTTON

Eclipse: *6 issue miniseries 1984-1985.*

Pressbutton is a demented ex-florist whose body is almost completely consumed by Vegan Green Fungus, a telepathic, slow and very well mannered carnivorous plant. Everything save one arm and his head is replaced with clunky mechanicals, including a huge shiny chopper for a left arm. As some kind of compensation, a button on his chest is hot-wired directly into his pleasure centres. His partner, Mysta Mystralis, is a thirteen year old artificially matured (she looks 21) clone, with whom he works as a licensed hitman (slash, hack, stab and chopman, actually). They find themselves the subject of an assassins' plot, accidentally catch some drug-runners and Mysta narrowly escapes becoming God, in breakneck adventures chockfull of wit and bad taste in equal measure, written with manic glee by Steve 'Pedro Henry' Moore and drawn by Steve Dillon and Alan Davis. These stories are reprinted from the UK magazine *Warrior*, as are the back-up strips, by such luminaries as Alan Moore (who, as Kurt Vile created Pressbutton as Kurt in the *Sounds* comic strip 'The Stars My Degradation'), Hunt Emerson, Brian Bolland, Dave Gibbons and John Ridgway. After this series more Pressbutton can be found in *Laser Eraser and Pressbutton*.~WW

Recommended: 1-6

AXIS Alpha

Axis Comics: *One-shot 1994*

This preview of forthcoming Axis series is a collection of short stories featuring B.E.A.S.T.I.E.S. (an armoured anti-terrorist squad), Dethgrip (an armoured thief), Shelter (a mercenary superhero team), Tribe (an armoured something or other) and W (a team of assassins that includes Why and Where). The creators are too eager to show their characters in action, but there isn't an interesting one in the bunch and only Gene Ha on Shelter offers a glimmer of promise as far as the artwork is concerned.~NF

AXIS MUNDI

Slave Labor: *2 issues 1996*
Slab O Concrete: *1 volume 2001*

In writer Ian Carney's cyber-fantasy vested interests own the worldwide web. If you're not very rich your only way into the party is to gatecrash. This is exactly what 14 year old schoolgirl Button Smith does as thug Axis Mundi. Her alter ego becomes a cult star of Unreal Estate (the web) with a following that irks plutocrats and media whores alike. The Slave Labor series was prematurely cancelled, so the collection is the first printing of parts 3 and 4. Artist Garry Marshall has a tremendous feel for cast shadow and, key when evoking virtual reality in mono, scale. Some of the references are doomed to obscurity but the political sharpness and graphic chutzpah should ensure this stays a well-remembered bash.~SW

AZ

Comico: *2 issues 1983*

Dear, oh dear, oh dear. Az is large pink alien (an Azonian), who is captured by the evil monocled Baron Stroker. There are a few nice ideas, like a cigar-smoking fish, but you can't sympathise with our pink friend as he's a violent bugger. The abysmal art only made matters worse. This is sub-standard fanzine level at best, so who would have thought Comico would grow into a respected publisher.~HY

AZRAEL

DC: *100 issues, 3 Annuals, one-shot (Azrael +) 1995-2003*

Jean Paul Valley is the avenging angel Azrael, defender and chief assassin of the ancient Order of Saint Dumas. Conditioned from birth by the System, which is manifested when he puts on his costume, Jean Paul does not really know who or what he is. This series picks up where the Batman 'Knights End' story left off, with Jean Paul living on the streets of Gotham, unsure of anything. The first storyline (1-4) gives him some companions, the drunken ex-psychiatrist Brian and Sister Lilhy, who has left the Order. As the series progresses, Jean Paul discovers more about his past, including that he was born in a laboratory and has animal genes in his makeup. 21-26 feature the fall of the Order of Saint Dumas, before Ra's Al Ghul tests Azrael as a possible mate for Talia (29-30). 34 is a *Genesis* crossover, 35 guest-stars Hitman and 40 is a 'Cataclysm' crossover. After battling Bane (36-40), then losing and re-finding Sister Lilhy and Brian, Azrael becomes 'Agent of the Bat' on the cover and in the indicia (47). 'No Man's Land' (50-61) gives Azrael a new costume (silver instead of gold) and teams him with Oracle, Batgirl and Catwoman against Nicholas Scratch and the Joker amongst others. It also introduces him to Leslie Thompkins, whose pacifism writer Denny O'Neil will use (at tedious length), in counterpoint to Azrael's aggressive tendencies for the rest of the series.

After surviving an attempt by Nicholas Scratch to frame him for murder (and a return to his old costume), Azrael searches for Leslie's missing brother who has become a fanatic and co-opted Sister Lilhy's new Azrael as his own weapon of retribution (63-75). Thereafter, another new beginning sees Harold help Azrael build his own cave as he tries to help local people, but falls prey to a mad scientist. 83 is a 'Joker: Last Laugh' crossover, reintroducing Sister Lilhy (again). After defeating a superpowered opponent, Azrael begins a descent into madness, urged on by visions of Saint Dumas, and puts his Batman costume on again briefly, before becoming the unwitting tool of a couple of con men who set out to make Azrael a popular saviour, thus lining their own pockets. Then Batman decides that it's time to take responsibility for Jean Paul's fate. The run-of-the-mill nature of the series wasn't helped by the artwork. Drawn mostly by Barry Kitson (1-28), Roger Robinson (31-33, 35-40, 42-68) and Sergio Cariello (69-100), only the last of these managed to bring any real life to their work.

The 1995 annual explains events leading up to the *Sword of Azrael* miniseries, and the 1996 annual is a tale of a future Azrael. Best issue of the whole series is the Pulp Heroes themed, 1997 annual, drawn by Jim Aparo, in which Jean Paul narrates a hard-boiled detective team up with Catwoman. Issue 1,000,000, set in the future, seems designed to confirm that Azrael is and always will be a dull-witted character. Written by O'Neil, in what was clearly meant to be a thoughtful manner, the series was simply repetitious and dull because Jean Paul as a character was effectively comatose for most of the series (O'Neil's attempt to demonstrate that Azrael was a naïve innocent). O'Neil gets to write The Question again in *Azrael +*. In this dull team-up Vic Sage and Jean-Paul Valley end up on the same riverboat when The Question is hired as bodyguard to a colonel's actress daughter, and Azrael takes an advert for her performance as an omen in his quest for self-understanding. Drawn without much life by Vince Giarrano, there's a lot of talking but nothing much actually happens~NF

AZRAEL/ASH

DC/Event: *One-shot 1997*

A cut above the standard cross-company crossover in so far as there's a decent, if unexceptional, storyline that has Azrael and Ash trying to prevent a mad Professor from killing hundreds of people. The professor is abusing the trust of a young, lost alien that thinks it's summoning its mother with the fires it sets. With a cameo from Batman and one of his old villains, Firefly and support from Oracle, Denny O'Neil makes good use of his experience with the DC characters while Joe Quesada and Jimmy Palmiotti turn in their usual, pretty, tightly-inked artwork.~NF

AZTEC ACE

Eclipse: *15 issues 1984-1985*

Doug Moench, writer on Marvel's occasionally inspired *Master of Kung-Fu*, seemed to lose all sense of proportion when granted a greater degree of editorial freedom for this series. *Aztec Ace* is an impossibly prolix time-travel yarn full of hippy dippy philosophising such as this load of old tosh from 1: "The whole thing was a symbolic realisation of time, space, history's mystery, and that which could unravel the whole ball of yarn, an onion with five layers and a nasty center – or five apples sharing the same worm-riddled core." Like wow, man. No wonder the letters page is full of people recommending Grateful Dead albums...

Moench throws away an interesting mix of time travel, alternate worlds, mythology, history and the occult on a series of hideously complicated and pretentious storylines. They're full of distracting cameos from the likes of Benjamin Franklin, Humphrey Bogart and Charlie Parker, which require great concentration for very little reward. By 13 even Moench's resolve was weakening, as our Aztec hero wearily donned a superhero costume to become imaginary 1940s hero The Crimson Comet. The passable artwork of Mike Hernandez (1, 2) and Dan Day (3-15) plays second fiddle to writer Moench's text-heavy scripts.~AL

AZTEK:The Ultimate Man

DC: *10 issues 1996-1997*

Grant Morrison and Mark Millar teamed to write a new hero for the end of the century: naïve and unworldly (he's been brought up in a Tibetan monastery), inexperienced but nevertheless bred to battle the Shadow God. While he's waiting for the latter to show up, he has to find a place for himself in Vanity, an ugly city. In 1 he's involved in the death of the city's resident superhero, Bloodtype, and becomes a target of the city's various ganglords, who don't want a superhero around. A team-up with Batman (6-7) against the Joker sets him firmly within the DC Universe. This is followed by a closer look at the Q Society that trained him, revealed to have connections to Lex Luthor. The artwork by N. Steven Harris and Keith Champagne, neither of which sound like real names, has clean lines and clever use of shadows, but faces out of costume needed work. Perhaps Morrison and Millar took too long to get to the point, although the title's humour and the lack of their familiar psychobabble was refreshing. With Aztek's cancellation his future was played out in *JLA*.~NF

B

BABE

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1994, 2 issue microseries 1995*

An unscrupulous agent (showbiz, not secret) almost runs down a naked lady one rainy night. She's seven feet tall, amnesiac, and phenomenally strong. He decides to search for her true identity, but not too hard, since there's money to be made in the meantime. The first series is lightweight, but an amiable read, polluted by the sickeningly cutesy 'Proto-Tykes' back-up. The second is so pointless and perfunctory one wonders why John Byrne bothered. Presumably the hugely successful talking pig movie of the same name will preclude a third attempt.~HS

BABYHEAD Magazine

Slave Labor: 1 *issue + 2002 to date*

A strange concoction of short strips featuring thick-lined heavily photo-referenced art, bizarre but pointless characters, heavily marketed superheroes and stories steeped in the pop culture of the early 1980s. Part scattershot satire and part wacky humour, it's not half as funny or clever as it's meant to be.~FP

BABYLON 5

DC: *11 issues 1995*, 3 issue miniseries ('In Valen's Name') 1998**

This first series is unique in the annals of comic adaptations in attempting to complement then current events in the TV show continuity. With previous base commander Jeffrey Sinclair having left Babylon 5, it's revealed that he's become Earth's ambassador to Minbari, and 1-4* focus on him there, being framed for murder. It is well connected with the TV series, being plotted by series creator J. Michael Straczynski, who also writes the first issue. Thereafter it's written by Mark Moretti, and drawn by Mike Netzer and Carlos Garzon, who are better at capturing likenesses than John Ridgway, who draws the following story arc. 5-8 are set prior to the arrival of the Shadows in the TV series and have Garibaldi discovering a Shadow base in a story that also encompasses his first meeting and adventure with Sinclair. While good, it doesn't match the first story, but the team of Tim DeHaas and Ridgway return for a Psi-Ops tale in 11. 9 and 10, written by David Gerrold, are competent, but don't match the remainder of the run. The miniseries concerns the return of Babylon 4 from the past, with Straczynski plotting and writing 1, before leaving the rest to Peter David. Mike Collins and David Roach produce the best show likenesses, but unless you're desperate for snippets of Valen's legacy in the past and then final fate of Sinclair, it's dull.~WJ

Recommended: 1-4

BABYSITTER

Slave Labor: *2 issues 1999*

Setsuko's just transferred to a new high school and wants to get on with the normal things that a normal little girl does in Japan. If only she wasn't continually hassled by devils, monsters, amok robots and their mad makers and the ubiquitous secret societies. Good thing she has her own jet-pack! Engaging insanity from Andy Rastaino who explores a complex culture from the viewpoint of someone addicted to Nippon's cartoon exports.~WW

Eddie Campbell's BACCHUS

Harrier: *2 issues 1988**
Dark Horse: *1 Special 1995**
Eddie Campbell: *60 issues 1995-2001*

This originated as a companion title to Campbell's *Deadface* series, which starred Bacchus but was much more adventure orientated, or at least as active as Eddie Campbell's stories get. After the first 30 or so issues the title has metamorphosed into a compendium of everything Eddie's ever done. There's the early Days of the Ace Rock'n'Roll Club strips (52's 'If Monkeys Learned To Fly', about teenage pregnancy scares, is among the best) through fanzine covers, to reprints of Eyeball Kid and Joe Theseus stories (*1001 Nights of Bacchus* runs in 34-43, 'Picture of Doreen Grey' in 41-47). The latter issues are more commonly made up of a couple of short new strips about everyday life, and dream encounters with his characters, backed up by a chunk of reprint and contributions from Montague Hale and Daren White. In the case of many creators, this would be worthless, but there are many gems to be scraped up from Campbell's amateur years, and he does have some sense of quality control in what sees the light of day.

Bacchus begins as a vehicle for retelling whichever Greek myths catch Campbell's magpie eye, with a certain joyous irreverence. The narrator is the 4000-year old god on history's longest bender: "It's all a bit of a blur after I invented wine". The scripting perfectly captures the simultaneously wise and rambling nature of pub conversations, and yet there is always a certain threat of violence. The Harrier story shows us the old rascal in Rome laughing at the roly-poly version of himself the Romans dreamt up. He remains firmly the anarchic god whose followers ripped people apart in their god-sent, wine-fuelled frenzy.

The first self-published issue disappoints – a *Cerebus* jam probably designed to lure readers with a bigger name – but then the pedal's down and we're off on a wild ride with 'King Bacchus' in which the old guy's local pub secedes from UK rule. All would be well if Delirium Tremens and his Screaming Habdabs weren't on Bacchus's trail, forcing him to take refuge in a handy painting. As Bacchus is chased through a world of artworks, the cleverest among the pub's citizens bring in Neil 'Scary Trousers' Gaiman to reinvent their hero as a more popular, offbeat superhero version of himself. Alan Moore pops up as the wizard who lives in the basement, as Campbell weaves fine art, fine wine and parody effortlessly into a detailed and inventive tapestry. The only downside is the art assistance from Pete Mullins, who smoothes out some of Campbell's rough and scratchy edges, and doesn't have his feel for line quality, which is a great pity. However, he's a fixture of the series so you soon get used to it.

Campbell's semi-autobiographical Alec stories begin reprints with 15 and run to 29. Alec pops up again in some of the Ace Rock'n'Roll Club stories also. Particular highlights among the many vignettes of Campbell family life that represent the new material in the later issues include 'Running a Publishing House out of the Front Room' in 47, 51's 'Ouch' where Eddie reminisces about discovering the perplexing world of American comics while in hospital as a child, and 'Monty the Dog' in 59, a slapstick comedy about a new family dog who uproots bushes, terrorises joggers by yanking down their shorts when they pass the house, and mounts the children's legs at every opportunity. Bacchus is an intensely civilised comic whose charms may bypass many readers. Lovers of spinning yarns over a few pints will adore it, however. All of the Bacchus material is collected in a series of nine trade paperbacks.~FJ

Recommended: 9-20, 41, 51, 59

BACKLASH

Image/WildStorm: *32 issues 1994-1997*

Backlash is Marc Slayton, an ex-member of Team 7. As the series starts, Slayton is employed as a teacher by Stormwatch, but when his girlfriend Diane is put into a coma by a daemonite he is forced to become a renegade in order to find a cure. He breaks Taboo out of jail hoping her inside knowledge will help. From this premise the series concentrates on Slayton's place in the scheme of things, introducing a daughter, Crimson, and a rivalry between the cured Diane and Taboo. His hitherto unknown ancestry is revealed and as a result he loses his powers, but he and Taboo are pardoned and hired by the government's Psi Department. His relationship with Team 7 continues to cause friction, however, in the WildStorm crossovers *WildStorm Rising* (8) and 'Fire From Heaven' (19, 20). From 27 a long-running story begins with revelations about Marc's father and the introduction of an ancient alien race, the Drahn. These storylines were then carried over into replacement series *WildC.O.R.E*, a team title. Written by Sean Ruffner and drawn by Brett Booth and later Juvaun Kirby (21-28) and Pete Woods (28-32), Backlash was a better than average superhero series, strong on characterisation and always seeming to possess a definite direction.~NF

BACKLASH/SPIDER-MAN

Image/WildStorm: *2 issue microseries 1996*

While conforming to most of the rules about inter-company crossovers (namely "for every one of yours you'd better include one of mine"), Sean Ruffner and Brett Booth manage to produce a pretty good story. It's about Venom being misled by Pike into believing that Taboo is somehow related to his symbiote and therefore drawing himself into conflict with Spider-Man and Backlash when he kidnaps her. The story ties in more to Backlash's than Spider-Man's continuity but is frankly all the better for avoiding any clone nonsense, and Brett Booth's artwork is excellent. Not good enough to recommend, perhaps, but well worth a look.~NF

BAD BOY

Oni Press: *One-shot 1997*

High profile, but disappointing premiere outing for cutting edge publisher Oni, that teams writer Frank Miller and illustrator Simon Bisley (with colour and letters by Angus McKie) to tell the tale of incorrigible kid Jason and his struggle against conformity. In most situations, however, that wouldn't involve being kidnapped by killer cyborgs, chemically brainwashed and made the test case for a scheme to spiritually and emotionally lobotomise humanity to produce shinier happier people that will do what you tell them to. Although competent and good to look at, it's not the best work from either creator, and Harlan Ellison did it first and better.~WW

BAD COMPANY

Quality/Fleetway: *18 issues 1988-1989**

In the future, Earth is on the verge of ecological collapse and wars are fought in space with the alien Krool for planets to migrate to. Young Danny Frank is sent as a replacement to the planet Ararat where he is almost instantly the last survivor of his unit. He is rescued by and joins the legendary Bad Company, an in-country team who are in many ways worse than the aliens they fight. The Krool are dedicated to research, mutilation and all the arts of torture, and Danny learns the horrors of war and that you can't trust a human. He's alongside Kano, Thrax, Dogbrain and Scummer, escaped experiments of the alien monsters, who would rather die free than return to their own lines. The work by Pete Milligan, Brett Ewins and Jim McCarthy was considered ground-breaking and very popular on its initial run in the UK's *2000AD*, but seems terribly dated now. The comics also feature a number of other *2000AD* strips as backups, including 'Universal Soldier' by Alan McKenzie and Will Simpson, 'Freaks' by Pete Milligan and John Higgins, and 'Tribal Memories' by Pat Mills and Riot. Titan volumes collect all stories in black and white.~WW

The BAD EGGS

Armada: *4 issue miniseries 1996*
Acclaim: *4 issue miniseries 1996-1997*

Dinosaurs as sitcom? Hasn't this been done before? Yes, and considerably better than this. Particularly feeble are the abundance of knowing references to the present; one can almost imagine the canned laughter. There are some funny moments in this story of dinosaur tearaways, particularly in the final issue of the first series, when no dinosaur other than the leads will believe the local volcano is going to blow. All in all, though, stick to the TV show.~WJ

BAD KITTY

Chaos!: *3 issue miniseries 2001, one-shot ('Mischief Night') 2001, 4 issue miniseries ('Reloaded') 2001-2002*

Catherine Bell is a cop, beautiful, blonde, bad-assed (it can usually be seen hanging out the top of her low slung, too-tight leather trousers) and on the trail of corruption in New Orleans. When she's framed for murdering her partner 'Kitty' goes on the run to uncover the Voodoo conspiracy that is crushing the city. Dreadful tosh from Brian Pulido, Steven Grant and Adriano Batista. 'Mischief Night' is part of a company crossover which examines the supernatural hi-jinks of the Bad Girls one Halloween before the second miniseries explores the repercussions as Catherine becomes involved in a war between a werewolf pack and Vampire Babe, Chastity. Joshua Dysart and Batista prove that you're never too old to be a sweaty adolescent.~WW

BAD LUCK

King Comics: *1 issue 1993*

This is such an accurate representation of 1940s comics that one almost wonders if it isn't some sort of hoax. It does seem to lack any sense of irony, but the daft plotting, simple art, illogical decisions by the protagonist and strange jumps in the story are straight from the so-called Golden Age. Why?~FP

BAD NEWS

Fantagraphics: *1 issue (3) 1988*

Following the semi-pro issues, editors Paul Karasik and Mark Newgarden brought their anthology title to Fantagraphics for one, terrific final issue, with contributions from Richard McGuire, Ben Katchor, Kaz, Gary Panter and even Art Spiegelman. It is no surprise that this reads like a slimmer version of *Raw*, but there's nothing wrong with that. Standout strips include R. Sikoryak's lovingly crafted newspaper strip pastiches and Mark Newgarden's breathtaking comics deconstruction, 'What We Like'. Pretty much the only downside to the comic was that there were no more issues, since the quality was so obviously there.~DAR
Recommended

Warren Ellis's BAD WORLD

Avatar: *3 issue miniseries 2001*

Peculiar blend of anecdote, after-dinner tale and tirade as Warren Ellis produces a veritable catalogue of the disturbing, the disgusting and the vile things that human beings choose to do. Jacen Burrows produces illustrations for short prose pieces. The patented Ellis rants and tirades are as readable as ever but one wonders how you can bemoan the venality of humanity whilst packaging it for sale.~WW

BADAXE

Adventure: *3 issues 1989*

This spin-off from *The Adventurers* recounts how the War God of Pangaea attempts to return to the world of mortals by manipulating warriors and wizards into finding a suitable body to act as an avatar. A hodge-podge of badly written and drawn *Conan*, *Jungle Book*, and *Lord of the Rings* 'homages' that is as bewildering as it is dull.~WW

BADE BIKER and ORSON

Mirage: *4 issue miniseries 1986-1987**

Jim Lawson's paen to the freewheeling *Easy Rider* lifestyle as cool drop-out Bade hooks up with Orson, a talking frog possessed by the artificial soul of an alien culture. They have meandering encounters with juvenile delinquents, mutant killer shrubs and devils from Hell. Good-humoured but unmemorable.~WW

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* Available in a collected edition

BADGER

Capital: *4 issues 1983-1984*
First: 66 issues (5-70), 1 Graphic Novel ('Hexbreaker'), 1984-1991, 4 issue miniseries (Badger Goes Berserk) 1989, one-Shot ('Bedlam') 1991
Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries ('Shattered Mirror') 1994, 2 issue microseries ('Zen Pop Funny Animal Version') 1994*
Image: *11 issues 1997-1998*

The adventures of Hammaglystwyth, a 6th century druid and the Vietnam veteran he meets in a Wisconsin Psychiatric Institution. It's an incredibly inconsistent series, all the more surprising for being written almost exclusively by Mike Baron. The Badger is a martial arts/costumed hero and one of several peculiar personalities that alternate in running the body of the very disturbed Norbert Sykes. When Ham discharges himself from the hospital, he takes Sykes and therapist Daisy Fields, abandoning his previous speciality (Weather Control) in favour of acquiring control of the 20th century's dominant power system – money. Sykes, the chosen tool of Matilda the Badger God, is charged with protecting animals, with whom he can converse, whilst Ham uses them as blood sacrifices. This makes for some good comedic moments in early issues, but as the series progresses characterisation is increasingly sacrificed to the demands of whatever gag the story revolves around. A broad supporting cast, including the many dead film stars that 'help' Badger fight a succession of martial artists, demons and weirdoes keep the fast-paced stories from becoming formulaic, as do the jaywalkers, litterbugs, lovers of loud music and animals abusers that he regularly thrashes, presumably as a vicarious thrill for scripter Mike Baron.

Badger Goes Berserk miniseries tells a better than average tale as Norbert's stepfather returns, forcing Badger to confront the events that created his multiple personalities, with different artists drawing each of Norbert's identities. The 'Hexbreaker' graphic novel has him get married and participate in a martial arts tournament run by the Rulers of the World.

Taken individually, most issues are an entertaining read but anyone hindered by a sense of logic, or with a dislike for the works of Chuck Jones, Hong Kong cinema and the Three Stooges may find *Badger* palls very quickly. As the series folded, First released a mediocre one-shot in which Norbert is re-committed to an asylum that just happens to be run by a mad psychiatrist and Badger's arch-enemy, the Roach Wrangler. For Dark Horse Baron wrote a more or less straight (gag-free) reworking of the origin tale ('Shattered Mirror') followed by a pedestrian tale of cattle mutilations and demonic college professors ('Zen-Pop Funny Animal Version'). At Image *Badger* returns to his action-humour roots in forgettable tales with all the ingredients, but little inspiration to lift them out of the category of formula writing.~WW

Recommended: 1-4, 25, 37, 39-42, 68, 'Badger Goes Berserk' 1-4, Graphic Novel

BADLANDS

Dark Horse: *6 issue miniseries 1991-1992**

It's 1963 and small-time crook and full-time patsy Connie Bremen is contacted by a former cellmate on release from jail with an offer of work. He's moved to Texas and given a job guarding the promiscuous daughter of a local businessman. It gradually dawns on Bremen he's there for a reason. Yup, it's Kennedy shooting time in Dallas. Considering the assassination shaped the American psyche, astonishingly few comic stories have used it, even as a touchstone for the times. Steven Grant and Vince Giarrano weave a compelling story around a man no longer in control of his destiny, but about to change the destiny of a nation.~WJ

Recommended: 1-6

BADROCK

Image: *2 issues, 1 Annual 1996*

The hulking teenaged member of Youngblood gets a solo series. Being written and drawn by Rob Liefeld, it's even more devoid of imagination than you might expect, being a clichéd missing-parent storyline that, despite the presence of the Savage Dragon in 2, was abruptly cancelled. The Annual, written by the usually inventive Tom & Mary Bierbaum, also disappoints. Guests the Freak Force turn up and guess what? Everybody fights! At one point, a character asks, "What's the story here?" What, indeed.~HS

BADROCK & COMPANY

Image: *6 issue miniseries 1994-1995*

Youngblood's rocky adolescent giant worked his way through a series of guest stars in this light, entertaining series. The plot involved him desperately trying to become older heroes' sidekick until they finally told him to go away and never come back, a joke that just about lasted the six issues and into the spin-off Grifter & Badrock miniseries that followed.~JC

Recommended: 3 (Mighty Man), 5 (Grifter)

BADROCK WOLVERINE

Image/Marvel: *One-shot 1996*

Very ordinary teaming of the youngest Youngblood and the oldest X-Man, incorporating a tour of the Savage Land and the mutates that appear every time the X-Men visit. As company team-up policy dictates equal opportunity, this time they're under the control of interstellar conqueror Tyrax, who mutates a few dinosaurs to pad the comic to the requisite length.~FP

BAKER STREET

Caliber: *10 issues 1988-1992*

Former police inspector and current punk Sharon investigates in an alternate London experiencing a resurgence of Victorianism amid the prevalence of rival punk gangs. Allusions to Sherlock Holmes and his world form an intriguing setting, but they're secondary to a well portrayed cast and well plotted mysteries that would work with any window dressing. 'Honour Among Punks' occupies 1-5*, a tale of forgeries and gang wars from Gary Reed and co-plotter and artist Guy Davis, whose style is detailed, expressive, confident and far removed from his amateur efforts on *The Realm*. We're in Jack The Ripper territory for 'Children Of The Night' (6-10*). It's even better, with Davis now solo and managing to shock with the identity of his killer. There's far more to *Baker Street* than mystery, though. Sharon and Susan, her straight American counterfoil, are endearingly portrayed, having a warmth never present in Holmes and Watson, and if you want more there's a short in *Caliber Presents* 9, and the 'Sketchbook', containing a wealth of background material unpublished elsewhere.~FP

Recommended: 1-10

BALDER THE BRAVE

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1985-1986*

This ties in with *Thor* 353-362, where Balder is established as a hero who has a special ability to communicate with birds. Here he's involved with the sorcerer Karnilla, the Queen of Norn, but has to leave on a rescue mission to Hel, and while he is gone the Frost Giants attack Norn and abduct Karnilla. Poor Balder, two rescue missions in the space of a single issue, with not even time between for a change of underwear. Actually, it's not a bad story, and stands on its own quite happily after a slow, Thor-burdened start. Walter Simonson keeps it zipping along, with plenty of twists and turns, with some unusual dark aspects. Sal Buscema's artwork works well, and the scenes in the giants' castle are particularly enjoyable. It's above average, but it's not essential reading.~FC

BALL AND CHAIN

Homage: *4 issue miniseries 1999-2000*

Edgar and Mallory are very much in love, and each is trapped in the Marriage from Hell. Trouble is, they're married to each other, and despite their mutual passion, they're about to call it quits when a meteorite falls out of the sky, smiting them both. Normally, this would be the perfect solution to their marital differences, but it turns out that the meteorite has given them amazing powers; as long as they stay in close proximity to each other. It's also made them "weirdness magnets", so they find their lives becoming even more complicated. Scott Lobdell's tale of wedded angst and reluctant super-heroics is fun, but just misses being a great deal better due to the limits of artist Ale Garza. Under a penciller with a better grasp of body language and facial expression, this would have been delicious. As it is, it's....okay.~HS

THE BALLAD OF DOCTOR RICHARDSON

Horse Press: *Graphic Novel 1994*

Set in the imminent future, Paul Pope's "drawn novel" is a stylish disintegration of a man's life. Doctor Richardson has a secure university tenure, but his attempts to publish are meeting with failure. A single man, on meeting a former student he throws his customary caution to the wind in pursuit of her, being drawn into situations and company far outside his cosy academic closet. This is a very accomplished character study from Pope, who is particularly impressive in detailing the bleak nature of Doctor Richardson's existence. Pope's art may not be to all tastes, being very stylised and European, and not at all helped by the detail of his lines blurring in print. There is, however, fluidity and confidence and Pope's is a rare vision and talent.~WJ

Recommended

BALLISTIC

Image: *3 issue miniseries 1995*

Kracus, the mad-god leader of the Ethreal (a race of vampire/werewolf hybrids), pursues Cyberforce's Ballistic to force her to become his queen. With the help of some of the Wetworks team and Kracus' sister, Ballistic must use the combination of her cybernetic powers and newly acquired vampire abilities to overcome Kracus' destructive urges. This is an excellent example of how to handle crossovers between different universes. Brian Haberlin connects Mother One from Wetworks' origin to the Cyberdata corporation that created Ballistic, and it's Cyberdata's search for alien technology that brings them into contact with the Ethreal from the WildStorm universe. Despite annoying tendencies to distort the human figure for the sake of a good pose, Michael Turner's artwork is very pleasing. Haberlin's script avoids a lot of the superhero clichés but fails to make much use of the Wetworks characters other than Mother One.~NF

BALLISTIC IMAGERY

Image/Top Cow: *1 issue 1996*

Uninspired, but well illustrated anthology featuring the dimension patrolling Hellcop later to progress to a miniseries, a sci-fi fantasy quest and 'Tales of Cyberforce'. Ho-hum.~WW

BANANA FISH

Viz: *7 volumes – 1998 to date*

Lacklustre, rambling and often off-key gangster thriller that began English serialisation in the anthology magazine *Pulp*. When a US soldier seemingly goes mad in the final days of the Vietnam war and starts blasting the members of his own platoon he is shot and crippled by his buddy Max Lobo. The only thing the demented grunt will say is "Banana Fish". Twelve years later, in 1985, gangland atrocity is on the increase in New York and the police are floundering. When charismatic young Gangsta Ash Lynx is suddenly embroiled in the drug schemes of his "patron" and pimp, the Godfather Papa Dino he is suddenly betrayed by his own homeys and becomes the target of every cheap thug in town. When his best friend Skip and visiting Japanese reporter Eiji are kidnapped Ash's resources are pushed to the limit to save them and himself. A permanent target now, Ash, whose brother was driven mad in Vietnam by the designer drug "Banana Fish" teams with Lobo, now a reporter, to save himself and gain revenge. Originally created as a strip for young women by Akima Yoshida, the story telling is convoluted, the crime element is vague and inauthentic, as are many of the situations, and aspects of sexuality seem to regularly overwhelm basic plot advancement. Pretty enough to look at but insubstantial and unsatisfactory.~WW

THE BANDY MAN

Caliber: *3 issues 1996*

An atmospheric curiosity, written by Stefan Petrucha, with three artists, Miran Kim, Jill Thompson, and Charles Adlard, each depicting a different time period: Creation, just before the birth of Christ, and the present day. Thompson's contributions are particularly good. The unusual subject matter includes heretical females, gnostic texts, and the mysterious title character, God's creation predating Man. It's interesting, apart from the dull present day sections.~GK

Batman: BANE OF THE DEMON

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1998*

When criminal strongman Bane ("the man who broke the Batman") decides to track down the Order of St Dumas he finds instead Talia and Ra's Al Ghul "The Demon's Head". An uneasy alliance is struck as Al Ghul's search for the order's doomsday plague triggers new yearnings in Bane; he wants Talia and he wants to be immortal like Al Ghul. Chuck Dixon, Graham Nolan and Tom Palmer produce a competent thriller, chockfull of suspense, action, intrigue and double-cross.~WW

BANISHED KNIGHTS

Image: *2 issues 2001-2002*
Dreamwave: *2 issues (3-4) 2002*

Ponderous *Warlands* spin-off about conflict among vampires, made all the more dull by the poor computer colouring and gloomy backgrounds. The four issues tell a complete story, or what there is of one, split when Dreamwave started publishing their own comics rather than producing them for Image.~FP

BANZAI

Kitchen Sink: *One-shot 1978*

Banzai was a nice collection of three underground artists – Kim Deitch, Joel Beck and Roger Brand – all of whom were on top form. Brand's 'More Innocent Times' was a typically autobiographical piece about a drug bust, whilst the best of Beck's efforts was 'The Great Comic Book Conspiracy', which featured the Mafia robbing a comic shop. Better than either, however, was Kim Deitch, whose 'Anthropomorphism' centrespread was an astonishing feat of anthropomorphism gone mad.~DAR

Recommended

The Adventures of Jinky Coronado! BANZAI GIRL

Sirius: *2 issues + 2002 to date*

With all things manga seeping into American comics it was inevitable that sooner or later the Japanese obsession with schoolgirls in provocative poses would arrive. This might have been quite a cute and well-drawn comic about a schoolgirl who fantasises about other-worldly adventures then experiences them for real. Unfortunately, though, there's the additional sordid elements of constant perky nipples and underwear shots, factors that belie the editorial page interview attempting to convince a real Asian girl is responsible for the comics.~WJ

BAOH

Viz: *8 issue limited series 1990**

Given licence to continue their bacteriological experiments after World War II, the Judas Laboratory also takes an interest in humans with paranormal abilities. One such is

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* Available in a collected edition

Baoh, who's biologically engineered to be the perfect organic weapon. Once he's freed from the clutches of Judas by a nine-year-old precognitive girl, the pair want to make their own way in the world, but the ruthless Judas aren't about to let their investments disappear. From there it's one long chase scene punctuated by occasional conflicts. *Baoh* is certainly competent and romps along at a fair clip unencumbered by what seems to be a far too literal translation, but ultimately there's nothing to distinguish the series or render it memorable.~FP

BAR SINISTER

Windjammer: *4 issue miniseries 1995*

A band of gene-spliced animal/human crossbreeds escape from the nasty corporation that designed them. They then open a civil rights can of worms by seeking sanctuary in a church, and demanding recognition as sentient beings, not private property, with violent and utterly predictable results. Spinning off from Mike Grell's *Shaman's Tears* this old tosh is well below his usual standard.~WW

BARB WIRE

Dark Horse: *9 issues 1994-1995, one-shot 1996, 4 issue miniseries ('Ace of Spades') 1996*

The *Barb Wire* movie might be an all-time turkey, although the one-shot adaptation achieves the miracle of making it seem okay, but the regular issues are of a high standard. Operating from a bar in the run-down industrial city Steel Harbour, Barb is a bounty hunter, albeit a particularly glamorous one prone to displaying acres of flesh. Despite her aversion to superpowered types they just can't avoid her. Luckily more off-beat paranormals Motorhead and the Machine are also on hand when matters escalate. John Arcudi writes a solid superhero comic, and artists Paul Gulacy (in the Comics Greatest World issue), Dan Lawlis and Mike Manley match the scripts. Barb was created by Chris Warner, but the 1996 miniseries is the first time he works on the character, and he does a fine job by and large. The fickle finger of fashion has made Barb's club a jumping hotspot, and there's a more ruthless female bounty hunter in town. She's adopted the identity of an old villain and is killing Steel Harbour's thugs, aiming to spark a gang war. Everyone has her fingered as Barb, so there's one person with a vested interest in stopping her. Unfortunately the concluding issue disappoints.~FP

Recommended: 1-9, miniseries 1-3

The BARBARIANS

Atlas: *1 issue 1975*

Contents: one below-par Iron-Jaw story, and one duff German reprint. You could surely better spend even the pittance this would cost from back-issue boxes.~ WJ

The BARBI TWINS ADVENTURES

Topps: *1 issue 1995*

Science-fiction adventure starring real life *Playboy* models the Barbi Twins. It gave writer Robert Conte the opportunity to meet the girls, and he certainly looks happy in the photograph, but one can't imagine too many purchasers were pleased with this daft and nonsensical piece of exploitation. Topps followed it up with a Barbi Twins Calendar.~FP

BARBIE

Marvel: *63 issues 1991-1995*

The famous fashion doll saunters through innocuous adventures. One of the earlier *Barbie* writers, Trina Robbins, commented on the difficulty of scripting these stories since Mattel wouldn't allow any character to have any negative traits, even minor 'friendly rival' ones like a Veronica Lodge or Chili Storm, so no real conflict could be created. Having said that, the series and its companion title *Barbie Fashion* (55 issues 1991-1995) had a loyal following. They were only cancelled due to Marvel withdrawing from the licensing agreement, not because of a lack of sales, and they regularly featured talented creators. One can't help feeling the likes of Robbins, Anna-Maria Cool, Amanda Conner, Barbara Slate and Lisa Trusiani were ghettoised because of their gender into working only on the Barbie comics. If you have to check out a Barbie try 63, the 'Flying Hero Barbie' special. Trippy.~HS

BAREFOOT GEN

Project Gen: *2 volumes 1979*
New Society: *4 volumes 1988-1994*
Penguin: *2 volumes 1990*
Last Gasp: *4 volumes 1994-1999*

When the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima Keiji Nakazawa was seven years old. He survived. By 1963 he'd become a comic artist, and in 1972 began serialising a comic featuring his autobiographical recollections of Hiroshima before and after the bomb, portraying himself as Gen. It's a monstrously powerful work, affecting in many levels. For American readers, it pulls the Japanese away from their demonised status during World War II, portraying, at the start, a vibrant community explored over two-hundred and forty pages in the first volume. They're easily recognisable people with the same basic concerns as anyone else. Most importantly, it depicts the living hell endured by the survivors via a series of horrific and memorable images. It's at this stage that you're very grateful indeed that Nakazawa has chosen to draw the story in a cartoon style.

The survivors experience small victories in the face of almost incomprehensible adversity, ignorant of the protracted deaths that await many of them. Nakazawa's story is about personal experiences, not political scenarios, so the reasons for the bombing are only covered in passing, but he doesn't flinch from displaying the inhumane treatment of Hiroshima survivors by their fellow citizens. Were the story unrelenting misery, though, it would provide a message without being nearly as readable. Throughout the horror Gen behaves in the manner of any seven year old boy, so splicing the book with moments of laughter, while his mother is portrayed as a woman of incredible fortitude with a wider experience.

In the final analysis, this is a very joyful story for much of the time, and by focusing on ordinary people it's more successful in conveying Nakazawa's message of the dangers of atomic warfare. It's a compelling read that puts the trivia of most autobiographical comics to shame.

Barefoot Gen has a complicated publishing history, with most volumes stemming from the late 1970s Project Gen translation. They originally published the entire story over two thick volumes. The same story was split into four volumes by New Society, and later Last Gasp in the USA, while Penguin published the first two of these volumes in the UK. The first 104 pages were also published as two *Gen of Hiroshima* comics.~ WJ

Recommended: 1-4

BAREFOOTZ

Kitchen Sink: *3 issues 1975-1977*
Renegade: *One-shot 1986*

The first three issues reprint many of Howard Cruse's earlier 'Barefootz' strips from various underground comix and papers, with some new stories. Barefootz is an eternal optimist living in the strange and sinful city. His closest friends are the stressed-out artist Headrack and the voracious, man-hungry Dolly, both engaging and well developed characters. The stars of the strip, though, are the myriad cockroaches who run free through his apartment, cultivated by him as friends, but usually obsessed by their own affairs, and Glory, the thing under the bed who 'makes frogs' at people she doesn't like. The cutesy style leads a lot of people to underestimate Barefootz – a fact Howard Cruse himself took a swing at on the back cover of issue 3, a 'traditional' underground pastiche cramming as many sexual, violent, and drug-related references as possible onto one page – but it's a witty, understated strip with great charm and imagination. The Renegade one-shot reprints the previously uncollected 'Barefootz' strips from the 1970s *Comix Book*.~HS

Recommended: 1-3, one-shot

BARRY WINDSOR-SMITH STORYTELLER

Dark Horse: *9 issues 1996-1997*

Large-size, large-scale work from Barry Windsor-Smith, who, it seems, has taken to comedy. Each issue contains episodes of three ongoing stories alternately occupying half the magazine. 'The Freebooters' features a character much like Armstrong (of Archer and Armstrong) in that he's an old boozer who can't fight as well as he used to, but who is being sought by a dim-witted young man who wants him to help save the world. The difference is that it harkens back to Windsor-Smith's earliest triumph through a barbarian setting. 'The Paradoxman' has a bike that travels through time and lands him in the hands of aliens at some point in Earth's past. This may or may not be real, however, because as the series ended, the character was discussing the story so far with its writer. 'Young Gods' (dedicated to Jack Kirby) begins with Heros about to be married to Celestra but going for one last drunken binge with her sister Adastra and his friend Strangehands. Despite Windsor-Smith's confounding of some expectations in maintaining a (mostly) monthly schedule for his intricate and ornate style, sales brought a premature end to the series. Conclusions are promised in some form, though, from Fantagraphics in 2003.~NF

BART SIMPSON

Bongo: *10 issues + 2000 to date*

Following the format of the *Simpsons* comic, this normally contains a lead story with one or two shorter backups. While named after Bart and concentrating on his exploits, Lisa shows up quite frequently either as the object of Bart's mischief or the means to help him escape its consequences. There are several of Professor Frink's 'Partly Probable Parables', in which Bart misuses the professor's inventions, or becomes their victim (as in 8, when he's turned part-fish). Some stories are pure fantasy (obviously beyond the fact that it's all a fantasy), as in the space and Wild West adventures in 3 and 5 respectively. There is no regular writer, though Chris Yambar or Gail Simone contribute to most issues with scripts by George Gladir and Scott Shaw! among others. The artwork preserves the look of the cartoon series, but Dan DeCarlo appeared most regularly, even though he was just providing layouts, and after his death, 8, which he laid out, was dedicated to him. The series is well produced and each issue supplies some good gags. Bart convincing Milhouse that he's invisible in 6 is notable, as Lisa's irreverent version of *Great Expectations*, taken at face value by Bart, who doesn't know any better in 8, and Ralph's entry into the *Duff Book of World Records* by forcing one-hundred-and-eighty-three lima beans up his nose in 9.~NF

BARTMAN

Bongo: *6 issues 1993-1995**

Spinning off from the Simpsons TV show and comic, this stars Bart's superheroic incarnation as he battles injustice in Springfield. One of the most successful TV-to-comic adaptations ever, this is just as funny as the real thing.~HS
Recommended: 1-6

BASEBALL Comics

Will Eisner Productions: *1 issue 1949*
Kitchen Sink: *2 issues 1991-1992*

Will Eisner's attempted introduction of a baseball-themed comic in 1949 failed, and the first issue reprints the original, featuring Eisner and Tex Blaisdell's hick from the sticks, which is a decent, if predictable story. 2 reprints a tale of more recent vintage from *Death Rattle*, and a very average *Spirit* effort. There's no issue 3, proving that forty years hadn't increased the market for baseball-themed comics.~WJ

BASEBALL GREATS

Dark Horse: *3 issues 1992*

Never materialising into the planned ongoing series, this presents biographies of Jimmy Piersall, a very good, if eccentric outfielder, driven pitcher Bob Gibson, and power hitter Harmon Killibrew. Triple A rather than major league, but a grand slam better than similar titles from Revolutionary.~WJ

BASTARD!!

Viz: *13 issues + ('Wizard' 1-2) ('Nija'3-5), ('Fighter'6-8), ('Vampire' 9-10), ('Empress!!' 11-14), 2001 to date*

Nonsensical and ponderous fantasy tales set in a world based on Heavy Metal music. The kingdom of Metallion is at war, allied to the neighbouring nations of White Snake, Iron Maiden and Metallicana in a battle against the forces of Chaos, who have established a beachhead in the conquered land of Judas. Lucien, a young washboy has the spirit of an evil wizard, Dark Schneider, bound within him. The desperate rockers free the wizard, who led the Orcs, Golems and other Chaotic riff-raff in a previous attempt to conquer humanity, as a last-ditch ploy to save themselves and the world. It's a daft mish-mash of bad boy makes good and *Lord of the Rings* with lashings of nudity and lots of big flashy fights from creator Kazushi Hagiwara, but there's no sense to it, nor any real point. Read a book and play a record instead, headbangers.~WW

BASTARD BUNNY

That Rabbit: *9 issues 1993-1996*

A bloody great skinhead rabbit in braces and docs is not yer average comics character, and he's the star of some great T-shirts. Unfortunately, when it comes to the comics the idea wasn't as funny, with writer Dave Anderson extending silly jokes and slapstick routines beyond the cause of duty. With 5 things start to improve, not least because there are finally some people able to draw working with Anderson's scripts, which are improving with every issue. David Jukes and John Moore are particularly talented artists, and there's a decent supporting character in Toot Toucan. Any issue after 6 will while away those few minutes waiting at the bar, or elsewhere. A selection of material was collected by Virgin Books.~FP

BASTARD SAMURAI

Image: *3 issue miniseries 2002*

A world of secret ninja societies and gangster-sponsored fights to the death for gamblers are laid bare. Predictably enough, when one samurai discovers some unsavoury truths, he goes rogue. It's a simple story interestingly drawn by Kelsey Shannon and Michael Avon Oeming in cartoon fashion, so numbing the violence. Shannon's colouring further adds to the mood. A simple story, stylishly told.~DB

BASTARD TALES

Baboon Books: *2 issues + 1998 to date*

Richard Marcej expels some bile from his system railing against the insipid quality of mainstream entertainment and the ubiquitous passive acceptance of it. The fantasy final episodes of long-running cartoon strips raise a smile, and the cartooning overall is of a high standard, but it's ultimately tilting at windmills.~WJ

THE BAT

Adventure: *One-shot 1992*

Pulp villain The Bat, as noted on the cover, was an inspiration for Batman, and here we have a decently written isolated house mystery. Its major failings are the art, which, while not bad, completely fails to evoke the 1920s setting and a bizarre ending. This may well be understood by those few familiar with the character, but anyone else will be scratching their head. These aren't fatal flaws, however, and *The Bat* is a diverting ten minute read with spoilt heiress Cordelia particularly well established.~WJ

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* Available in a collected edition

BAT LASH

DC: *7 issues 1968-1969*

Premiered in *Showcase* 76, Bat Lash was a fast gun with an eye for the women and an appreciation of the finer things in life. Created by Sergio Aragonés, who wrote the feature with Denny O'Neil, and beautifully drawn by Nick Cardy, the combination of humour and action is a winner. Ironically, in a fine run the best issue is 6, revealing Lash's past, at odds with other stories by being played straight. Despite high quality throughout, the feature was never fully appreciated at home, but proved very successful in Europe, particularly in Italy, where collections are easily found. Bat Lash was to return in the *Jonah Hex Spectacular* and as a back-up in *Jonah Hex* 49, 51 and 52.~FP
Recommended: 1-7

BATCH

Caliber: *1 issue 1991*

Well-drawn three-panel strip humour collection about a bachelor and his friends, written by Charles Marshall and drawn by Greg Cravens. There are some amusing moments.~DB

BATGIRL

DC: *One-shot 1988, one-shot (Batgirl Adventures) 1998, one-shot 1998, 4 issue miniseries ('Year One') 2002-2003*

The first one-shot is the story of Barbara Gordon's last case before being crippled in Batman 'The Killing Joke'. She comes to terms with a villain who terrorised and injured her, now himself the target of a criminal who kills abusers of women. There's a neat resolution of moral dilemmas that refreshingly avoids a twist ending. Batgirl had usurped the cartoon based *Batman Adventures* (12 and 18), and her own *Batgirl Adventures* is a rare multi-level comic, which can be enjoyed by youngsters while having subtext and depth to intrigue adult readers. Pitting Batgirl against Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn, courtesy of Paul Dini and Rick Burchett, it's one of the best examples of what DC's animated series can achieve. The second 1998 one-shot is part of the *Girlfrenzy* month, a pointless flashback with inconsistent art. When the most fun to be had is noticing whether the heroine is wearing heels or flats in any given panel, you know the story's in dire straits. 'Year One' follows Barbara Gordon's chance meeting with Robin at the conclusion of Robin 'Year One', which inspired her to become a costumed adventurer. Written skilfully by Chuck Dixon and Scott Beatty, the first-person narrative convincingly conveys the awestruck tone of a determined but nervous neophyte adventurer intimidated by the enormity of what she's trying to do. Mention should also be made of a sympathetic Batgirl tale in *Legends of the DC Universe* 10-11.~HS
Recommended: Batgirl Adventures

BATGIRL

DC: *33 issues +, 1 Annual, 1 Secret Files 2000 to date*

Introduced, during the 'No Man's Land' event, this Batgirl is Cassandra Cain, acquired at birth by master assassin, David Cain and raised to be his successor. Trained constantly in combat techniques, Cassandra developed an ability to read people through their physical movements, but is largely unable to communicate verbally as a result. At age eight she completes her first assassination, but realising that it was wrong, runs away from Cain, finally surfacing in Gotham. Her guilt over this act and a need to recover her fighting skills after a telepath accidentally takes them away by 'fixing' her brain, drives Cassandra into a death-wish pact with Lady Shiva. She offers to teach Cassandra on condition that they fight to the death a year later (1-25). She has few friends not only because of her lack of communication skills, but also because of her drive to prove worthy of Batman's trust. That said, Spoiler has made regular guest appearances (from 20), and after the events of 25, there is scope for increasing Cassandra's cast and giving her something to do other than fight crime. Batgirl has largely avoided crossovers, but 23, 27 and 29 tie in to the 'Bruce Wayne: Murderer' series.

Initially written by Scott Peterson and Kelley Puckett, the latter becomes sole writer with 7, though Peterson writes 26 and Chuck Dixon fills in for the 'Officer Down' crossover in 12, Spoiler in 20, and the Green Arrow (Connor Hawke) and Robin team-up in 30-32. Most of the artwork is by Damion Scott, inked by Robert Campanella, and the result is bold, cartoony, deliberately simplified, but very pleasing. Overall, this is a better than average series, that would have merited greater recommendation, if more issues had been by Peterson or Puckett, Scott and Campanella. The Annual introduces new hero, Aruna Shende, an Indian stuntwoman and shapeshifter, but is more a Batman story, though it's interestingly drawn by Mike Deodato (or his studio at any rate). The main story in 'Secret Files and Origins' reiterates what's already known, but there's also a funny, old vs. new Batgirl backup story. 1-14 are available in paperback collections.~NF
Recommended: 1-11, 15-19, 22-25

BATHROOM GIRLS

Modern Comics: *4 issues +, 1 Special ('Guide to Holiday Chaos') 1998 to date*

While sometimes crude, in both senses of the term, there's a lot to enjoy about Yvonne Mojica's gang of in your face high school girls drinking, swearing and fighting. There's even more to enjoy about her cut and paste approach to comics that includes photo strips, alcoholic recipes, ornaments, extra strips running along the bottom of the page, and plenty of cut out items. The Bathroom Girls website is a lot of fun as well.~WJ

BATMAN

DC: *608 issues + 24 Annuals, 3 80-Page Giants, 1 Secret Files, 1 Special, 1 Spectacular, 1940 to date*

Batman is one of the few American comic characters to have passed beyond the comics world into common public recognition. Wealthy Bruce Wayne is inspired by a bat flying through his window to adopt that identity as his manner of fighting crime, having trained since childhood, when his parents were murdered in front of his eyes. Created by Bob Kane with help from Bill Finger, the dark and brooding result was instantly successful, and a year after his début in *Detective Comics* Batman was awarded his own title. It begins by adding two major pieces of the myth as Catwoman débuts minus costume, which she'll get in 3, as The Cat, and also the first appearance of the Joker, indisputably created by Jerry Robinson. Despite the colourful covers, often of a patriotic nature as the USA entered World War II, *Batman*'s early issues contained dark and gritty detective-oriented stories, with the odd colourful villain thrown in. The Joker was instantly popular, and 11's cover is a classic, with Batman and Robin punching him out surrounded by giant playing cards. Kane's art quickly developed from being quite crude to sophistication, and Robinson, also a very fine artist, and with a better eye for design, drew many of the early tales. Very simple by today's standards, plots were nonetheless emphasised over all other story elements, and there's an admirable quirky quality to them. In 25 the Joker and the Penguin team up (for the first time), drawing up a deed of partnership, but each at first falls prey to his attempts to swindle the other. With Batman captured and trussed, he outwits the pair by appealing to their vanity. Other early landmarks included the first solo story of Alfred the butler in 32; and look for a very detailed origin of Batman in 47. Wacky villains and crime stories weren't enough for the fans, though, and Batman and Robin occasionally travelled into the past, such as 24's trip to ancient Rome, 32's meeting with the Three Musketeers, and a journey to King Arthur's court in 36. And, like all good superheroes, Earth wasn't their only battleground. In 41 they became interplanetary policemen battling green-skinned aliens, and 59 offered us 'Batman of the Future', in which the bat-signal was projected onto the moon! The Joker, Catwoman (with an origin in 62), Penguin, Two Face and Killer Moth remained popular villains. Many of these stories were written by Bill Finger, and Gardner Fox, Otto Binder, Bill Woolfolk and Jack Schiff also contributed, but as they were uncredited attributing writers is far more difficult than artists. By the early 1950s Robinson was sometimes still drawing Batman, with Kane only occasionally turning in a story, and the bulk of the art was being handled by Sheldon Moldoff and Dick Sprang. It was the latter's angular style and penchant for setting fight scenes on giant props that made him come to be associated with Batman more than any other artist until the 1970s.

Noting the popularity of Lois Lane in the Superman titles, Batman was given his own prying female journalist in the form of Vicki Vale, who débuted in 45, returning in 49 along with villain The Mad Hatter. She would never achieve the popularity of Lois Lane, and attempts at transforming her into a romantic interest for Batman were half-hearted, as if even among aliens and time travel this was a preposterous concept. An oddity occupied 78, with Roh Kar, the manhunter from Mars. The first Martian lawman to visit Earth was perhaps an inspiration for the début of the Martian Manhunter four years later. The story personified the increasing fantasy elements around which Batman comics were based from the early 1950s, seemingly attempting to emulate the style of the very successful Superman comics of the time. Batman's darker persona was completely eroded as everything became light-hearted, and the franchise was milked for all it was worth, a mood sealed with the arrival of Ace, the Bat-Hound, complete with mask (!) in 92. Batwoman in a bright yellow outfit in 105 was only slightly better, given a young companion, Bat-Girl, in 139. The costumed villains were gradually phased out, with only the Joker recurring regularly, and not as frequently as in the 1940s. As ever, the stories were competently produced, unique in their own way, offering decent entertainment, but far removed from the original Batman.

Readers at the time seemed to agree, and sales began a gradual decline. By the early 1960s the comic was in trouble, with Bat-Mite – an imp from another dimension who wanted to help Batman – indicative of how far Batman had strayed from his roots. In an attempt to jump start a change, Julie Schwartz was appointed editor of the *Batman* titles, having successfully revived the superhero genre from the mid-1950s at DC. He introduced a new look to Batman from 164. While Bob Kane was credited as drawing the interiors (he actually farmed out the work to Sheldon Moldoff), co-artist Carmine Infantino gave the title a new look, most significantly adding a yellow oval around Batman's chest emblem. Alfred the Butler was killed, only to be revived because he was a major part of the *Batman* TV show. Batman's stories now reverted to the old detective format, but this style didn't last with the arrival of the TV show in 1966, at which point Batman's colourful adversaries were restored to the series. While certainly pepped up, Batman's stories weren't as overtly comic as the TV episodes, though they occasionally verge on farce. These were hot sellers, but with the waning of interest in the TV show sales dropped back down again.

DC redefined many of their comics in the late 1960s, and *Batman* was no exception. The first sign of change came with 200's cover from Neal Adams, a man who was to become very important to the series. First, though, Bob Kane was bought out. His stranglehold on the title's art was over, and there was an immense contrast between his final issues and those of his successors, writer Frank Robbins and artists Irv Novick and Joe Giella. Robbins' Batman was certainly more dramatic, as was the art, and when Dick Giordano began inking Novick's pencils with 219 the new look had been clearly established. Although Robbins didn't write the more noted stories of the era, he was consistent and imaginative, and all his Batman stories are polished. Things improved still further when writer Denny O'Neil joined the team and Neal Adams began contributing interior artwork. Adams' image of Batman remains a definitive version, modern, stylish and dynamic, and he, O'Neil and Giordano remain a classic Batman creative team. A conscious decision was made to divest Batman of almost all fantasy trappings. He now operated largely at night, only rarely with Robin, and his detective skills were emphasised as he dealt as often as not with the type of criminals infesting the real world. The sight of Batman swooping from the rooftops was once again striking fear into the hearts of cowardly criminals. A new arch-villain was introduced in 232, Ra's Al Ghul, along with alluring daughter Talia, both of whom would play a considerable part in the years to come. 237's 'The Night of the Reaper' is a classic of the time from O'Neil, Adams and Giordano, with Berni Wrightson and Harlan Ellison also contributing to a story concerning revenge on a Nazi butcher. The back-up is also noteworthy, reprinting Batman's last solo adventure pre-Robin from *Detective* 37. 234 is another triumph from the same creative trio, returning Two-Face for the first time since the 1950s, 'twice as evil, twice as dangerous', as the cover tells us. If that wasn't enough, 243-245 had a classic Ra's Al Ghul story, again by Adams, O'Neil and Giordano, and 251, with Adams inking his own pencils, is the first modern-day appearance of the definitive Joker: mad, bad and decidedly very dangerous to know. This was also a growing-up period for Robin, who left for college in 217 and a back-up strip keeping readers abreast of his adventures and college life. 234-242 were forty-eight pages long, with a new Batman story leading off, followed by the Robin strip and a reprint of a classic Batman tale in the back, with 238 a hundred pages with assorted reprints. All are excellent packages for Batman fans.

Fans of pulp hero The Shadow should look for 253 and 259, in which he guested. His influence on Batman's creation in reality is nicely mirrored by an admission in the stories that Batman modelled himself on the character. 254-261 were all a hundred pages, with a new Batman story in the front and 1940s, 1950s and 1960s reprints filling the remainder. The standout story of this period was again drawn by Adams, his finale in 255, a werewolf tale written by Len Wein. Novick also left, to be replaced by Ernie Chua with 262, who portrayed Batman more as a superhero than a creature of the night, and O'Neil went with 269, initially replaced by David Reed.

This wasn't an impressive period for *Batman*. Successive short-run creators turned out adequate material that lacked an extra spark, with the contemporary Batman strips in Detective definitely the star turn. The highlights during the late 1970s are all artistic. The peculiar combination of Rich Buckler inked by Berni Wrightson can be found in 286, Mike Grell illustrates his only Batman stories in 287-290, Michael Golden draws 295 and 303, and the vastly underrated Sal Amendola illustrates 296. 300 was a special issue: 'The Last Batman Story' by Reed, illustrated by Walt Simonson and Dick Giordano. Again, art apart, it was just adequate, with an older Batman and adult Robin. Simonson was back in 312. 321 was an oasis, with Wein and Simonson turning in a very nice Joker caper. By that time Wein was writing most Batman issues, and he played a notable part in reviving Catwoman, with Selina Kyle attempting to go straight in 322-324.

A significant change occurred with 327 (until 354) as Dick Giordano became editor, bringing Gerry Conway along with him as writer. Giordano is a rare editor able to bring out the best in the most unlikely creators, and certainly worked well with Conway, whose writing was a considerable improvement on the previous several years. It was Marv Wolfman, Irv Novick and Frank McLaughlin in 332-335 who provided the era's most significant story, 'The Lazarus Affair', involving Ra's Al Ghul, Talia and Catwoman in a mystery and action-packed adventure.

332 also contained the first solo Catwoman story. In order to stimulate sales of both titles throughout the early 1980s, *Batman* often crossed over with *Detective*. Gene Colan drew 343-351, and one might imagine that if ever there was an artist suited to Batman it was Colan, with his flowing, moody artwork and distinctive night scenes. The

other regular penciller was Don Newton, who drew 354 and 356, a very good Gerry Conway story crossing over into *Detective* 520, featuring Hugo Strange usurping Batman's identity. It's Conway's final fling as Doug Moench becomes writer, and by this time Vicki Vale is back, now having a far more convincing romance with Bruce Wayne. Except he's also developing strong feelings for Selina Kyle, and the pallid and mysterious Nocturna. With all these women after him (it was probably the mask), how did he find the time to fight crime? It all comes to a head in messy fashion in 391.

368 introduces a new Robin. The previous version had now outgrown the role, and was then a mainstay of the Teen Titans as Nightwing. Jason Todd, the new incumbent, was several years younger, and lost his parents in a story told in 408-410. Editorial judgement for once was misplaced, and the revival of an adolescent Robin didn't prove as popular as expected with the readership. Letters demanding Robin's removal began arriving soon after his introduction, and their frequency and quantity increased to the point where DC agreed to let the readers decide. 'A Death in the Family*' began in 426, and rather innovatively DC ran a poll in which readers could vote as to the ending in 429. It was a close call for Jason Todd, but he was murdered by the Joker, the series being written by Jim Starlin and drawn by Jim Aparo. Many felt pandering to the immature bloodlust of the readership was marketing ploy lacking dignity.

In issues leading up to 400 Catwoman is a regular co-star, almost completely reformed, and slobby Gotham police detective Bullock is also playing a larger part, often as comic relief. Paul Gulacy draws 393 and 394, but Tom Mandrake is now regular penciller, never outstanding, but more solid here than elsewhere. 400 is a longer than usual anniversary issue in which all of Batman's major villains escape confinement, and in a series of short chapters illustrated by a stellar line-up he has to recapture them all. There's lovely art from Brian Bolland, Joe Kubert, Steve Leialoha, George Pérez, Bill Sienkiewicz and many more, although the art of Trevor Von Eeden in 401 is equally memorable, giving Batman a fine Gothic look. Von Eeden was also good on the 1992 annual (15). 404-407* is 'Batman: Year One', by Frank Miller and David Mazzucchelli. Miller returned to Batman's past to write an impressive story dealing with his early career. It also covers the past of Selina Kyle and Commissioner Gordon, who arrives in Gotham at the same time as Batman first appears, and a long-lived relationship begins. Mazzucchelli's art superbly evokes the period and the action for a must-have story. Jim Starlin began contributing both art and stories to Batman in 1987, writing 414-425, and for a man known more for his cosmic and mystical series his Batman scripts were satisfactorily down to Earth. His best was 'Ten Nights of the Beast' in 417-420, drawn by Jim Aparo, and introducing the KGBeast, a Russian stalking victims in Gotham.

433-435 have now regular artist Jim Aparo drawing a John Byrne story 'The Many Deaths of Batman', in which those who had a hand in training Batman are being murdered. Look who's introduced in 436, only seven issues after Robin's death: here comes Tim Drake, who would become the third Robin. This was in the first part of 'Batman: Year Three', Marv Wolfman's return as regular writer, with art by Pat Broderick, the last and weakest of the early-days four-parters ('Year Two' had been in *Detective* 575-578). It details Batman meeting Dick Grayson and training him as Robin. 'A Lonely Place of Dying' in 440-442 is an improvement, with Aparo returning as artist and the restoration of Robin, who first appears in costume in 442. By now Batman is once again crossing over with Detective on a regular basis, and the best of the crossovers is plotted with *Detective* writer Alan Grant, and features the Penguin in 448 and 449. The creative teams of *Batman* and *Detective* swap with 455 as Grant becomes the regular writer, bringing dynamic artist Norm Breyfogle with him. Grant's stories maintain the action, mystery and suspense, and add a welcome touch of British humour, an example being 475, with the return of Scarface, the mad ventriloquist dummy and the most successful addition to Batman's enemies in recent years. With one exception: Bane.

492-500* are chapters of the 'Knightfall' saga by Moench and Breyfogle, a massive story running through both main Batman titles in which all Batman's enemies are freed by Bane, and he becomes more and more exhausted in his attempts to recapture them. At his weakest Batman is confronted by Bane, a drug-powered powerhouse, who cripples him in 497. Bane is defeated, but by Jean Paul Vallelly, Azrael, introduced in the *Sword of Azrael* miniseries. Also raised to combat crime, he takes over as Batman, but significantly modifies the costume, incorporating armour and weaponry. The attendant publicity for the series boosted sales, and Bruce Wayne's recovery was strung out for almost two years during the 'Knightquest' (501-508*) and 'Knightsend' (509-510*) stories, crossing over into *Shadow of the Bat* as well as *Detective*. Azrael as Batman becomes increasingly more violent, to the point where he oversteps the boundaries between wrong and right, and, as we always knew he would, the real Batman returns. Sandwiched in between 511 and 512 is 0, part of the *Zero Hour* crossover.

The more notable of the annuals and specials for this era are 1984's special with Michael Golden art, the 1987 annual (11), which has an Alan Moore and George Freeman Clayface story, and the 1989 annual by Mike Barr and Jerry Ordway.

Having seen proof that committee conceived blockbuster storylines crossing between all *Batman* titles pulled in the readers, there have been several more. 'Contagion' (529-530*) and 'Legacy' (533-535) are interspersed with stories incorporating elements pertaining to DC's annual cross-company event. There's definitely a concerted effort to keep Batman dark and moody and not to let the series stray off course. Moench with new regular artist, Kelley Jones keep the tradition going, even though they're allowed to play around with characters such as the Demon (544-546). Soon the concept of the 'event' would take over, but first we're introduced to Chase, a female agent of the D.O.E – Department of Extra-Normal Operations in 550 in a story involving a new Clayface.

Gotham City experiences an earthquake in 'Cataclysm' (553-554*), followed by 'Aftershock' in 555-559* and 'Road To No Man's Land in 560-562*. 663-674* offers 'No Man's Land'. This was a devastated Gotham isolated and sealed off by the authorities after the earthquake. Many die-hards refuse to leave, especially Bat-villains such as the Joker, Penguin and Poison Ivy to name a few, all claiming their little section of Gotham. Within this framework assorted creators provide smaller stories crossing between all Batman titles, and a new Batgirl is introduced. The various trade paperbacks present this over-long saga in the correct order.

An unlikely character eventually comes to Gotham's rescue in the form of Lex Luthor, whose company rebuilds the city in record time – with dark alleyways and slums still intact of course. 576 ends editor Denny O'Neil's long association with the title. His replacement Bob Schreck has to carry on with the miscast team of Larry Hama, and artists Scott McDaniel and Karl Story, whose manga-ish style, though quite unique, just looks messy. The stories aren't memorable, and a succession of new writers don't help, maintaining a misguided attempt to change Batman into a myth, despite previous evidence of his existence (in the DC Universe of course)! In 587 Commissioner Gordon resigns in the 'Officer Down' crossover, an occurrence thankfully becoming scarce. A well constructed major one starts, though, in *Batman*: 'The 10 cent Adventure' and continues as 'Bruce Wayne: Murderer?' and 'Bruce Wayne: Fugitive' in 599-605*. As the titles suggest, Bruce Wayne is framed for murder and arrested. Not being able to prove his innocence he escapes and abandons his Bruce Wayne identity. It's left to the other cast members, to find out the truth. The conclusion is disappointing, but the whole saga was well thought out. None of the annuals during this period really stand out – usually based on a company-wide theme for that particular year. The 80-Page Giants are worth looking at though. The first two issues offer a wide selection of stories and art of the Batman cast, while the third offers a full-length saga featuring the Calendar Man written by Chuck Dixon.

As denoted above, there are plenty of recent stories available in collections, but those wanting a more general flavour of Batman through the years could try *The Greatest Batman Stories Ever Told,* which samples stories from the earliest days to the mid-1980s. For the really enthusiastic there's a similar follow-up, technically the second-greatest Batman stories ever told, but titled *The Greatest Batman Stories Ever Told* Vol II. If you're looking exclusively for very early issues, these are being reprinted in hardcover as the ongoing *Dark Knight Archives,* which have now covered up to issue 12 in three volumes.

Keeping us all on our toes as 2002 ends, Bob Schreck provided a new creative team that elevated *Batman* to the number one best selling slot. Speculation comes to mind, or thousands of Batman fans are coming out of the closet. Jeph Loeb is the writer, but, no disrespect to him, the rise in sales is due to artist Jim Lee. 'Hush' begins in 608 and involves a kidnapping with Poison Ivy and Killer Croc in for good measure. While the story isn't outstanding, there's a lot of promise. It's been years since the title looked as good as it does under Lee, who is an excellent storyteller. If only he could get away of trying to turn the soles of Batman's boots into an art form. Is he trying for a patent? Things are looking up.~HY

Recommended: 232, 234, 237, 242-244, 251, 255, 300, 321, 323, 324, 332-335, 355, 390, 391, 400, 404-407, 475

BATMAN ADVENTURES

DC: *36 issues, 2 Annuals, 2 Specials 1992-1995, 5 issue miniseries ('The Lost Years') 1998*

The stylised animated *Batman* TV series of the early 1990s is arguably the best ever TV depiction of a character originating in comics. For the comic Kelley Puckett and vastly underrated artists Mike Parobeck and Rick Burchett adopt the TV formula of simple continuity-free stories paying attention to detail and character with equally impressive results. Most issues by the regular creative team are excellent, but for samples try the début of Batgirl in 12 or three villains hijacking the title in 30. This isn't to say issues by people other than the regulars are substandard, they just fall a little short unless the TV series writer and artist Paul Dini and Bruce Timm drop by. Their *Mad Love Special* focuses on the Joker's sidekick Harley Quinn, and the attraction she has for a lunatic criminal mastermind, and was one of the best comics published anywhere in 1994. Dini and Timm return for the Holiday Special along with other animators from the TV show, and it's another treat. 'The Lost Years' bridges the gap between seasons of the TV show where the action jumped forward a number of years. Bo Hampton, known for his painted artwork, surprises with his cartooning ability, while TV writer Hilary Bader turns out an adequate script lacking the underlying humour of the better *Batman Adventures* comics. 1-12 were collected over two volumes.~FP

Recommended: 1-3, 6-10, 12-16, 18, 20, 25-28, 30, 33-36, Mad Love Special, Holiday Special, Annual 1

BATMAN AND ROBIN ADVENTURES

DC: *25 issues, 2 Annuals 1995-1997, one-shot ('Sub Zero') 1998*

Renamed to coincide with the start of the new TV cartoon, the continuity of *The Batman Adventures* resumes with a quick succession of regular villains, such as Two-Face, The Riddler, Penguin and Joker all performing under par, before hitting its stride with Robin's replacement in number 6. From then on a string of good to great stories result from Ty Templeton as the dynamic duo battle crime in classic fashion, aided on occasion (and sometimes completely supplanted) by Batgirl. Of particular note are The Harley Quinn/Poison Ivy team-up in 8, Batgirl vs. Talia in 9, Man-Bat in 10 and Bane in 11, although succeeding issues are enjoyable, none more so than the hilarious 18 when the Joker loses his sense of humour. The annuals are equally enjoyable as the first presents a sequel to 'Mask of The Phantasm' and the second relates a tale from Bruce Wayne's youth as Zatarra the Magician teaches him some useful tricks, and crosses over with *Superman Adventures* Annual 1. 'SubZero' ties-in to the Mister Freeze animated film. It moves at breakneck pace and still manages to tell a good old-fashioned Batman story, blending pathos, humour and thrills seamlessly together. What superheroes ought to be like. Gotham Adventures continued essentially the same type of material.~WW

Recommended: 6, 8-11, 18, 21, 25. Annual 1-2, 'Sub-Zero'

BATMAN & SUPERMAN ADVENTURES WORLD'S FINEST

DC: *One-shot 1997*

Paul Dini adapts the movie script he wrote with many others, while Joe Staton and Terry Beatty supply slick cartooning. The story also features many of the characters' background cast as well as The Joker and Lex Luthor. It's not quite up to the standard of the best animated *Batman* comics, but nevertheless a solid piece of entertainment.~WJ

BATMAN AND THE OUTSIDERS

DC: *46 issues, 2 Annuals 1983-1987*

At a time when Batman was moving back to his darker, more serious roots, this spin-off team title allowed a lighter feel to the Dark Knight, albeit away from his own comic. With the help of some perennial second-stringers and equally uninspired new creations, Batman escapes the clutches of Nazi-sympathiser Baron Bedlam and restores the rightful ruler to the throne of Markovia, a fictional Bavarian state. The new king's superpowered brother heads back to the US with Batman and his new pals, and together the team engage in a series of pedestrian, but generally entertaining, adventures under the creative team of Mike Barr and Jim Aparo, then Alan Davis from 22, his first American comics work. When Batman bowed out and left the others to their own devices, the comic was retitled *Adventures of the Outsiders* from 33, but survived less than a year, indicating that perhaps his presence was the only thing that had kept it going as long as it did. 'Nuclear Fear' (39-41) is worth a look if you like stories so-bad-they're-almost-good, but overall the series pretty much deserves the cheap-box obscurity that has become its fate.~JC

BATMAN BEYOND

DC: *6 issue miniseries 1999, 24 issues 1999-2001, 1 Special ('Return of the Joker) 2001*

This enjoyable, if usually undemanding comic, is set in the future and based on the animated TV series. The elderly Bruce Wayne has retired and now serves as cantankerous mentor to teenager Terry McGinnis, who wears a new Batman costume. He must balance his schoolwork and love life with superheroics, making the stories reminiscent of the early Spider-Man. It's nearly all written consistently well, and in a much more sophisticated way than the non-animation based Batman titles, by TV scripter Hilary Bader. Art on 1-3 of the miniseries is by Rick Burchett, whose elan is not quite matched by Joe Staton, who does the second half, or Craig Rousseau, who draws nearly all of the regular series, though all are far above average.

It's easy to pick up and enjoy any of the mostly self-contained and largely light-hearted issues, although if you've not seen the TV series presumed familiarity with characters introduced there can confuse. There's a good supporting cast, including a grown-up Barbara Gordon, former Batgirl, now police Commissioner, as her father was. The best villains are the Royal Flush Gang in 4 and 23. Burchett returns for the grand Justice League Unlimited story in 21 and 22, featuring a funny little monk as Green Lantern, and the sexiest Big Barda ever, which is saying something.~GK

Recommended: Miniseries 1-3, 4, 21, 22

BATMAN CHRONICLES

DC: *23 issues 1995-2001*

Extra-length quarterly Batman comic focussing on his friends, allies and environment, and his interaction with them. Each issue has at least one, usually two or three, self-contained stories, thus appealing to the more casual reader wanting the occasional Batman comic without having to cope with a multi-part story arc. A few crossover chapters do creep in, such as 4's Hitman story tying in to the 'Contagion' sequence and 20's odd and forced team-up between Catwoman and the *Relative Heroes* miniseries. Even so, generally the title can be read on its own merits in isolation from the rest of the Bat-line. It's never less than competent and readable, and has occasional flashes of brilliance. Outstanding is 5's 'Oracle: Year One', by Kim Yale and John Ostrander, which details Barbara Gordon's struggle to build a new life for herself after the events of The Killing Joke, and the untold tale of Batgirl and Robin's first meeting in 9, written by Devin Grayson with gorgeous Duncan Fegredo artwork. Charming and insightful, the story presents both characters as enjoyably gauche without making either look foolish. Brian Michael Bendis wrote his only DC story to date in 21's 'Citizen Wayne', an over-clever homage to the Welles movie. There's also a Gallery issue containing a selection of pin-ups ranging from the stellar to the mediocre, easily ignored if you're looking for story content.~HS

Recommended: 5, 9

BATMAN: DARK VICTORY

DC: *13 issue limited series 1999-2000*

Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale continue their series of stories about Batman's early years with an epic, entertaining noir mystery set over thirteen different public holidays and notable days. The emphasis, once again, is on the grim and the gritty, and 'Dark Victory' certainly owes a considerable debt to the hardboiled style of Frank Miller and David Mazzuchelli's 'Batman: Year One', still the superior model for this kind of revisionism. Loeb delivers a fast-paced, tightly structured script that juggles an impressively wide range of supporting characters and subplots, climaxing with a slightly over-familiar retelling of Robin's origin story. Sale's minimalist artwork is derivative but atmospheric, and his clear storytelling helps to sustain the momentum of some entertainingly clipped and slangy dialogue.~AL

BATMAN FAMILY

DC: *20 issues 1975-1978*

One of DC's fondly remembered giant-sized comics, *Batman Family* is nothing like as good as memory suggests. The principal strip was a Robin/Batgirl team-up that ran almost every issue, occasionally replaced by solo stories. To begin with the series was decidedly silly, with the pair battling Benedict Arnold, or getting married, but later, more serious stories are less interesting, and many issues are spectacularly dull. After a decent first issue from Mike Grell, pencillers like Curt Swan, Irv Novick, Don Heck and even Garcia-Lopez (in 3) fight a losing battle against the dreaded inks of Vince Colletta, so the strip was doomed from all sides. Until 10 each issue was padded with old, mostly 1950s, Batman reprints, but the title's salvation arrived with 11 in the form of Man-Bat. Where Bob Rozakis scripts for the lead strip were pedestrian in the extreme, on Man-Bat he proved to be a writer of real quality. The best feature was the comparatively low-key atmosphere, with as much space given to Kirk Langstrom's pregnant wife as to the villains he tangled with. Rozakis was also lucky to be paired with a succession of excellent artists in Marshall Rogers (11-13), Howard Chaykin (14) and most impressively Michael Golden (15-17, 20). Golden proved to be the star of the title, and when it converted to an even larger dollar format with 17 he graduated to the added Batman strip to fine effect. Another memorable addition was The Huntress by Paul Levitz and Joe Staton (18-20), which was fast-moving and plotted, making the last issues the best of the run.~DAR

Recommended: 18-20

BATMAN FAMILY

DC: *8 issue limited series 2002-2003*

John Francis Moore and alternating pencillers/inkers Stefano Gaudiano and Rick Hoberg grind out a competent conspiracy thriller wherein an old friend of Bruce Wayne's mother shmoozes her way into the chairmanship of Wayne Industries. She intends to gut it from within whilst her pet team of international thieves attempts to destroy the various members of Batman's "family" of assistant crime fighters. A good look at a different sort of crime caper and the weekly publication schedule concentrating on one protagonist's story per issue adds some welcome pace. Worth a look.~WW

BATMAN Graphic Novels and One-shots

Batman graphic novels and one-shots cover a vast territory, with the most common prompt giving creators the opportunity to work on a 20th-century cultural icon without being bogged down by the monthly deadlines of the regular titles. Perhaps the obvious place to begin is with adaptations of the films. 'Batman' covers Batman's origin and first encounters with a Jack Nicholson-style Joker. Visually, Jerry Ordway captures the look of the film and its actors, but Denny O'Neil can only plough through the plot. 'Batman Returns' presents exactly the same problem for O'Neil, though there's a lot more plot to play with. He sticks to the formula for 'Batman Forever' and 'Batman and Robin', and even Bill Sienkiewicz inking can't save the latter.

Concurrently with the films, DC released issues spotlighting their villains. 'Penguin Triumphant' sees the Penguin apparently going straight and living the high life in Wayne Manor, while he plots the downfall of his childhood tormentors. 'Two Face' suffers from a J.M. DeMatteis script, but Scott McDaniel, gives the dreary psychobabble a visual impact. 'Riddler – The Riddle Factory' is written by Matt Wagner, who weaves decent characterisation and good detection around the story of The Riddler's search for an old gangster's hidden stash, supported by Dave Taylor's attractive artwork. 'Poison Ivy', 'Batgirl' and 'Bane' all have clean artwork, without being special, but 'Mr Freeze', by Paul Dini and Mark Buckingham, even in retreading old ground, contains some excellent storytelling.

A frequent form of Batman graphic novels is Elseworlds tales, representing Batman as he might have been if born in different times or different circumstances – otherwise known as 'imaginary' stories. 'Gotham By Gaslight' set the trend (predating the Elseworlds tag), merging the Batman's origin with the story of Jack The Ripper in 1880s Gotham. Brian Augustyn overwrites a little, but this doesn't undermine the strength of Mike Mignola and P. Craig Russell's atmospheric artwork, which makes the story. Augustyn's sequel, 'Master of the Future', has a better script and some of Eduardo Barreto's best artwork. A madman threatens to destroy Gotham as it prepares an exposition to celebrate the dawn of the 20th century, and Bruce Wayne must decide whether to put on the costume again. In Jan Van Meter's The Golden Streets of Gotham, Batman is the son of Polish immigrants, Robin Hood-style burglar, Selina Kyle is the Mayor's daughter and cat-masked Union Organiser and Barbara Gordon is the daughter of a policeman and intrepid reporter. They battle the corruption and terrible working conditions of 1910 Gotham, in this stirring story, which subtly incorporates other elements of the Batman mythos, and whose atmospheric setting is enhanced by the dark and grainy artwork of Cliff Chiang, and Tommy Lee Edwards. 'The Devil's Workshop' teams Batman with Houdini against the Joker and a vampire. Mark Chiarello's painted artwork lets down Howard Chaykin and John Francis Moore's script, being far too static and forced. Chaykin also wrote and drew 'Dark Allegiances', set just before World War II, employing many of his usual touches, including a sordid atmosphere and racial politicking, as Bruce Wayne and Catwoman try to prevent the assassinations of Roosevelt and Hitler. It's not exactly charming, but Chaykin's flair pulls it off.

'The Blue, The Grey and the Bat' is set during the American Civil War, as Colonel Bruce Wayne disguises himself in order to flush out murderous gold thieves with the aid of an Indian called Redbird. The plot is chaotic and artist Alan Weiss, even inked by José Luis Garcia-Lopez, seems completely unsuited to the project. A much more interesting mix with real history is Max Allan Collins' 'Scar of the Bat', in which Eliot Ness puts on a cape and cowl to fight the Chicago mobs. With Eduardo Barreto providing an excellent period feel, this is definitely one of the most original Elseworlds tales. Even better is Mike W. Barr's 'Reign of Terror', set during the French Revolution and drawn by Garcia-Lopez. 'Holy Terror' is an alternative history tale postulating that Oliver Cromwell didn't die in 1658 but lived to spread his Commonwealth to the New World. As a result, America is a fiercely religious country where agitators like Bruce Wayne's parents are executed by the state, covertly or otherwise. Alan Brennert sets the whole thing up neatly, with decent artwork from Norm Breyfogle, though this is more an alternative version of the DC universe than a solo Batman story. In a similar vein, Alan Grant and Alcatena portray a 1900s Bruce Wayne as the doctor in charge of the asylum in 'The Batman of Arkham', threatened from within by Professor Crane and from without by the Joker. 'Castle of the Bat' is a classic horror story, setting Bruce Wayne on the path of Dr Frankenstein while a rival of his father's conducts his own hellish experiments on passing travellers. Mike Grell's 'Masque' is a terribly sketchy variation on 'The Phantom of the Opera', 'Two Faces' retells Dr Jekyll and Mister Hyde, while 'Nosferatu' attempts to bring German expressionist cinema to the mix with references to 'Nosferatu' itself, 'Metropolis' and 'The Cabinet of Dr Caligari'. Ted McKeever's artwork is as distorted as ever, and this looks like no other Batman comic.

The mysterious side of Batman's character lends itself to the right horror plots, so a Dracula story comes as no surprise. 'Red Rain' sees Batman aided in his fight against the vampire by the convenient Tanya, whose gift to him is exactly the power he needs to overcome Dracula. In the sequel, 'Bloodstorm', a lycanthropic Selina Kyle helps the now vampiric Batman against a serial killer Joker. Doug Moench's gothic ideas are perfectly realised by Kelley Jones (whose artwork here shows touches of Berni Wrightson and Paul Gulacy). In the final part of the trilogy, 'Crimson Mist', a resurrected Batman attempts to kill all his foes before he succumbs to his own bloodlust. These are grim fairy tales, enhanced by Moench's obvious feel for the character and surrounding mythology. It's therefore a disappointment to find that the same team don't hack it on the oddly titled 'Dark Joker – The Wild', a dark fantasy about sorcerers, flying islands and a man who turns into a bat in order to fight the evil Joker's magic. 'Batman & Demon', is also fantasy based, with Bruce Wayne is the immortal vessel of a bat demon with Alfred as Merlin. Written by Alan Grant, this is a grim tale. Sometimes the obvious settings work best, and two hard-boiled detective stories are issues are worth looking out for. Ed Brubaker and Sean Phillips have James Gordon in the role for 'Gotham Noir', while Dean Motter and Michael Lark have Dick Grayson hunt the murderer of Selina Kyle in 'Nine Lives'. 'Brotherhood of the Bat' is a more traditional imaginary story with Batman dead and Ra's Al Ghul killing millions in his absence. Taking over the Batcave, Ra's costumes his assassins as Batman to make a ruined Gotham his. His daughter Talia, however, has borne Batman's son and guides him along the path that will restore a true Batman to the city. Moench tells a good tale, but there's too much plot and not enough characterisation, while the use of eight different artists distracts rather than pleases. 'The Dark Knight Dynasty', written by Barr, and well-drawn by various artists (Scott Hampton, Gary Frank and McDaniel), presents tales of the past, present and future as two Batmen and a Batwoman fight Vandal Savage through the ages. 'In Darkest Night' asks: what if Bruce Wayne had been given Abin Sur's power ring and become Green Lantern? Little more than a mishmash of both origins, it's of no particular interest.

Comedy (and violent mayhem) is served up in 'Batman/Lobo', by Grant and Simon Bisley, in which the Joker hires Lobo to kill Batman, and, surprisingly, it's quite engaging. 'Mite-Fall' is a real curiosity, featuring the return of Bat-Mite, the impish creature out to have fun at Batman's expense. Drawn by Kevin O'Neill, it at least looks good, but the humour is way past its sell-by date and Grant's tired old jokes don't raise a smile. Finally, in this category, 'The Last Angel' is by novelist Eric Van Lustbader, illustrated by Lee Moder in a clean, sensuous style. Though not categorised as an Elseworlds tale, the death of Rupert Thorne and the distinctly different version of Selina Kyle (Catwoman) seem to indicate that it should be. In any event, it's a well-told story involving the Joker, Catwoman and an ancient mask with evil powers. An alternative to Elseworlds is Realworlds, in which comics characters are just that. In Batman: Realworlds, Charlie, slow and somewhat delusional, thinks he's Batman and tries to protect his 'Robin' from local drug dealers. Artwork from Marshall Rogers helps and the story's touching, but not convincing.

Some Batman one-shots, sometimes originally released in hardcover, sometimes just deluxe editions, and sometimes just labelled 'specials' take place within accepted Batman continuity. They may be referred to or continue from the regular comics. One of the earliest graphic novels incorporated into continuity was the controversial 'The Killing Joke', the infamous clash between Batman and The Joker in which Barbara Gordon (Batgirl) is crippled and Commissioner Gordon tortured. Alan Moore tells this grim tale alongside an origin of The Joker, contrasting his madness with that of The Batman, but reportedly was reined in by editors at DC. Brian Bolland's lovingly detailed artwork stays just the right side of glamorous. 'Arkham Asylum' suffered similar interference. Long anticipated, when it arrived it turned out to be an overwritten, pretentious exercise by Grant Morrison and Dave McKean. 'Full Circle' is a sequel to 'Batman: Year Two' (*Detective* 575-578) in which The Reaper seemingly returns from the dead for revenge. Barr produces good mysteries and Alan Davis' artwork is bold and distinctive, while there are many elements from Batman's past sprinkled throughout the story for nostalgia fans.

There was a 1995 tie-in to the 'Underworld Unleashed' series, 'Devil's Asylum', in which Batman is tempted by the poisoner, Kryppen. Alan Grant writes and Brian Stelfreeze "story-tells" (whatever the difference is) while Rick Burchett does the artwork. It's better than many crossovers, but retreads a lot of old ground. Set during 'No-Mans Land', the 'Day of Judgement' tie-in has Robin and Nightwing battle zombie gangsters whilst the 'Our Worlds At War' tie-in sets the scene for Batman to confront President Luthor over the use of federal forces in Gotham. 'The 10 Cent Adventure' (an issue costing 10¢), is an introduction to the character and a prelude to the 'Batman: Murderer' storyline running through *Batman* titles in 2001 and 2002.

'Vengeance of Bane' introduced Bane, the character integral to the 'Knightfall' storyline. Graham Nolan and Barreto produce reasonable art, and Chuck Dixon's script conveys the information succinctly, but this remains a heartless tale reading like the scene-setter it obviously is. It was followed in 1995 by 'The Vengeance of Bane II' by the same creative team. This is a better tale, making use of the past, freeing Bane from his drug dependency and from prison. Dixon creates another simplistic story in 'Blackgate' where Batman has to infiltrate Blackgate prison to prevent an escape. Joe Staton and James A. Hodgkins make a good art team on a dull story. Much the same can be said of 'Bullock's Law', in which detective Bullock is pressured not to testify in court. Alan Grant contributes a couple of titles based on conspiracy theories. 'The Abduction' toys with the idea that Batman has really been abducted by aliens and 'Dreamland' concerns government drug experiments in an underground complex. Breyfogle draws both, and the latter is the better of the two. Grant's own contribution to Batman's villains, Scarface, appears in 'Scarface: A Psychodrama' in which the Ventriloquist thinks he's escaped from his puppet. This is a good tale, made all the better by being well illustrated by Charlie Adlard. Frank Quitely's fine artwork on 'The Scottish Connection', again by Grant, with Batman investigating strange goings-on in Rosslyn Chapel, raises this above the average.

Every now and again, the mistake is made of giving Batman supernatural adventures in continuity. Neither George Pratt's 'Harvest Breed' nor Pat Mills and Duke Mighten's 'The Book of Shadows' have even the redeeming quality of decent artwork. 'Fortunate Son' does have good art from Gene Ha on a dull tale of Batman and Robin falling out over the merits of a rock singer. Hall's 'DOA' has Batman poisoned, but refusing to give up before he's rescued a kidnapped girl. The visually impressive 'Ego', by Darwyn Cooke, explores Batman's psyche (again) and 'The Hill', written by Christopher Priest, is a clever, thought-provoking story about a criminal who isn't frightened by Batman and uses politics to defend himself. 'Absolution' comes as something of a surprise, having an absorbing script by J.M. DeMatteis, about Batman's ten-year pursuit of a terrorist, who's always managed to stay one step ahead of him until she hides herself amongst missionaries in Thailand. The painted artwork, by Brian Ashmore, is also better than average, and overall this is a good, thought-provoking piece.

'Seduction of the Gun' was much praised on release because of its stance on the question of gun ownership and use. John Ostrander avoids preachiness, but the issue itself impairs any real plot, though Vince Giarrano's artwork shows occasional flashes of inspiration. 'Night Cries' is another issue-based story, this time by Archie Goodwin with painted artwork by Hampton. Goodwin handles child abuse sensibly, but once again, there's no escaping the lack of a decent plot. Concern also outweighs plot in 'Death of Innocents', about landmines, but why Batman should be considered the ideal vehicle for a story about such an issue is odd. The art is another matter. Staton inked by Sienkiewicz is an unlikely marriage made in heaven though they're wasted on this. Dini and Alex Ross' treasury sized 'War On Crime' isn't quite as moralistic, but the didactic intent overwhelms any attempt at complexity. 'Digital Justice' is another failure, full of high-tech babble and hideous computer-generated artwork by Pepe Moreno. As you might expect, the 'Batman 3-D' graphic novel is in 3-D. It's an unexciting adventure in which Batman's villains are trying to outdo each other in the murder of a millionaire. There are also 3-D pin-ups and a reprint of a rare Batman story produced during the original 3-D craze in 1953. 'Scarecrow 3-D' uses 3-D for just a few scenes to show the effect of Scarecrow's fear drugs in what is effectively a Robin solo story.

There's a sequence of graphic novels concerning Batman's relationship with Ra's Al Ghul, The Demon. 'Son of the Demon' and 'Bride of the Demon' are both written by Barr and take up the idea, from an earlier, non-continuity special, that Batman and Ra's daughter Talia are lovers. Both have plenty of action as Batman spoils Ra's Al Ghul's plan to recreate the world in his own image. The first ends with the birth of Batman and Talia's child, and the second with the conception of Ra's' own offspring. Jerry Bingham has never bettered his art on 'Son of the Demon'. Tom Grindberg on 'Bride', by contrast, does a bad Neal Adams and gets the look completely wrong, as he does so often. 'Birth of the Demon' is by The Demon's creator O'Neil, and concerns the character's origin. It should probably not be considered part of continuity since it involves a dying Batman being revived by Ra's Al Ghul's Lazarus Pit, which is what has kept him alive for centuries. Nevertheless, it's not a bad tale and has the advantage of Breyfogle's best artwork on Batman. Ra's Al Ghul also turns up in 'The Chalice', by Dixon and John Van Fleet, which concerns an uninspired conflict over the Holy Grail, but does at least have better painted artwork than usual.

There are two Secret Files issues – 'Villains' and 'Gotham City' – that are primarily pin-ups and facts about characters and places, but they do each have a lead story, the Catwoman meeting with the new Batgirl by Scott Peterson and Paul Ryan in the latter, being the better of the two. The final category contains Batman's team-ups with other characters. *Batman/Demon* by Grant and David Roach, sees the pair joining forces to battle a devil worshipper and the devil he's trying to bring to Gotham. It's a facile excuse for taking Batman to hell, complete with guilty vision of the dead (his parents, Robin). It's not unentertaining, just a waste of time. 'The Poison Tomorrow' teams Batman with Green Arrow, and is O'Neil at his most moralistic as Poison Ivy plans to poison the world to save it. The supernatural elements of *Batman/Phantom Stranger* and *Batman/Deadman* sit uncomfortably with Batman's character, despite the efforts of Grant with Arthur Ranson and James Robinson with John Estes respectively. 'Plus: Arsenal' is a straightforward teaming of Batman with the ex-Green Arrow sidekick against the KGBeast, while *Batman/Nightwing*: 'Bloodborne' is just confused and ugly.

Batman and the Incredible Hulk is undemanding, but overall avoids the clichés common to company crossovers, and has smooth artwork by Garcia-Lopez. *Batman/Captain America*, by John Byrne, is better, if only because it's set during World War II. The Red Skull tricks the Joker into helping him steal atomic weapons and the plot's going swimmingly until the characters are called upon to out-fly a nuclear blast. Still, there are some good touches for nostalgia buffs. *Daredevil/Batman* spends too much time on the obligatory fight between the heroes and their personal antagonism, but Batman/Daredevil (by Grant and Barreto), with Scarecrow and the Kingpin is better. *Batman/Spider-Man* features a battle of wits between the Kingpin and Ra's Al Ghul, largely playing down Spider-Man's participation. *Batman/Punisher* and *Punisher/Batman* form a two-part story that sees The Punisher visit Gotham in search of Jigsaw and run into first the Azrael-Batman and then the real Batman. In the meantime, Jigsaw has teamed with the Joker. O'Neil on the first half is restrained but Dixon goes for big gun battles. On the art front, Barry Kitson and James Pascoe do creditable work on O'Neil's script but John Romita Jr and Klaus Janson make a very unappealing meal of Dixon's. Overall an oddity not worth seeking out unless you're a completist. *Batman/Spawn*: 'War Devil' and 'Spawn/Batman' aren't related, and you know you're in trouble when one of them needs three writers. It's a fiasco that involves Gotham being the site for the return of the dead. Janson's art is suited neither to Batman nor to Spawn. Todd McFarlane has the sense to have Frank Miller to script for him, and the Image issue is more successful, but since most of the issue consists of Spawn and Batman fighting each other (understandable in context, although a bit of a cliché), it's not exactly a long read. *The Darkness/Batman*, despite being produced by committee, is better than average and takes place in continuity for Jackie Estacado, who's ordered to kill Batman, but ends up betraying his 'family'.–NF

Recommended: *The Golden Streets of Gotham, Gotham By Gaslight, Gotham Noir, Holy Terror, The Killing Joke, The Last Angel, Master of the Future, Mr Freeze, Nine Lives, Red Rain, Reign of Terror, The Scottish Connection, Son of the Demon*

BATMAN:THE LONG HALLOWEEN

DC: *13 issue limited series 1996-1997**

Building on the success of the *Legends of the Dark Knight* Halloween Specials, this is by their regular team of Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale. Set during Batman's early career, the series concerns itself with a serial killer, nicknamed 'Holiday', apparently out to destroy a particular Mob family. Each issue takes place on a different holiday (Christmas with the Joker, Valentine's Day with

Catwoman) and over the course of the year, most of Batman's foes make an appearance. The series considers the disagreements between different Mob families, and how the Mob came to lose control of Gotham to the growing number of 'Bat-villains'. Loeb makes good use of the supporting cast with a major sub-plot concerning the relationship between Batman/Bruce Wayne, James Gordon and Harvey Dent, both before and after the latter becomes Two-Face. Sale's artwork has come on by leaps and bounds and, with its references to Miller and Toth, seems perfectly suited to the Batman.~NF

Recommended: 1-13

BATMAN Miniseries

DC: *2 issue microseries (Batman/Grendel:'Devil's Riddle', 'Devil's Masque') 1993, 3 issue miniseries ('Jazz') 1995, 4 issue miniseries ('Black and White') 1996*, 2 issue microseries (Batman/Grendel: 'Devil's Dance', 'Devil's Bones') 1996, 3 issue miniseries (Batman Vs Wildcat) 1997, 4 issue miniseries ('Bane of the Demon') 1998, 4 issue miniseries (Batman/Toyman) 1998-1999, 2 issue microseries ('Dark Knight of the Round Table') 1999, 2 issue microseries ('Book of the Dead') 1999, 6 issue miniseries (Batman/Huntress: 'Cry For Blood') 2000*, 3 issue miniseries ('Outlaws') 2000, 4 issue miniseries ('Haunted Gotham') 2000, 3 issue miniseries ('The Doom that Came to Gotham') 2000-2001, 2 issue microseries ('The Ankh') 2000-2001, 3 issue miniseries ('Hollywood Knight') 2001, 2 issue microseries ('League of Batmen') 2001, 5 issue miniseries ('Turning Points') 2002 3 issue miniseries (Batman/Deathblow) 2002**

DC/Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries (Batman Vs Predator) 1991*, 4 issue miniseries (Batman Vs Predator II: 'Bloodmatch') 1994*, 4 issue miniseries (Batman Vs Predator III: 'Blood Ties') 1997* 2 issue microseries (Batman/Aliens) 1997, 4 issue miniseries (Batman/Tarzan: 'Claws of the Cat-Woman') 1999, 2 issue microseries (Batman/Hellboy Starman) 1999, 3 issue miniseries (Batman/Aliens II) 2003*

DC/Fleetway: *one-shot (Batman/Judge Dredd: 'Judgement on Gotham') 1991, one-shot (Batman/Judge Dredd: 'Vendetta in Gotham') 1993, one-shot (Batman/Judge Dredd: 'The Ultimate Riddle') 1995, 2 issue microseries (Batman/Judge Dredd: 'Die Laughing') 1998-1999**

Batman's archetypal nature seems to lend the character naturally to a variety of situations and milieu, both within and outside his regular comic continuity, but this very familiarity, and the abundance of supporting characters, has meant that individual creators' treatments can produce material of widely varying quality. 'Bane of the Demon' tells of the criminal strongman's alliance with Talia and Ra's Al Ghul ("The Demon's Head") and a search for a doomsday plague. Chuck Dixon, Graham Nolan and Tom Palmer's competent thriller contrasts harshly with the action packed but plot-free *Batman Vs Wildcat*, who team to crush an illegal Pay-Per-View pit-fighting scheme only to end up beating the stuffings out of each other. Dixon, Beau Smith, Sergio Cariello and Art Thibert do their best not to tax our brains whilst pandering to our dark sides, unlike Larry Hama's tense *Batman/Toyman*, dealing with a deaf boy abducted by the insane toy maker who thinks the child has compromised his latest scheme. Anthony Williams' art is competent, and each chapter has a different inker and a different narrative voice, with the silent 3, the deaf boy's tale, amazingly effective. Dixon and John Van Fleet tell a moribund tale of an Egyptian Wizard's daughter in 'The Ankh', who after being trapped for thousands of years in a tomb is released to begin a campaign of theft and possibly mystic murders. The pretty pictures fail to disguise a vapid and predictable plot, unlike 'Outlaws', by Doug Moench and Paul Gulacy, a high-octane action thriller that deals with a corrupt federal task-force moving into Gotham with a mandate to take down all costumed vigilantes. 'Jazz' is an eccentric looking crime caper from Gerard Jones and Mark Badger that concentrates on the Dark Knight's detective skills, and concerns the mysterious return of a be-bop legend long believed dead, and the measures persons unknown undertake to return him to that state.

'Cry For Blood' by Greg Rucka, Rich Burchett and Terry Beatty is a well produced yarn that has the Huntress re-examine her tragic origins, and with the help of the enigmatic Question and his mentor Richard Dragon re-define who she is and why she does what she does. *Batman/Deathblow* is a confused and cynical muddle from Brian Azzarello, Lee Bermejo, Mick Gray and Grant Goleash, as the ultimate Black Ops specialist hits Gotham City on the trail of a pyrokinetic super spy. By contrast, 'Black and White' is a spectacular showing from comics' greatest talents, producing short complete tales without benefit or hindrance of colour. Ranging from poignant ('Good Evening Midnight' by Klaus Janson in 3) to tragic (Bruce Timm's 'Two of a Kind' in 1) to the just plain weird ('The Third Mask' from Katsuhiro Otomo in 4) these highly personalised stories show why Batman continues to grip the public consciousness. The success of the miniseries lead to the institution of a regular black and white back-up series in the back of *Gotham Knights*. 'Turning Points' is also an excellent and different sort of anthology, with each issue dealing with a different period of Batman's career, produced by a different team and in an appropriate style for each era.

Matt Wagner's Grendel fits well with the Batman mythos. Hunter Rose is the world's greatest criminal and seeks out the Batman as a challenge, in the first microseries, a well conceived and executed tale of opposites. The sequel features Grendel's thematic successor Grendel Prime, who travels from the future to acquire the skull of Hunter Rose, which is on display in Gotham City. Prime is an almost unstoppable physical force who tests Batman's abilities to the limit.

Elseworlds tales are set outside continuity and can therefore place the character in any situation imaginable, and there isn't the knowledge that Batman will always survive. 'The Doom That Came To Gotham' is a classic horror pastiche. In 1928 millionaire recluse Bruce Wayne returns from a twenty year sea voyage with surviving crew Dick, Jason and Tim, in time to fall foul of the witch Talia as she tries to revive her dead father and return the Dark, Slithery Gods from the Outer Abyss to control of Earth. Set against the backdrop of a Gotham City founded on an act of dark magic that has a singular tragic effects on the lives of the wealthy, writers Mike Mignola and Richard Pace produce a moody masterpiece stylishly illustrated by Troy Nixey and Dennis Janke. Magic also features in the moronic 'Haunted Gotham', a tale of a city plagued by evil sprits, fought by Bruce Wayne's parents and with Bruce trained from birth to battle these ghosts as Batman. 'Dark Knight of the Round Table', by Bob Layton and Dick Giordano is a pretty but vapid adventure that sets the character in the time of King Arthur, with Wayne's parents murdered by Morgana LeFay's bat demon as the catalytic force that sets the orphan on his vengeance trail. Another tack is to diverge at some stage from accepted continuity. In Moench and Mark Bright's 'League of Batmen', Ra's Al Ghul has killed his arch foe and devastated the world with plague, but his grandson, child of Bruce Wayne and Talia, organises an international team of caped crusaders to save humanity. 'Book of the Dead' stipulates Batman's parents were archaeologists murdered to prevent their solving the "Riddle of the Ages". When Bruce Wayne funds a project to prove the gods of Egypt were in fact aliens, it precipitates a dull rehashing of every B-movie cliché of the last twenty years. Movies also feature in the excellent 'Hollywood Knight' with Layton and Giordano telling a taut, post-war crime thriller as independent film producer Byron Wyatt directs and stars in the movie serial Batman until a rival studio tries to murder him. His subsequent derangement and quest for justice makes for a cracking read.

The co-ventures with movie and licensed properties are a mixed bag. The three Predator tales suffer from an inescapable feeling of inevitability. Unlike characters in a *Predator* movie, and even more so in the *Predator* comics, the cast of *Batman* have not the slightest hint of expendability. Batman and Co are always going to win, and won't get lastingly damaged in the process. In the first

Dave Gibbons and Andy and Adam Kubert spin a yarn of gangsters and boxers falling foul of the invisible hunter. In II a rogue Predator stalks Gotham hunted by its own kind, whilst Batman finds himself the target of a $5,000,000 hit. By Doug Moench and Paul Gulacy, it's the pick of the bunch, better than father and son Predators stalking Batman and Robin in the predictable and tension-free 'Blood Ties', which shoe-horns Mr Freeze in to coincide with the release of the fourth Batman movie. *Batman/Aliens* by Ron Marz and Bernie Wrightson at least yields some focus to other characters before the inevitable conclusion, as Batman invades a Mayan Temple, while the long delayed sequel by Ian Edgington and Staz Johnson pits the Dark Knight against an Alien that's been entombed in a Gotham City basement for seventy-five years. *Batman/Tarzan* is an uninspired period quest to lost cities in search of evil white men and lost treasures, but *Batman/Hellboy/Starman* is a moody, atmospheric tale of magic wielding Nazis who kidnap Ted Knight (the original Starman) just as Batman must contend with the Joker's latest slaughter spree. Good thing Knight's son is also a superhero, and that Government agent and good demon Hellboy is in town too. Enjoyable stuff from James Robinson and Mike Mignola, but casual readers will need a scorecard for the less well-known characters.

Batman transfers readily to the blackly humourous world of Judge Dredd and the similarities in their characters means the jokes and one-liners work double-duty. 'Judgement On Gotham', from Alan Grant, John Wagner and Simon Bisley traps Batman in Mega-City 1 whilst Judge Death and the Scarecrow prepare to unleash genocide on Gotham, whilst 'Vendetta' is little more than an incredibly long fight between Dredd and Batman, drawn this time by Cam Kennedy. 'The Ultimate Riddle' is illustrated by Carl Critchlow and Dermot Power and is another punch-up, this time at the bidding of an alien sportsman, whilst the oft-delayed 'Die Laughing', illustrated by Glenn Fabry (1) and Jim Murray (2) teams the Joker and the Dark Judges as they attempt to slaughter the 10,000 inhabitants of a sealed Megasphere.~WW

Recommended: 'Black and White'1-4, 'Hollywood Knight' 1-3, 'Outlaws' 1-3, 'Turning Points' 1-5

BATS, CATS & CADILLACS

Now: *2 issues 1990*

A vampire, a werecat and a wererat don't make for your everyday buddy team. Written as light comedy, it never really gels, with the characters little more than gag delivery vehicles, and the gags not good enough to distract from that fact.~FP

BATTLE

Atlas: *70 issues 1951-1960*

A general war anthology title that featured 'Buck Private O'Toole' in early issues. The anthology format means there are contributions from some excellent artists, including EC stalwarts Bernie Krigstein in 21 and 23, Jack Davis (49), John Severin (28, 32, 34) and Al Williamson (55, 67, and 68, inking Jack Kirby). Others to be found include Russ Heath (6), Joe Maneely (4), Angelo Torres (59) and plenty of Kirby in the late issues. Combat Kelly and Combat Casey were briefly featured in 60-62. Although it survived Marvel's great bout of cancellations in 1957, the greater need for *My Girl Pearl* in 1960 killed Marvel's only remaining war title.~SW

BATTLE ANGEL ALITA

Viz: *9 issue limited series ('Part One') 1992-1993*, 7 issue limited series ('Part Two') 1993*, 13 issue limited series ('Part Three') 1994-1995*, 7 issue limited series ('Part Four') 1995*, 7 issue limited series ('Part Five') 1995-1996*, 8 issue limited series ('Part Six') 1996*, 8 issue limited series ('Part Seven') 1996-1997*, 9 issue limited series ('Part Eight') 1997-1998*, 6 issue miniseries ('Last Order Part One') 2002-2003*

Alita is a cyborg with little memory except for her knowledge of the Panzer Kunst, a very powerful fighting technique. In the world of the Scrapyard, Alita is reconstructed by Ido, a refugee from the floating city of Tiphares – everyone wants to go there but it's fiercely protected. There's plenty of opportunity in the early series for Alita to show off her fighting abilities, whether against rogue cyborgs or in the Motorball arena. After the death of her boyfriend Hugo at the end of Part Two she seeks her own death in this arena, where the most powerful cyborgs work in teams to race around a circuit. Part Three contains this storyline but is also the story of the champion Jashugan, whose victories come with a higher and higher cost to his health. Part Four features the return of Zapan, the rogue cyborg from Part One, determined to destroy Alita and the whole of the Scrapyard if it won't surrender her to him. Part Five sees a new direction as, searching for Ido, who's been taken prisoner by an old colleague, Alita becomes a member of an élite force in service to Tiphares. She's a bodyguard on a nuclear-powered train until it's attacked and destroyed. Part Six continues the search, with Alita now accompanied by her new friend Figure. The final two Parts conclude the series as Alita encounters mad scientist Desty Nova and his son Kaos / Den. She finally uncovers her own origin as well as that of Tiphares just before, it seems, the whole world will be destroyed by Nova's machinations. 'Last Order' picks up the story in the middle of the last part, and creates an alternate ending, beginning with Alita's memories, as she is being reborn, of Yoko and Erica being forced to walk through a minefield until they're saved by a female warrior using the PanzerKunst.

Yukito Kishiro's artwork is what draws you to this tale, although as the series progresses his characterisation and storytelling grow in depth, increasing our understanding of the whole situation but politicising and adding emotion where it had been lacking. Part Four shows a growing maturity, being mostly a big fight but containing seeds of emotional and physical rebirth. Where the artwork also increases in ambition in the later parts, the scripts have a lighter touch too, as Kishiro's confidence increases and touches of humour are allowed to shine through.~NF

Recommended: Part Four 1-7, Part Five 1-7, Part Six 1-8, Part Seven 1-8, Part Eight 1-9

BATTLE CHASERS

Image/Cliffhanger: *4 issues 1998**
Cliffhanger: *4 issues (5-8) 1999-2001*
Image: *1 issue (9) 2001*

A text-book example of how to screw up a good thing big time. Joe Madureira concocted an appealing brew combining elements of Tolkein, Star Wars and the Roman Empire to good effect. He introduced an intriguing, although hardly original, cast including an aged wizard, young neophyte, an enormous battle robot who loves nature, and a woman with the biggest breasts in the world. It was well dialogued by the previously unknown Munier Sharrieff, and Madureira's impressive action pencils inked by Tom McWeeney completed a stylish and enticing package. The mistake? The gaps between issues grew longer and longer, eventually alienating an absurdly loyal audience beyond redemption. What there is should still be worth investigating for fantasy fans. 1-5 are the best issues, and a relatively complete story, with 1-4 available in two collected editions, and Adam Warren applies his manga style to short stories in 6 and 9.~WJ

BATTLE CLASSICS

DC: *1 issue 1978*

An attempt by DC to earn a bit of extra pocket money by reprinting some of their vast library of war stories. It teams their main World War II characters – Sgt Rock, Mlle Marie, Johnny Cloud and Jeb Stuart – and was intended to initiate an ongoing series. As it débuted, though, swingeing cuts were being applied to DC's entire line and there was only ever the one issue.~HY

BATTLE FOR A THREE DIMENSIONAL WORLD

3D Cosmic Publications: *1 issue 1982*

Definitely the novelty in 1982, long term 3-D comics enthusiast Ray Zone covers the main developments in the history of 3-D, and the Jack Kirby artwork is separated for the 3-D viewing. Typically Kirbyesque hero figure Stereon is despatched to pivotal moments in the lives of those who perfected the 3-D process and prevents their destruction from second dimensional 'flatties'. It's a painless educational pamphlet, and if you've ever wanted to see Jayne Mansfield in 3-D, this is your opportunity. You will need 3-D glasses, though.~FP

BATTLE GIRLZ

Antarctic: *6 issue miniseries 2002*

Mech Girl Yunna arrives on the planet, Arlan, and is immediately attacked by Blood Hand Assassins. Rescued by the Priestess and Eevi, the Mighty Girl, she's welcomed as the newest recruit to Special Imperial Security and is introduced to her team-mates, Gadgeteer, Temptress, Vamp and their leader, Sasa Rai, the Saintly Perfect Goddess. Together they must shop, learn more about each other and overcome the interplanetary threat of Geneszorr and his villainous minions. Nothing too serious, then about this light-hearted action romp, full of big robots, magic and scantily-clad, beautiful, female warriors, all delineated in a decorative, manga style by creator, Rod Espinosa. It's fun, but Espinosa's too fond of the grand gesture (there are too many single panel pages), which, attractive as they may be, upset the flow of the narrative.~NF

BATTLE GODS: Warriors of the Chaak

Dark Horse: *9 Issue limited series 2000-2001**

A confusing blend of science-fiction, Mexican Wrestling and Mayan mythology as a disparate band of professional fighters in 2065AD seek entrance to the Chaak, the Tournament of the Gods, against a backdrop of approaching armageddon. It's well illustrated by sole creator Francisco Ruiz Velasco, but its just *Mortal Kombat* with Mexican accents.~WW

BATTLE GROUP PEIPER

Tome Press: *One-shot 1997*

Scholarly examination of the actions of a German Panzer commander who executed American P.O.W.'s during the Battle of the Bulge. A workmanlike fact-based piece from Wayne Vansant.~WW

BATTLE OF THE PLANETS

Image/Top Cow: *5 issues + 2002 to date*

In the near future an apparently alien device rampages through a city, and the only people able to stop it are a previously untested group of genetically modified pilots. There is also a covert organisation on Earth plotting global domination and infiltrated into positions of power. This is based on the late 1970s cartoon series fondly remembered by thirty-somethings of the present day, and every effort is made to merge nostalgia with the current tastes of the comic market. There's a smooth animation gloss to the art, decently distinguished pilots and enough intrigue to keep the comic interesting for some while yet.~FP

BATTLE OF THE ULTRA BROTHERS

Viz: *5 issue miniseries 1993-1994*

If you find the sight of paint drying dangerously over-stimulating, this may be the comic for you. Normally you would expect moments of excitement in stories of 120 foot high Ultra Warriors fighting space-going monsters that are larger still, but have no fear. The Warriors, with their blank, insectoid eyes, are unburdened by any detectable personality and if you didn't know they were the heroes, you would take them for an evil robot army. It's only the marginal notes that let you know they're impressively tall, since they're never drawn against anything that's normal human scale. Yes, this is the cure for your insomnia, as long as you don't start wondering why Viz ever felt the need to translate Mamoro Uchiyama's manga original.~FC

BATTLE POPE

Funk-O-Tron: *12 issues + 2000 to date*

Delightfully blasphemous tale of the World's last Pope from Robert Kirkman and Tony Moore. When God finally judges the Earth and takes the Saved to Heaven, there's an awful lot of people left standing around looking surprised, none more so than the lecherous and brutally violent reigning Pontiff. Things get worse as the doors to Hell open and a horde of Devils move in to lower property values. After a bar-fight the Pope is killed by a demon while he's boffing the barmaid, although Jesus Christ is able to blow the murderer away. God then resurrects the Pope, buffs him up like a superhero and sends him back to clean up the world for humanity – with Jesus as his gun-toting, bumbling sidekick. Along the way they pick up a few helpers, St Michael, a Demon and Santa Claus as they begin the never-ending battle to save the unsalvageable. Originally intended as a miniseries, the project was immediately extended by producing themed one shots that carried on the numbering: 'Shorts' (5), 'Mayhem' (6), 'Mayhem II' (7), 'Shorts II' (8), 'Shorts III' (9), 'Christmas Pope-tacular' (10) before beginning another story-arc ('Wrath of God' 11-13). There's also an affiliated Saint Michael miniseries, and collections appear when enough material has been produced. Overall, well done, but probably on the top of many people's "to be banned" list.~WW

BATTLE TIDE

Marvel UK: *4 issue miniseries 1993, 4 issue miniseries 1993*

"Tag Team Wrestling Inter-Galactic Style!" screams the cover blurb, and that's about all you need to know. Death's Head II and Killpower co-star, Psylocke and Sabretooth guest star. Series two is more of the same, but with only the Hulk getting between Killpower and Death's Head.~HS

BATTLE TO THE DEATH

Imperial: *1 issue 1987*
Eternity: *2 issues (2-3) 1987-1988*

In order to rule Japan, Inspector Tanasa, with samurai warriors and the weapons of an ancient alien race at his command, has raised the dead with the Flame of Life, but is thwarted by a band of ninjas led by Lieutenant Katsu. At which point, the aliens appear and whatever sense there was is ditched for the sake of ludicrous comedy. Writer, John Arcudi, and artist Jim Rohn (1-2) may not appreciate being reminded of their part in this, as there's little good to be said for it, other than that it ended when it did, albeit unfinished.~NF

BATTLEAXES

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 2000*

Sword and sorcery served up with a twist by Terry LaBan and Alex Horley. Four female warriors and an apprentice druidess seek their fortunes as mercenaries in the kingdom of Birzenia, currently at war with the barbarian Tenguts. There's a lot of sex and violence, but it's supported by a well-crafted tale and earthy artwork from Horley, whose pencils are far more attractive than his painting.~NF
Recommended: 1-4

BATTLEFIELD ACTION

Charlton: *74 issues (16-89) 1957-1966 (16-62), 1983-1984 (63-89)*

Pedestrian anthology war comic with little to recommend it other than the occasional name artist, such as Sam Glanzman and Pat Boyette. 84 features reprints from Jack Kirby, Bill Draut and Al McWilliams and looks as if it might be a leftover 1950s Prize comic.~WW

BATTLESTAR GALACTICA

Marvel: *23 issues 1979-1981*

Based on the post-*Star Wars* TV series, *Battlestar Galactica* was launched in *Marvel Super Special* 8, with the TV pilot adapted by Ernie Colón. The subsequent ongoing title was a cut above your average tie-in comic, thanks mainly to Walt Simonson's regular appearances as penciller.

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* Available in a collected edition

Although his blocky style didn't produce the greatest likenesses he was well suited to drawing the dog-fights, and there were plenty of them in issues 4, 5, 11-13, 15-20 and 23. The last remnants of space-faring humanity are fleeing across galaxies, hotly pursued by the evil robot-like Cylons. Their mission: to find the legendary home of mankind without leading the Cylons there to massacre whoever they may find. Their motley fleet of small craft is protected by the Galactica, which is crewed by the usual bunch of white-toothed young people, crusty old blokes, cute kids with pageboy haircuts and comedy aliens. Walt Simonson's scripts brought a heart-warming touch to the book without getting as mawkish as the series itself. She developed the characters well. As in the TV series most adventures centred around staid but sexy pilot Apollo (who just happened to be the son of Adama, the Battlestar's commander), his spunky sister Athena and his devil-may-care best buddy, Starbuck, a gambling womaniser with a cheeky grin. There was more space to develop the struggle for power between the military Battlestar and the secular Grand Council, although this was used chiefly to generate plot ideas.~FJ

BATTLESTAR GALACTICA

Maximum Press: *4 issue miniseries 1995*, 3 issue miniseries ('The Enemy Within') 1995-1996, 3 issue miniseries ('Starbuck') 1995-1996, 3 issue miniseries ('Apollo's Journey') 1996, one-shot ('Journey's End') 1996, one-shot ('Special Edition') 1997, one-shot ('The Compendium') 1997*

Having liked the TV series as a kid, Rob Liefeld decided to revive the comic using various Maximum Press regulars to flesh out his concepts. Leaving Earth, Apollo goes through a long dark teatime of the soul when his wife and Starbuck die, but remember kids, this is comics. He gives in to his 'dark side', discovering psychic powers just in time to save the Galactica from the Cylon's allies The Nomen to whom he's conveniently given it while evil. If one explains that this miniseries is written by the actor who played the character in the 1970s, Richard Hatch, that might explain a lot. It's drawn by Hector Gomez and coloured in the horrible plastic computer style that makes everything look slimy. In 'Starbuck', the show's most popular character grows long hair and womanises his way through a band of resistance fighters on the moon, while being tormented by a sadistic prison camp commandant. Gomez inks the first issue himself and it's not a wise decision, but he's far superior to the other bunch of artists who fill in on the rest of the series in that he can draw perspective and mostly humanoid bodies. The nadir is 'Journey's End', drawn by two incompetent pencillers and finished by 3 inkers, who put no effort (and no background) into illustrating Liefeld's plot. Liefeld himself unerringly confuses an already muddied pond by having the Galactica transported into the future and then into it's own past to save itself. Or something. Utter toss.~FJ

BATTLESTAR GALACTICA

Realm: *5 issues 1997-1998*

Realm took the third shot at producing the further adventures of the Last Survivors of Humanity as they flee across uncharted space from a relentless mechanoid foe. All the cast regulars are in evidence as they search for fuel ('Law Of Volahd' in 1-2) and allies ('Prison Of Souls', 3-5). The obvious love that creators James Kuhoric and Chris Scalf have for the TV show isn't infectious, resulting in uninspiring stories, and the full painted art is meticulous lacks, but lacks punch.~WW

BATTLESTONE

Image: *2 issues 1994*

Trips through the memory of the former Brigade member, largely relating to the *Youngblood* and *Spawn* continuities. When our hero wakes up from his cold sleep, he fights... Unhhhh... too boring... blacking out.... (thud)...Zzzzz...~HS

BATTRON

NEC: *3 issues 1992*

A series that surely sank without trace on the appalling and unrepresentative covers. Anyone purchasing 1 on the basis of the (poorly depicted) naked woman draped behind a sheet would surely be put off by Wayne Vansant's tale of a French Foreign Legionnaire named Battron during World War II. Despite featuring a travelling brothel, it's sober fare, extremely well drawn in Vansant's nigh-photo-realist style, but very dry and slow-paced in the telling.~WJ

BAY CITY JIVE

WildStorm: *3 issue miniseries 2001*

Pastiche of 1970s "Blacksploitation" and Kung Fu movies featuring white cop Halloran and righteous Bad Mutha Nathan 'Sugah' Rollins (no, really!) as they try to keep a dimension busting jade idol out of the hands of Mad Scientists, gun-totin' gangster dirtbags and the inevitable clan of easy-to-kill ninjas. Stick your tongue in your cheek and it's a hoot.~WW

BAZOOKA JOOLS

Com.X: *3 issues + 2000 to date*

Jules is a streetwise teenager embroiled in a high-tech conspiracy that leaves her conjoined with a symbiote. Naturally the nasty corporation want their tech back, but Jules isn't keen on their methods. To her advantage is the fact that the symbiote makes her very tough and gives the ability to generate and operate really big guns. One major side-effect is that using her powers makes her breasts inflate to huge and unmanageable proportions. If this is supposed to be an ironic or subversive subtext it's subverted by its own medium, as the end result is still a sexy blond with massive jugs shooting big guns. Not nearly as entertaining as you might think.~WW

Bobby Benson's B-BAR-B RIDERS

Magazine Enterprises: *20 issues 1950-1953*

Based on the radio show of the same name, this concerned adventures on a modern-day ranch. Owner Bobby Benson is a kid, and most of the ranch work is done by the foreman Tex Mason, conveniently leaving Bobby and his friends Harka, Irish, Waco and Windy Wales free to get into scrapes. When Tex has finished running the ranch he's usually called upon to get them out of trouble as well. As if this wasn't enough, he also finds time to star as the Lemonade Kid in the back-up strip, an FBI Agent pitted against would-be world-conquerors and the like. Other back-up strips included Ghost Rider and Red Hawk. While fighting bank robbers and rustlers for the most part, Bobby also managed to get involved with Fifth Columnists and evil scientists from time to time. The first thirteen issues were drawn by Bob Powell; Dick Ayers continued *Bobby Benson* and drew the first *Ghost Rider* episodes.

14 has a famous horror cover featuring shrunken heads, marking the series' move away from straight Western stories to compete with the rising number of crime and horror titles. The B-Bar-B riders also featured in *Model Fun* and *Best of the West* (Magazine Enterprises 1951-1953). In 1990 AC Comics published a black and white one-off reprinting three of Powell's B-Bar-B stories and one Red Hawk back-up strip.~NF

BEAST

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 1997*

Former New Mutant Karma drags Cannonball and The Beast along as she attempts to free her long vanished and genetically altered brother and sister from the clutches of villains Spiral and Viper. It's a moronic excuse for a story. Stick it in a cage and throw peanuts at it.~WW

BEAST BOY

DC: *4 issue miniseries 2000*

The former Changeling is given a run-out under his original name. Once a TV star as well as a Teen Titan he finds life after cancellation harder than he anticipated, particularly as someone is impersonating his shape-changing abilities to murder people. The art by Josue

* Available in a collected edition

Justiniano is very good in places, but otherwise it may satisfy fans of the character, but is hardly essential.~WJ

B.E.A.S.T.I.E.S.

Axis: *1 issue 1994*

A well drawn but practically content-free package from Javier Saltares as a mysterious team of heroes in animal themed high-tech armour posture and flex. Before anything could happen the comic ran out of pages.~WW

BEAUTY & THE BEAST

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1985*

No, not the TV show, nor the Disney Movie, nor even the classic fairytale that inspired both. Rather, this is the X-Men's Beast, with Dazzler unconvincingly roped in to play Beauty. Our mismatched couple, who start a torrid romance just for this series that is never referred to again in the X-canon, fall foul of a secret organisation which kidnaps mutants and forces them to participate in gladiatorial combat and...urrrgh...ackk...coma....~HS

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

First: *2 issues 1989-1990*

Spin-offs from the mid-1980s TV show about the unlikely romance between a crusading social worker and a bestial subterranean whose deformed exterior hides a noble spirit. Okay, they're 'girlie' comics: pretty, soft-focus, soft-centred and sentimental, but they're lovingly illustrated by Wendy Pini and more satisfying and coherent than the irrational show that generated them.~HS

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

Innovation: *9 issues 1993*

The soppy romantic TV series gets another run through comics, this time adapting episodes, beginning with the pilot stretched over the first three issues. Mike Deodato produces decent likenesses among the adept but static artwork. The stories are taken from the original scripts, so there are some scenes that weren't in the screened versions to attract fans of the series. Those who aren't already fans are likely to find this saccharine and ridiculous.~FP

Disney's BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

Marvel: *13 issues 1994-1995*

Marvel had a limited license to produce Disney Comics in the mid-1990s to promote the faltering film company's current or forthcoming TV enterprise. *Beauty and the Beast* is set before the movie's conclusion when the lovely and good Belle is living in the Beast's enchanted castle and acting as his librarian. In an uncharacteristic move, writer Barbara Slate eschews the usual complete story or stories per issue in favour of a continuing storyline (1-4) with the monster slowly coming to love Belle. The soap opera elements continue all through the run as Belle teaches the Beast to read and they grow ever closer, in a perpetual set-up for the last ten minutes of the movie. Artist Cosme Quartieri does a more than competent job keeping the mushy stuff interesting looking. A good effort if short on thrills.~WW

Stan Shaw's BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1993*

There's no beauty in this art-wank adaptation of the traditional fairy tale.~FP

BEAVIS AND BUTT-HEAD

Marvel: *28 issues 1994-1996*

Despite 1-8 being collected, this is a staggeringly bad tie-in to the MTV cartoon featuring two generation zero saddoes nerding their way through life. Masturbation and fart jokes with the monotony broken up by clips and specially drawn snippets of Marvel heroes and villains acting as equivalents to the music videos on the TV show. Total Doo-Doo, Man, Heh-Heh.~WW

BECK & CAUL Investigations

Gauntlet: *4 issues, 1 Annual 1994*
Caliber: *2 issues (5-6) 1995*

Jonas Beck, a centuries-old werewolf, and 'Caul' Guillane, a young Cajun psychic, form an uneasy partnership to fight evil when they're both involved in trailing a succubus serial killer to the Underside. Reginald Chaney manages some neat twists on established ideas of supernatural beings, but his dialogue is plodding and expository, and the plot over-dramatic. In 3 they go up against a child-killing witch and then Caul reinvestigates the mysterious disappearance of her brother. There are some nice touches, but ultimately Paul Kowalski's overblown art, which looks like a bad 1970s Neal Adams rip-off, is enough to put anyone off, with its distorted faces, hackneyed poses and gimmicky panel arrangements. A 1994 special reprinted the first two issues.~FJ

BEDLAM

Eclipse: *2 issues 1985*

Collections of short horror pieces by Stephen Bissette and Rick Veitch, not to be attempted while in the vicinity of food. The quality is uneven, though each issue has its moments, such as 'Cell Food' in 1 (truly nightmarish), and 'Banana Planet' and 'Arena' in 2.~FC

BEDLAM

Chaos!: *One-shot 2000*

Having accidentally freed the eight families of evil from their prison, a young Native American is transformed into the immortal, time-travelling, skull-faced Bedlam when he touches the Chaos Shield, which had served as the prison's lock. Hunting the families, he's joined unexpectedly by the demonic Carnelian, who offers her companionship and assistance. David Brewer's artwork is uninspired, but writer, Steven Grant, has some fun with the time travel and treachery.~NF

BEER AND ROAMING IN LAS VEGAS

Slave Labor: *One-shot 1998*

Humour title about a slacker barman trying to retrieve a stolen video tape from a house surrounded by a tall wall, and his attempts to get over it. Not very funny, and not very well drawn.~DB

BEER NUTZ

Tundra: *3 issues 1991-1992*

Picture three versions of *Cheers'* Cliff Claven and you've hit on Bink, Humphrey and Luther, three sad cases who substitute boastful bar conversation for friendship. This isn't subtle, but Wayno's observations are funny, especially the illustrated synonyms for defecation in 1. 3 spotlights another loser, social retard Howie, also seen in 1, and his comic collection.~FP

BELL'S THEOREM

Catalan: *3 volumes 1987-1989*

A scientific proposition has it that hidden variables have to be present in matter, and that for quantum mechanics to work a matter is influenced not only by forces in the space and time it occupies, but in other potential places it might occupy. Taking this idea, Matthias Schultheiss begins to extrapolate creative ideas from it. Volume one begins with a convict, Shalby, being offered freedom if he'll take part in some medical testing. In the course of the experiment his consciousness becomes merged with someone else and he finds he's part of someone else's past. The second volume ('The Connections') covers his continuing search for his own identity in an inner landscape during psychotic seizures, and in volume 3 ('Contact'), having discovered

some of the secrets of what's going on, he finds himself on the run in Hamburg with mysterious U.S. agents on his tail. His new 'memories' lead him to a haunting conclusion in a forgotten Nazi submarine. However the story's by no means as simple as a mere plot outline suggests. A great deal of the atmosphere of dislocation and menace is created by Schultheiss' beautiful artwork, but many readers will find the content indecipherable.~FJ

Before the Fantastic Four: BEN GRIMM AND LOGAN

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 2000*

Action spy adventure story, set before Ben Grimm became the Thing and Logan joined the X-Men. Both are in the military and are sent to Communist Russia to investigate a secret weapon. This is a very silly story, and so lightweight that writer Larry Hama must have had to nail the pages to his desk to work on them. Only for the very young, or those with severe head injuries.~DB

BENZINE

Antarctic: *7 issues 2000-2001*

One of the earliest proponents of American Manga was Ben Dunn and this is his attempt to create a Japanese style anthology with comics and comics-related material (e.g. articles on Nazism in Japanese comics, American manga creators and a manga comics list/price guide). Dunn himself is involved with many of the serials, *Tiger-X* (a re-imagination of the film Red Dawn with giant robots, 1-4), The Lightning (2), Broken Axis (4-5), The Redeemers (6-7) and The Adventures of Swimmer (6-7). Other strips include 'Asrial's Salusian Armored Corps' (a *Ninja High School* spin-off) by Holly Daughtrey and Hiro-San (1, 3, 5), 'Tomorrow Man' by Kevin Gunstone and Terry Pallot (1-2) and 'The Happyness Plan' by Jeremy Forrester (6-7).

The overall quality is barely average, the artwork in particular being very inconsistent. The most accomplished strip is a Warrior Nun Areala story in 5 by Gunstone and artist Jon Haward.~NF

BEOWULF

DC: *6 issues 1975-1976*

Another of the mid-1970s DC barbarian strips. Despite writer Mike Uslan's credible plotting it's hard to read American idioms such as "I owe him one" or 'In a pig's eye it is!' coming from the mouth of a character from popular European folklore. Ricardo Villamonte's artistry is similarly inconsistent, but on the whole passable. Result: forgettable.~SW

BERLIN

Black Eye: *4 issues 1996-1998*
Drawn & Quarterly: *5 issues + (5-9) 1998 to date*

As both capital and microcosm of Weimar Germany in the late 1920s Berlin was at the forefront of German artistic renaissance and on the cusp of political and cultural turmoil. Through the eyes of a large cast, although primarily newcomer mature art student Marthe Müller, Jason Lutes examines the city and its tensions. Berlin is very accomplished, with Lutes particularly adept at cementing character with well-written dialogue, for example the tyrannical art teacher in 2. The historical inevitability encircling the cast offers the reader an extra layer of knowledge and emotional investment, and the whole is fascinating. The infrequent publication, though, now down to annual, can hardly aid in sustaining a readership. There is a collection of 1-8, which is probably easier to find than the comics.~WJ
Recommended: 1-9

BERNI WRIGHTSON, MASTER OF THE MACABRE

Pacific: *4 issues 1983-1984.*
Eclipse: *1 issue (5) 1984*

A collection of Wrightson's work for Warren black and white magazines, *Creepy*, *Eerie* and *Vampirella*, the first three issues contain the better material, with some spirited versions of Poe's *Black Cat* and Lovecraft's *Cool Air*. The final issue is very badly coloured and Wrightson's detailed artwork and beautiful rendering are done no favours throughout the series. Steve Oliff does his best on the first three issues but the considerable reduction in size of the artwork hampers him; colouring the strips is ultimately a misjudged decision and seriously mars the quality of these books.~NF

BERZERKERS

Image/Extreme: *3 issues 1995*

On the basis of his artwork herein one has to assume that Dan Fraga has spent his life devoid of any contact with other human beings, mirrors, or any film, TV show or book depicting humans. Given his sheltered existence and that he's obviously drawn this entire series with only verbal instructions on how a human being looks, one has to commend Fraga. Despite his achievement, though, this ridiculous tale of assembly-line superheroes was cancelled before completion.~FP

BEST BUY COMICS

Apex Novelties: *One-shot 1979*

Robert Crumb once again attempts to understand a world with which he's resolutely out of step in a selection of strips originally printed in *Coevolution Quarterly*. The magazine rejected one of the best strips here, an early collaboration with Crumb's wife Aline in which the pair visit the Whole Earth Jamboree. The other highlight spotlights impoverished jazz pianist Frank Melrose. Beyond that and an assignment to visit the Space Day Symposium there's little Crumb hasn't done better, although perhaps not as concisely, elsewhere.~WJ

BETA SEXUS

Eros: *3 issue miniseries 1994*

Psychic vampire Sarah finds her soulmate in Vanessa, and they travel through space feeding their sexual appetites. This starts off decently, but the art deteriorates as the series continues and the gaps between issues become longer.~FP

BETTI COZMO

Antarctic: *2 issues 1999*

Betti is an intergalactic mercenary, who with her monsterous co-pilot Croaker works for Lady B's agency with the reluctant dispensation of the Intergalactic Royal Police. The artwork borders on cartoony, but the heavily rendered colour keeps the mood serious. Away from the balloon dialogue the writing is overlong and under-edited. Lightweight space thrills with, alas, no plot driving them.~SW

BETTIE PAGE COMICS

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1996, one-shot ('Spicy Adventure') 1997, 3 issue miniseries ('Queen of the Nile') 1999-2000**

1950s pin-up icon Bettie Page saw interest in her modelling career rocket through Dave Stevens' appropriation of her image in his cult *Rocketeer* strip, and it is fitting that he is the guiding light behind her comic career. The first one-shot was a beautifully drawn collection of high-camp strips by the likes of Russ Heath and Bret Blevins, Jeff Gelb and Stevens himself, which managed to capture just the right tone of irreverent fun. The second one-shot and the Queen of the Nile mini-series were less successful ventures by Jim Silke. Whereas the Stevens issue parodied all manner of 1950s trash genres, Silke's material was a take-off of 1930s pulps and movie serials and, while the art is pretty enough, the writing is perilously thin and rather unsatisfying.~DAR

BETTY

Archie: *118 issues + 1992 to date*

Betty is the sweet, perfect girl, who vies with Veronica for Archie's affections. In her own title, the focus tends to be on how good she is as she is forced to seek employment to pay for her clothes and dates, often making use of her skills as a mechanic. She is also handy with small children, either as a babysitter or as a coach to baseball team, The Tigers and the local girl's soccer team. As if school, work and an active social life didn't keep her busy enough, her hobbies include painting, poetry, sculpture, acting, and photography, whilst she also plays basketball and soccer, and is on the school's cheerleading team. Other stories play on her kindness to friends, family and strangers, her occasional attempts to change her personality, and her fantasies and daydreams (in which she and Archie are about to be married). Dating also plays a part, but her plans to be alone with Archie often backfire or she or Archie are too tired and fall asleep during the date. Though Betty is usually portrayed as a boy chaser, she's normally much more loyal to Archie than Veronica is. 55, however, shows Betty mooning after an unnamed boy, and 87 introduces Adam, someone who actually treats her with respect. This leads to The Big Breakup (99-100) in which Betty stops going out with Archie, briefly, of course, and thereafter she's occasionally seen on dates with Adam (if Archie hasn't managed to prevent them). Each issue normally contains four stories and, from 20, a Dear Betty page addressing readers' problems with friendships and romance.

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* Available in a collected edition

Regular writers include Mike Pellowski, Bob Bolling, George Gladir, Bill Golliher, Frank Doyle, Kathleen Webb, and Dan Parent (from 48). Doug Crane was the regular penciller (until 46) with a more elaborate style than usual on *Archie* comics, alongside Rex Lindsey, with occasional strips by Dan DeCarlo. After Crane, Stan Goldberg has been the most common penciller. Though there are small variations in the relationship between Betty, Veronica and Archie, the underlying premise is that it will never change. Nevertheless, Betty is kept busy, with or without them, and the writers ensure that though the characters may never grow up, they won't seem out of touch with modern life or its concerns.~NF

BEWARE

Marvel: *8 issues 1973-1974*

This all-reprint title contains weird horror shorts from the 1950's. The title changed to *Tomb of Darkness* from issue 9.~APS

Whitley Strieber's BEYOND COMMUNION

Caliber: *2 issues 1997*

Strieber has made a career of 'informing' the credulous about his alien abduction experiences, and this follows on from his book *Communion* as Whitley strives to convince a doubting world that he's telling the truth. It's an awkwardly told and unsatisfying story. As for the truth of it, it's not likely to convert any sceptics.~FP

BEYOND THE GRAVE

Charlton: *6 issues 1975-1976*

Can you imagine the person so starved of even the most basic forms of entertainment in the 1970s that they might resort to buying a Charlton mystery title? Universally unimaginative and poorly drawn (even by Steve Ditko, who features in every issue), there's a thrill rating of absolute zero here. Back to the original poser, though. Back covers feature adverts inviting readers to train for a career in law enforcement, border patrols or broadcasting. The successful applicants will by now be running your local police and immigration services or be heads of programming somewhere. Now you know why they're so humourless and lacking in imagination.~WJ

THE BIBLE

DC: *One-shot 1975*

This tabloid-sized comic adapted the Book of Genesis from creation to Sodom and Gomorrah, and was intended as the first of a series that sadly never materialised. Sheldon Mayer's script very concisely reduces the stories down to the bare essentials, and uses quite contemporary and straightforward writing so that the comics would be accessible to a young audience. To an older readership it may be too simplistic to be wholly engaging, but the emphasis on the Bible's panoramic scale is an enormous compensation, thanks to Nestor Redondo's spectacular artwork. Redondo, working from editor Joe Kubert's layouts, excelled himself in providing page after page of detailed, almost baroquely intricate tableaux, making full use of the comic's large format. Almost inevitably, there's nothing ground-breaking here, but for fans of great art this is an absolute must.~DAR

Recommended

BICENTENNIAL GROSS-OUTS

Yentzer & Gonif: *1 issue 1976*

Despite its title few of the contents have anything to do with America's bicentennial, the real meat of the comic being two strips by William Stout, the hard-hitting 'Filipino Massacre' and the libellous Disney spoof 'Realityland'. The other strips are largely inconsequential.~DAR

BIFF BANG POW!

Paisano Publishing: *3 issues 1991-1992*

As Ivan Brunetti predicts in his first issue introduction, this would be unappreciated in its own time and destined to commercial failure. Jokingly, he considers it will be rediscovered, prompting scholarly essays from French critics. Will it? Well, here he's already a brilliant cartoonist with a number of styles. Brunetti's later work combines hectoring underpinned by a fragile combination of insecurity and large ego, and a seeming desire to crumble the boundaries of acceptable taste. Luckily he's also very funny otherwise he'd be some strange hybrid of Steve Ditko and the Austrian doctor who creates art from corpses. There are plenty of grotesque gags such as 'Misery Loves Comedy' (all issues), 'Hitler's Sunday Comix' (1), and 'Manson Family Circus' (2), but the bulk of his contribution is a long 'Fine Art Force' strip. Treating arguments about art as superhero fights featuring the likes of Renaissance Man (who can do anything), Ms Minimalist and Captain Cubist, it's an interesting intellectual exercise that surprisingly sustains itself over three issues. Sadly, Brunetti occupies under half the pages. Art and pop culture themes stretch to the other contributors as well, with Richard Polt's strips covering the same ground as Brunetti. A strip about a samurai truck driver, although crudely drawn, is funny in places, but other than Brunetti it's only Jessica Abel whose work is noteworthy. Future French critics will probably look elsewhere, but fans of Brunetti's work shouldn't.~WJ

BIG APPLE COMIX

Big Apple: *One-shot 1975*

A group of New York-based comic professionals step away from the mainstream to produce an underground comic with the Big Apple as a theme. Revelling in the freedom bestowed by retreat from superheroes, everyone's work is top notch, so selecting the best strip is difficult. 'Over and Under' sees Neal Adams portraying the city's high life while the team of Larry Hama and Ralph Reese contrast on the opposite side of the page, and Wally Wood parodies his own highly regarded 'My World'. Other contributors include Archie Goodwin, Mike Ploog and Al Williamson. A must-have double-bag item.~FP

Recommended

BIG ASS COMICS

Rip-Off/Last Gasp: *2 issues 1969-1971*

When the politically correct critics have the knives out for Robert Crumb, **Big Ass Comics** provides prime ammunition. "Weird sex fantasies with the behind in mind" runs the coverline to the first issue, and it doesn't lie, but neglects to mention the racist caricatures. The odd thing is, it's all such absurd nonsense, drawn by Crumb in his early-period cartoony style. As part of his canon Big Ass Comics is a trivial footnote. Kept in print since the original publication, the most recent editions were published in 1991 by Last Gasp.~WJ

BIG BANG

Caliber: *5 issues (1-4, 0) 1994-1995*

Image: *35 issues 1995-2001*

"Comics haven't been this fun for fifty years!" exclaims 1's cover, and, guardedly, one can agree. An affectionate homage to the comics of the 1940s to the 1960s, Big Bang introduces lookalike versions of archetypal heroes, mimicking all the old styles. Caliber's 1-2, the Golden Age tributes, were very successful, 3's Silver Age homage less so with the artists simply lacking the fluidity of Sekowsky and Sachs, whom they were imitating in this JLA-style salute. 4 ill-advisedly takes the heroes to modern times, with distorted anatomy and moronic dialogue, but 0 is back to the Golden Age. It apparently impressed Image's Erik Larsen sufficiently that he offered to relaunch the comic as an ongoing series adding retro versions of Image heroes such as Mighty Man to the line-up, and crossing over with mainstays such as Savage Dragon. The Image series presents a plethora of 'historical' heroes, ranging from the 1940s through to (very occasionally) the 1970s of a publishing company that never existed. The evocations are not always successful, but any comics fan of riper vintage will at least appreciate their intentions, and frequently they're very skilfully done. Jerry Acerno's Shadow Lady (16, 17, 21, 26), a Phantom Lady tribute and 'Good Girl Art' heroine, is a pleasure, and Billy Fugate rapidly became distinguished as an artist who combined a nostalgic feel with exquisite skill, especially on the delightful Mary Marvel homage, Thunder Girl. 24 and 27 are 'The Big Bang History of Comics', text & illustration works imitating Steranko's famous tomes and relating in more detail Big Bang's fictitious publishing history, a cleverly-done pastiche which may nevertheless have alienated a certain percentage of the readership as taking the gag too far. 6 reprints the rapidly-sold-out issue 3 of Caliber's series, and 35 is a rather ignominious reprinting of various Big Bang stories from other Image titles, but the rest of the series is all-new, all-old entertainment.~HS

Recommended: Series one 0-2, series two 1, 3, 4, 17, 21, 26

Red Calloway's BIG BANG

Zoo Arsonist Press: *4 issue miniseries 1995-1996*

A bleak look at the fickle, manipulative and transitory nature of fame, as the titular Red Calloway is transformed from the man who lost it all into a movie star. Paul Sharar's almost Ditkoesque world of repetition is presented in black and white, both artistically and morally, and touches on disturbing topics in portraying almost the entirety of his cast as sleazy scumbags. Four magazine size issues stretch the plot a little thin, but there's plenty to commend, particularly Sharar's art, evoking a bygone era with a contemporary perspective.~WJ

BIG BLOWN BABY

Dark Horse: *4 issues 1996*

Picking up where its appearances in Dark Horse Presents left off, this broad superhero parody from the twisted minds of Bill Wray (ideas and art) and Robert Loren Fleming (script) is the kind of comic it's easy to dismiss as juvenile and disgusting. It also happens to be rather funny, in a tasteless way. When you get used to it, Fleming's script, which at first appears over-written, begins to crack you up, especially when teamed with Wray's manic drawings. All this and jokes about Stan Lee's wig and Vinnie Colletta's death too. Told you it was tasteless.~FJ

The BIG BOOK OF...

Paradox Press: *17 volumes 1994-2000*

Paradox Press' Big Books are an important attempt to bring comics to a wider audience. Always concerned with the weird side of life, they build upon people's enjoyment of odd stories and, by concentrating on humour and packed storytelling, provide great toilet reading. "Did you know there was this guy who..." is their stock in trade; stories to tell your mates in bars and weird facts to wow your friends.

The first volume, Urban Legends, was based on the many books of cheery folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand. Writers Robert Loren Fleming and Robert Boyd Jr misguidedly tried to make each story fit a single page format, rushing many while there are simultaneously stories without punchlines that are really one-line funnies. After that the format was relaxed, as there are a limited number of subjects where a writer can come up with 300 plus good stories to fill a volume, not to mention the complexity of commissioning so many short strips! In Doug Moench's *Conspiracies* volume the stories run up to eight pages, a good idea when trying to deal with the entire Kennedy conspiracy or the history of Area 51 in one chunk. Moench does a creditable job of rounding up a very difficult subject, using a Mr A-type figure to introduce it all, but has trouble slipping enough information onto a comic book page; complex conspiracies are often not very visual and suit prose better.

Early volumes tended to rely on a different single writer/editor for each subject. Carl Posey for *Weirdos* provides an interesting selection from a very rich and diverse field of ridiculous human endeavour. Bronwyn Carlton for *Deaths* comes up with some very dull ideas like illustrated tours of famous cemeteries, but Gahan Wilson on Freaks approaches the subject with he right mix of prurience and understanding. Jonathan Vankin's *Big Book of Bad* is all over the place, featuring Roman emperors, serial killers and Vanilla Ice, taking a creative interpretation of the subject to fill the volume when so many areas have already been covered in previous volumes. *Thugs* under Joel Rose's editorship jumps from Indian Thugee, the history of which he gets hopelessly wrong, to almost exclusively concentrate on American gang leaders from 1850-1930, told in a very dry manner. Similarly the *Vice* volume has to stretch the subject to fill its pages, moving from sex and drugs to pinball machines and comics.

Disappointments include John Wagner's collection of *Martyr* stories. It's not that they're not interesting individually if you like religious excess, it's just that dozens and dozens of stories of conversion, torture and catholic weirdness become repetitive. And the book of the 1970s is like those TV programmes that fill a cheap hour with colourful clips. Except it lacks the clips and jokes so mostly your response is either "Yes, I remember pet rocks. Hmm" or "Were my parents really dumb enough to buy a pet rock?"

Some of the best volumes are those that benefit from the input of several writers. *Little Criminals* is particularly well rounded, although the name is a misnomer. In the mix of well-known criminal comedowns and obscure but interesting stories are a number of rather ept thieves, fakers and murderers. Equally well-edited is *Scandal*, which has a good range of recent and forgotten cause celebres, and approaches the subject from a number of angles, dishing the dirt on politicians, sportsmen, film stars and those famous for being famous (often as a result of being involved in a scandal, of course!) Carl Sifakis edits the volume on *Hoaxes* with a similar mixed bag of writers to help him out. The two gems of the series for putting a new slant on orthodoxy are the collection of the Grimm Brothers' fairytales and the *Weird Wild West* which both, in their way, overturn romantic received ideas. Grimm unearths the bloody, psychologically-laden originals of stories like Cinderella and Rapunzel, along with a lot of much weirder tales like Hans My Hedgehog, while *Weird Wild West* dredges up gruesome tales of cannibalism, pickled outlaws, UFOs and mad cults.

Part of the joy of reading these volumes is the wide range of artists who illustrate the tales, from mainstream to underground, old pros alongside talented newcomers. Frank Quitely rubs shoulders with Russ Heath, Drew Friedman sits next to Bryan Talbot. There's something for everybody's taste, provided it's a little twisted. Selected offerings from Paradox's successful *Big Books* have been repackaged in magazine format as *100% True*.~FJ

Recommended: *Freaks, Little Criminals, Grimm, Weird Wild West*

BIG BRUISERS

Image: *One-shot 1996*

With that title and a teaming of Badrock from Youngblood, Maul from WildC.A.T.S. and Impact from Cyberforce, you're not expecting great literature, are you? There's considerably more invention than one might imagine, though, as the trio (or quartet if you include *Savage Dragon*'s humanoid shark villain Mako) are transported to a distant planet to fulfil an ancient prophesy. If you're looking for unchallenging fun you could do far worse than pick this from the bargain boxes.~WJ

BIG DADDY DANGER

DC: *5 issues + 2002 to date*

Adam Pollina (with inking by Tyson McAdoo) delivers a lively and engaging series starring the greatest masked wrestler on Earth, who has to balance the trials of being World Champion with the role of single parent. His son, Little Danny Danger (also masked!) feels neglected by his ever busy dad, but is unaware that his father's schedule is so hectic because Big Daddy Danger is also the Free World's greatest secret agent and defender of liberty! Planned as a nine issue limited series, this is wonderful fun for all ages, with thrills and spills ranging from spy action to extra-dimensional fantasy. Buy it for the kids and read it yourself.~WW

BIG DOG FUNNIES

Rip Off: *One-shot 1992*

Collects a selection from five years' worth of utterly feeble humour one-pagers presumably produced for a newspaper. Lead character M. Littlechief Bigdog is a hippy Native American fount of philosophical aphorisms, and his meditations on life and TV, seemingly intended as satire, make one scream for all the comforts of the straight life. Creator D.M. Pitts' 'jokes' are on a level with those found on Garfield mugs. He'd probably be appalled at the comparison. Good.~WJ

BIG GAME

Antarctic: *1 issue 1999*

Master of Chinese weapons magic Sushi, and Texas Ranger Ulysses, have been granted extended life spans and now fight together against the vampires and other monsters inhabiting a near-future "Los Vegos". Creator Shannon Denton's stylised, animation-like artwork can't overcome his lifeless script and the lack of characterisation.~NF

THE BIG GUY AND RUSTY THE ROBOT

Dark Horse: *2 issue microseries 1995**

This delightful oversized comic, written by Frank Miller with beautiful artwork from Geof Darrow, is a treat for lovers of big-robot comics everywhere. The story is a mix of pure whimsy and comic genius, following the adventures of Rusty, a cute li'l two-foot high robot boy created to save Japan from the threat of big monsters. He wants nothing more than to be a success so that the army will build others like him and stop him being so lonely. But, sadly, Rusty's pretty crap as robots go and the monster kicks his butt, meaning that Japan has to take advantage of a gift from America in the form of a huge robot called the Big Guy. Big Guy sees off the monsters and, in gratitude, Japan gives him Rusty to be his kid sidekick. The Big Guy is not impressed. Will Rusty be able to prove himself worthy? Or is he really just too – sob – small? Let's just hope that Miller and Darrow continue this wonderful series so we find out either way. A real joy.~JC

Recommended: 1-2

BIG HAIR COMICS

Image: *3 issues 2000*

Andy Suriano's funnies are drawn in a retro, 1960s cartoon show style. The main features are SF cockroach Astro Bug's adventures in outer space with his sidekick Kip, and Little Polynesian Pu-Pu's rock and roll encounter with a volcano god. The shorter strips include 'Byron And His Balloon Animals', 'Little Man Jake' and his size-reduction mishaps and 'What A Dawg' where a kid reaches puberty and literally becomes a dog! The cover of 1 features the dog boy's droppings in an unwholesome landmark of sorts. Mono laughs that cry out for colour.~SW

You and Your BIG MOUTH

Starhead: *2 issues 1993*

Fantagraphics: *5 issues (3-7) 1993-1998*

Pat Moriarity's lively and characterful cartooning is largely wasted on this collection of poems, rants, recounted dreams, observational comedy and pointless anecdotes by a wide variety of scripters. They include pop singer Henry Rollins and the late nouveau beat author Charles Bukowski, and this is not excused by including strips that lament the fact and wonder what to do about it. The long strip about a ruined friendship in 5, reminiscent of Peter Bagge's work, is much better but still ends weakly.~GK

BIG NUMBERS

Mad Love: *2 issues 1990*

Big Numbers united Alan Moore and Bill Sienkiewicz, two creators at the height of their powers and popularity. Their combined clout enabled them to convince distributors that twelve issues of a square, oversize comic about seemingly unconnected events in the lives of inhabitants of a grey home counties town (not unlike Moore's native Northampton, England) was the biggest thing since *Watchmen*. Although critically acclaimed, *Big Numbers*' complexity, oblique story-telling techniques and lack of conventional 'action' left some fans of Moore's earlier mainstream work bewildered. Moore explores the mechanics of modern society through the device of a writer returning to the places and people she outgrew ten years earlier. The story is aggressively multi-cultural and plays upon our perceptions of the British class system. Of particular note is Moore's ear for dialogue and speech rhythms, which the dialogue attempts to spell out for the benefits of American readers. Sienkiewicz matches the 'kitchen sink' story-line with evocative, detailed imagery that often dissolves into pencil lines or brush strokes, emphasising the transience of the characters' existence. He puts a wealth of techniques to the service of the story, using extensive photo reference.

This ambitious series began falling apart before issue 2 was even printed, with the artist continually delaying delivery of artwork. Plans to replace Sienkiewicz with Dave McKean or Al Columbia, who at the time was drawing in a very similar style, never came to fruition, and the story remains becalmed after two tantalising, morally-pointed issues.~FJ

Recommended: 1-2

THE BIG O

Viz: *5 issue miniseries 2002*, 4 issue miniseries 2002*

Based on an anime series, the concept of a population whose memories have been largely wiped is introduced with minimum explanation over three pages before the action starts. Stored memories are the city's greatest treasure, and The Big O is a combat robot called on by Paradigm City's top hostage negotiator Roger Smith when events move beyond his control. There's much of Bruce Wayne about Smith, who's independently wealthy and lives in opulent surroundings, and a Japanese take on *Batman* with a giant robot thrown in is the way to view this series. There's the distinctive locale, a chief rogue who's camp personified, and artist Hitoshi Ariga has a dark, angular style. He produces original material, by the way, not just adaptations of the anime. The logic of the premise stands up to little scrutiny, but the series doesn't need that and manga fans should find plenty to enjoy here. The Viz numbering is odd, with the final issue of the first miniseries concluding in the first issue of the second, and as is common with Viz, more miniseries are planned. *The Big O* improves as it continues, so they'll be worth watching out for.~FP

Here Come the BIG PEOPLE

Event: *One-shot 1997*

Humorous tale of nerdy computer billionaire Austin Milcsop, whose best-selling programs and products are all a subconscious attempt to find himself a mother. When his new supercomputer plunders time and space to build him (and all men) one, the stage is set for societal disaster. Well drawn social comedy with disturbing overtones (all the synthetic mothers are giant-sized, young, busty, pretty and a shocking shade of pink) from Trace Beaulieu, Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti.~WW

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* Available in a collected edition

The BIG PRIZE

Eternity: *2 issues 1988*

The peculiarly named Willis Austerlitz dreams of the gentler days of the 1930s, when, he feels, everything was somehow more decent. He's given the opportunity to live his dreams courtesy of the winning ticket in a planet-wide lottery of the future that materialises in 1988. The thin plot contrivance is forgivable in context, as the remainder of the issues compensate. Austerlitz is wearing rose-coloured glasses, of course, and discovers 1934 is not what he anticipated. Gerard Jones writes in an intriguing and wistful manner, and the art of Bryon Carson and Mike Roberts improves immensely, almost from page to page. Disappointingly, the story remains incomplete, but it is worth investigating. Jones later had another try at Innovation, this time titling the story *Timedrifter*, but this was also prematurely cancelled.~FP

A BIG SOMEPLACE

Iconographix: *2 issues 1992*

Thel's just found a new boyfriend, but her room-mate's disappeared. Then her downstairs neighbours Doc and Josephine intend to transplant Thel's bum onto Josephine. Dave Cooper's lumpy art and odd stories either appeal or they don't, with no mid-point. With this uncompleted tale the whimsy is almost all there is, and by far the best entertainment to be had is from a two page interruption in 2 about turtles Cooper has.~WJ

Colin Upton's BIG THING

Ed Varney: *1 issue 1990*
Fantagraphics: *4 issues 1991-1992*
Starhead: *1 issue 1994*
Aeon Press: *1 issue 1994*

Stop sniggering. This is an autobiographical title. There's an occasional excess of self-pity and whining about the day-to-day annoyances of life, but it's balanced by plenty of observations and telling asides that ensure each issue contains something worthwhile. In the opening issue 'Looneys' is the standout strip, contrasting the mixed feelings Upton has about a local eccentric with his own mental traumas. All too often, though, there are recollections that are obviously important to Upton, yet fail to engage the readership as intended. This is largely due to Upton's drawing style, which, while functional, is very limited and cluttered, and unable to convey the full emotional range of his stories. This is most vividly brought home in the second Fantagraphics issue, an over-extended story of the problems occurring when Upton crossed from Canada into the USA to see an art performance group. Ironically the strongest issue is 4, in which there's an angry response to hearing about *Big Thing*'s impending cancellation, 'Fuck'. It rails against superficial sweeteners in comics while bemoaning that *Big Thing*'s more intelligent content is sadly uncommercial. There's also a good selection of shorter stories, closing with a 'Famous Bus Rides' strip. A carry-over from Upton's minicomics days, there's one strip in most issues, all of them short, sharp and wry.

Bizarrely, the Starhead issue, titled *Big Black Thing*, is a response to a fake issue of *Big Thing* circulated with blank black pages. Initially despondent, Upton pasted in several of his minicomics, and a strange story about Hotxha The Albanian. The Aeon issue, officially *Aeon Focus* 2, is the strongest issue overall. There's a brutal and hard-hitting honesty transcending the still limited art with strips Upton had completed with no idea of where they'd see print. 'I'm Not Angry Anymore' is a visceral depiction of the bouts of despair and low self-esteem Upton experiences, and 'Chris' encompasses narrow-minded feminism and positive discrimination. Bleak and thought-provoking, the only page-filler is a strange humorous attempt at depicting the life of St Anthony. The Ed Varney issue and first Fantagraphics issue are magazine-sized, but the remaining issues are all in standard comic format.~FP

Recommended: Aeon Press 1

Fantastic Four: BIG TOWN

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 2001*

This had the potential to be a great series, with writer Steve Englehart returning to form, and nice art by Mike McKone and Mark McKenna, but something went terribly wrong. It's set in a universe such as ours where super-heroes just appear in comics, but when Reed Richards and friends head off into space and come back all fantastic-upped, the universe changes and there's an explosion of superheroes and villains, mainly centred in New York, or rather, Big Town. Englehart features what seems to be variants of the entire Marvel universe. Not all the good guys are that good anymore, but Dr Doom, the Red Skull and Magneto are still rotten to the core. The major storyline focuses on The Human Torch, and it wouldn't be Englehart without a hefty portion of angst. This would have benefited immensely from some breathing space rather than being crammed into four-issues. Everything is rushed at the end, with major characters unaccounted for, and terrible bits of storytelling. It's not a disaster by any means, but there's a feeling it could have been so much more.~HY

BIGGER

Free Lunch: *One-shot 1998, 4 issue miniseries ('Will Rison and the Devil's Concubine') 1998-1999*

You've got a problem if your whole body grows every time you're aroused, and that's what happens to Will Rison after circumstances detailed in the one-shot, while his problem draws the attention of a satanic seductress in the miniseries. The whimsy of Ranma$^{1/2}$ is an obvious influence, but Matt Ryan and Allan Holcomb also bring their own ideas to the table, and display an odd coyness besides. Their teenagers are a slightly racier Archie cast, but all likeable enough, and there's an appealing simplicity throughout.~WJ

BIJOU FUNNIES

Bijou Publishing: *1 issue 1998*
Kitchen Sink: *7 issues (2-8) 1969-1973*

One of the first and best underground anthologies, edited by Skip Williamson and Jay Lynch. Both were excellent cartoonists in their own right and the comic featured Williamson's Snappy Sammy Smoot and Lynch's Nard'n'Pat in a series of skits that mixed counterculture politics, knockabout humour and surrealism to great effect. Other artists included Robert Crumb, Justin Green and Art Spiegelman, making *Bijou* an essential buy. The final issue was an all-colour *Mad*-style spoof, which featured almost all the main underground artists drawing each other's characters and is a big favourite among some collectors despite lacking the bite of the previous seven. Two collections present a selection of material from the comics.~DAR

Recommended: 1-8

BILL & TED'S Excellent Comic Book

Marvel: *One-shot, 12 issues 1991-1992*

Magnificent, although anyone who's not a fan of the *Bill & Ted* films should stay away. Writer and artist Even Dorkin populates the comic with all the characters from both films and more, consistently delivering hilarity based on the dumb characters. As with the films, the plots are thin, but Dorkin packs a full complement of silly jokes in, and, this being a comic, there's the added bonus of all sorts of visual asides. He doesn't skimp on his backgrounds either, so pity poor inkers Stephen DeStefano (1-3) and Marie Severin (4-12) having to ink page after page of crowd scenes. There's Bill and Ted's wedding party in 1, while 4 introduces Fight Man, later to star in his own one-shot, and in 10 Bill and Ted enter his world. It's obvious Dorkin's favourite cast member is Death, who is

humiliated in assorted hilarious ways each issue, with 9 being the best as Death has to find a job to pay his rent and is replaced by Death Jnr. In 2 he goes on vacation with most egregious consequences, and the funniest issue is 11. Bill and Ted discover their friend Abraham Lincoln is to be assassinated and vow to prevent his death. Prior to the series Dorkin produced the comic adaptation of *Bill & Ted's Bogus Journey*, which, as the cover promises, is most excellent. Be warned, though, to stay well clear of issue 8, produced by altogether heinous and non-righteous less talented individuals, dude.~FP
Recommended: 2, 5-7, 9-11, *Bill & Ted's Bogus Journey*

BILL THE CLOWN

Slave Labor: *One-shot 1992, one-shot ('Comedy Isn't Pretty') 1992, one-shot ('Death & Clown White') 1993*

Poor old Bill, the time of the clown is past. He's yesterday's unsophisticated laughter maker without a future ahead. His refuge is violence. This is a satire on the testosterone breed of anti-heroes populating comics, drawn in appropriate Lobo style by Troy Nixey from Dan Vado scripts. It just about works the first time, but is already played out by the second attempt. There's plenty of worse comics to buy, but there's plenty better as well.~WJ

Harry Harrison's BILL THE GALACTIC HERO

Topps: *3 issue miniseries 1994*

Bland adaptation of Harrison's inept accidental hero who becomes the poster boy for a corrupt galactic military-industrial complex. The gags haven't worked since Vietnam (when the original short stories were published) and the Mike Gustovich art is pitiful.~WW

BILLI 99

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1991**

In the year 1999 America is falling apart; police forces need corporate funds to fight crime; there's mass unemployment. Billi's father, a cross between Batman and Zorro, is killed and she is framed by her uncle, who's a serial killer. Billi runs her father's company but can't inherit until she's cleared of his murder. Only her Mob boyfriend and a rogue honest cop can help her. *Billi 99* is a rather grim political thriller written by Sarah Byam and drawn by Tim Sale. It's one of Sale's earliest published works and the first issue shows some rough edges. By the end of the series, however, his confident, European style has firmly established the pessimistic tone of Byam's story. The politics sit a little uneasily with the favourable portrayal of organised crime, but overall the script is intelligent, with strong characterisation driving the story along.~NF

BILLY BOY the Sick Little Fat Kid

Asylum Press: *2 issues 2001*

With stories about a voodoo charm, death in the swamp and mischief with a slingshot and a teddy bear (until interrupted by a neighbour with a shotgun), there's a raw cartoon energy, in a simple-minded, ugly protagonist. Self-indulgent nihilism.~NF

BILLY COLE

Cult Press: *4 issue miniseries 1994*

A metaphorical strip about a newly-born baby who decides to rid the world of evil, whatever that might be! The city he wanders is overrun with brain-eating zombies in the factory, the church, even in the boxing ring. Ted Seko's stark artwork is often just functional and occasionally unclear, but the extreme, cast shadow style is in keeping with the tone of the story. This is not unentertaining, and had potential to be a genuinely didactic comic if only the pages were more lucid.~SW

BILLY NGUYEN, Private Eye

O'Leary's Books/Attitude Zone: *1 issue 1988*
Attitude Zone: *2 issues (2-3) 1988*
Caliber: *1 issue 1990*

In a divergent reality, smart-mouthed private detective, Billy Nguyen, and his friends, skate-punk Beep, gay muscleman, Tiger and police lieutenant, Amadeus Jones, tangle with a pair of scientists, Dr Delacroix and Dr Crowder. They're competing for a computer chip, and cause Billy some problems with a giant slug (1-2). 3 concerns the walking dead in the K-Marche store, and in the Caliber issue, Dr Delacroix returns for revenge. John Hartman and Stanley Shaw's strip is full of madcap adventure, post-modern, cynical dialogue and is visually inventive, though the pages can look over-full.~NF

BILLY RAY CYRUS

Marvel Music: *One-shot 1995*

This all-surpassingly strangely conceived work is by "King Of The Comic Book Writers" Paul S. Newman and long-time *Flash Gordon* artist Dan Barry. The bemulleted but otherwise wholesome Achy-Breaky Heartster takes young fans on what may be time travel trips, firstly to US frontier wars days, giving them all a chance to wear Davy Crockett hats which resemble Billy Ray's hair, and to do battle with a bunch of theme-holidaying Native American lawyers who eat a Chinese takeaway meal, and then, via I. M. Merlin's Mystic gas station, to mediaeval England. There they must battle a geyser which Edward I has mistaken for a dragon. And Cyrus' PR is called Lotta Flack. Go long on this soon to be hot title before Twist-crazy Neutro fans scoop the lot.~GK

BILLY THE KID

Charlton: *145 issues 1957-1983*

Incredibly long-lived and archetypal 'B' western series featuring the cousin of the infamous outlaw riding the range righting wrongs to atone for the shame heaped upon the name of Bonney, although changing a name seems less trouble than shooting every owlhoot in the West. Most of the time nobody cares anyway as the baby-faced gunfighter goes through all the cowboy set pieces. Some, though, are magnificently done, with the likes of Al Williamson, Angelo Torres, Dick Giordano, José Delbo and especially John Severin producing beautiful looking stories from mediocre scripts. Mike Kaluta fans might want to see 85, as it features his early comics work.~WW

BINKY

DC: *82 issues 1948-1958 (1-60), 1968-1971 (61-81), 1977 (82)*

An imitation of Archie, Binky's teenage adventures ran for a decade, even more innocuous and dated to the contemporary eye than their inspiration, particularly the bizarre Lord Fauntleroy outfit affected by his kid brother Allergy. Revived following a successful try-out in *Showcase* 70 in 1967, a new, 'groovy' version had limited success – spawning a spin-off title, Binky's Buddies, which ran for twelve issues in 1969/1970 – but couldn't crack the Archie monopoly long-term. For no known reason, issue 82 unexpectedly dribbled out in 1977, six years after the title's cancellation.~HS

BINKY BROWN Meets the Holy VIRGIN MARY

Last Gasp: *One-shot 1972*

Justin Green's *Binky Brown* single-handedly invented the autobiographical comic, and it remains to this day one of the finest strips ever drawn. It's a frenzied tale of Catholic and sexual guilt that keeps the reader riveted to the page in admiration and sometimes disbelief. Some may find the art initially crude, but it's perfectly suited to the story. Quite possibly the finest comic ever made, and reissued in book form by Kitchen Sink as *The Binky Brown Sampler*.~DAR
Recommended

BIO-BOOSTER ARMOUR GUYVER

Viz: *12 issue limited series ('Part One') 1993-1994*, 6 issue miniseries ('Part Two') 1994-1995*, 7 issue limited series ('Part Three') 1995*, 6 issue miniseries ('Part Four') 1995-1996*, 7 issue limited series ('Part Five') 1996*, 6 issue miniseries ('Part Six') 1996-1997**

Written and drawn by Yoshiki Takaya, this is a lengthy slice of unremarkable manga similar to hundreds of other Japanese strips. High school student Sho is possessed by The Guyver, an alien lifeform that turns our hero into an armoured superhero, with 'Guyver' meaning "beyond the norm", incidentally. Sho soon finds himself in conflict with the secret organisation that developed the Guyver technology, eager to reclaim their deadly biological weapon. The art credited to Takaya is obviously the work of several artists of varying ability. The story ends on a cliffhanger, but we're told in a bit of text on the last page that "With this volume, *Bio-Booster Armor Guyver* goes on hiatus indefinitely" – cheers lads! Despite an appeal only to the most undemanding of manga enthusiasts, it led to an animated series and even a 1992 movie starring Mark Hamill.~AL

THE BIOLOGIC SHOW

Fantagraphics: *2 issues (0-1) 1994-1995*

Surreal, visceral caprice from the mind and pen of Al Columbia. Almost every strip in this anthology is gratuitously unpleasant with mutilation, a recurring theme. Al obviously needs to get something out of his system, and the sooner he does so the better, because he can draw like a demon.~FP

BIONIC WOMAN

Charlton: *5 issues 1977-1978*

With Charlton already producing a *Six Million Dollar Man* comic and black and white magazine, a comic starring the TV series' spin-off *The Bionic Woman* was inevitable. The counter-espionage adventures of Jamie Summers, a beautiful woman with a mechanically enhanced body, may have had some potential in another publisher's hands. Sadly, there is nothing to recommend Charlton's attempt, from the production standards right down to the awful artwork and scripts. Use bionic force of will to avoid this comic.~SW

BIONICLE

DC: *10 issues + 2001 to date*

Lego's *Bionicle* toys are fantastic creations and good value for money. DC's *Bionicle* comics are very poor creations and astoundingly poor value for money at twelve story pages for $2.25. Worse still, they make little sense in isolation, needing the reader to log on to the *Bionicle* website for updates and continuations. Despite all the disadvantages the art team of Carlos D'Anda and Randy Elliott (with Richard Bennett inking 1) provide all the detail fans will want, but the lack of story is woeful.~WJ

BIPOLAR

Five O'Clock Shadow: *2 issues 2001*

Alternative Comics: *1 issue + (3) 2001 to date*

The efforts of twin Israeli artists Assaf and Tomer Hanuka press those same squishy nerves accessed by Dan Clowes. The work of Tomer particularly presents a disturbing world with sometimes surreal occurrences amid very familiar surroundings. His loose, scratchy and jagged art heightens the unease of fracturing relationships and lonely children, and violence and isolation are common themes. Where the strips are deficient is in structural terms, with fragmented, obscure storytelling, elusive purpose and often a lack of resolution. This is brought into focus by the work of Assaf, who is adapting a story by Hebrew author Etgar Keret, one chapter per issue. This is a tremendous piece incorporating all the unsettling aspects of Tomer's work along with a strong narrative. Frustrated at his unreciprocated love Mordy commits suicide, awakening in a world much like our own populated by others who've killed themselves, many bearing the scars of their death. Assaf's art and storytelling is very traditional, and he's excellent at conveying emotion and in constructing a distinct and recognisable identity for his cast. Both creators are producing high quality work deserving a wider audience.~FP

Recommended: 1-3

THE BIRD

Bananland Arts: *1 issue 1996*

Larry Welz harbours quite a few grudges and deals with them vicariously here by having a clown with a big hammer and a talking bird go around murdering people. It's nicely drawn, but let's hope this exorcism meant Welz returned to readable material.~FP

BIRDLAND

Eros: *3 issue miniseries 1991, one-shot 1994*

Gilbert Hernandez here abandons the sublimated eroticism of his more 'respectable' comic strips for an orgy of unfettered hardcore filth that takes in just about every sexual kink and combination. Along with a great many graphic sex scenes you also get a needlessly convoluted plot about two strippers, Bang Bang and Inez, and their many friends, enemies and lovers, including a female psychiatrist and a group of mysterious, sexually curious aliens. The second volume of the comic is an almost entirely wordless time travel fantasy that fully exploits Hernandez's talent for drawing pneumatic female heroines and their horse-hung but hapless studs. A photo in 2 shows Hernandez standing next to *Supervixens* director Russ Meyer, and *Birdland* can perhaps be best appreciated as an enthusiastic tribute to the unabashed, polymorphous perversity of classic American porno cinema. At the very least, the sheer glee with which Hernandez approaches his task certainly 'rubs off' on the reader.~AL

BIRDS OF PREY

DC: *One-shot 1996 (Black Canary/Oracle: 'Birds of Prey'), 4 issue miniseries ('Manhunt') 1996, one-shot ('Revolution') 1997, one-shot ('Wolves') 1997, one-shot ('Batgirl') 1998, 50 issues + 1999 to date*

Since being crippled, Barbara Gordon, the former Batgirl, is forced to fight evil by proxy. Using her computer skills, photographic memory and contact network she develops the persona of Oracle, supplying information to support other heroes. Enlisting the unemployed Black Canary for a one-off case, she senses a rapport between them and the two form a friendship and partnership despite never meeting face to face. The first one-shot is sleek, stylish and gorgeously illustrated by Gary Frank, and sharply written by Chuck Dixon, reading like a superior action movie with a brain behind it. It was a surprise success, and DC decided to keep the team going in a series of miniseries and specials under the umbrella title, *Birds of Prey*. The first teams the Black Canary – and, unwittingly, Oracle – with rogue vigilante Huntress and bad girl Catwoman, when the latter two and the Canary discover something unexpected in common: they've all been screwed – fiscally, or... otherwise – by the same man, and are hot for revenge. It's Thelma and Louise with spandex, as the girls go on the road, and across the world, to get their own back. Slick, fast, punchy, and the relationship between the travellers is handled with humour and sympathy by writer Chuck Dixon. Matt Haley turns in gorgeous art, and the deadline-crunching addition of Sal Buscema in 4 works surprisingly well.

'Revolution' concerns slavery in the "island paradise" of Santa Prisca, and is set before the events of 'Manhunt', and 'Wolves' sees our heroines having problems with disastrous relationships. These were followed by 'Batgirl' teasing about Oracle regaining the power of movement, after which the ongoing series started in bravura form when Dinah gets embroiled with one of Barbara's old flames on an undercover mission. Artist Greg Land, who took over with the 'Batgirl' one-shot, turns in beautiful work, and the balance between action and emotion is skilfully maintained by Dixon, especially in 8, guest-starring Nightwing, and featuring major progress in his and Oracle's partnership which finally gave fans what they'd wanted for years. After 'Manhunt' the stories reverted to two-handers between Babs and Dinah, though Catwoman did rejoin for the fun 'Apokolips Express' (14-15). Unfortunately, Greg Land departed after 15 to be

replaced by Butch Guice. Guice tried his hardest, particularly in 16, featuring the Joker and the identity of Oracle's first partner, but his work just wasn't up to the demands of a strip that required subtlety of facial expressions and body language. Whether Dixon lost interest or stopped trying remains a matter of conjecture, but the title rapidly lost focus. It reached its lowest point in 33-35, in which the Black Canary romances a major foe of Batman's without having a bleeding clue about his identity until it's too late, a plot insulting to the character. One oasis among the mediocrity was 42, in which the secret of Oracle and Power Girl's relationship was disclosed. Despite damned peculiar Glenn Fabry art, it was a strong, intelligent issue that reflected some of the series' original integrity. Terry Moore wrote 47-49, joined by Amanda Conner as illustrator, for a fun, fast moving yet poignant story involving a young woman with the power to heal devastating medical conditions. From 50 Gilbert Hernandez writes, and DC's plans are to continue the series with various creative teams. In view of the short-lived TV show, which has given *Birds of Prey* a higher public profile, it appears the ladies will be breaking hearts and faces for some time to come.~HS
Recommended: 'Birds of Prey', 'Manhunt' 1-4, 'Wolves', 'Batgirl', 1-15

THE BIRTH CAUL

Eddie Campbell Comics: *One-shot 1999.*

The Birth Caul was originally a multimedia performance staged by Alan Moore and friends in 1995, and here Eddie Campbell transformed the text into a comic format. The story's subtitle, 'A Shamanism of Childhood', probably comes closest to describing this extraordinary comic in which Moore traces his life from the death of his mother backwards through work, school, infancy, birth and beyond. Moore's writing is by turns meditative, touching, flowery, oblique and poetic, and while not all of it works, there are moments of real beauty. Campbell's drawing is consistently inventive and serves as a welcome anchor in some of the strip's more ethereal passages. For those looking for a genuinely mature comic that will reward repeated readings, *The Birth Caul* will be a satisfyingly demanding read.~DAR
Recommended

BIRTH RITE: Chapter One

Congress Press: *2 issues 1989-1990*

A policeman, undercover as a down-and-out, is murdered by two men, who may be members of a criminal organisation, dedicated to cleaning up the city. Experimental (not always in a good sense), both in storytelling and artwork (photographs, pencils, paints), this might have made sense eventually.~NF

THE BIRTHDAY BOY

Beetlebomb: *4 issue miniseries 1997-1998**

When nine year old Hugo wishes it could be his birthday every day the circumstances are exactly right, and his wish is granted. Cosmic balance, though, demands that for this to occur someone else is not born. Jason Lethcoe weaves in a possible invasion from the moon, Larry Stooge, giant robots, pez dispensers and a creature very much resembling the Foozle. It's one long shaggy dog story, plotted, it would seem, on the hoof. It displays some good cartooning, but not as many laughs as intended, and any charm expires before the end.~FP

BISHOP

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1994-1995, 3 issue miniseries ('Xavier Security Enforcer') 1998, 16 issues 1999-2001*

In one of the *X-Men*'s periodic *Terminator* riffs (you know, people travelling back from the future in order to save/change it), Bishop was introduced, and remained in the present with our mutant heroes. At first apparently possessed of no other power than the really big gun beloved of 1990s heroes, it emerges that he's an energy-channeller, absorbing and redirecting forces used against him. His first series pits him against an old enemy from his own time, in a pedestrian slugfest enlivened only by Terry Dodson's attractive art. The second series, set in Bishop's past of the future – bear with me – is a look at his relationship with his XSE team, including his sister Shard, and the conspiracies that they faced; very competently done, written by John Ostrander with art by Steve Epting, but completely inconsequential. The emotions aroused are not so much "What If?" as "So What?" The ongoing series was written by Joseph Harris with Georges Jeanty art, and begins with Bishop leaving the X-Men to seek out his old enemy, Trevor Fitzroy, former colleague from the XSE, and put paid to him. He briefly reunites with his sister, now a photonic-based lifeform, before Chronomancer's troops transport him into a dystopic future similar to the one he originated in, but surrounded by unfamiliar faces, some of whom may be old friends in new guises. Basically, *Mad Max* with mutant powers. Wolverine and Storm guest-star in 8, but it's all very by-the-numbers, and the removal of Bishop from the present day also removes any impetus for the readers to care, as whatever happens in the series doesn't 'count', and the audience has no emotional investment in the events or players. Eventually, Marvel grasped this, and after the 'Chronowar' segment of 12-14, Bishop returned to the present just in time for two crossovers before being shuffled off with indecent haste. He returns in X-Treme X-Men.~HS

BITCH IN HEAT

Eros: *14 issues + 1997 to date*

Erotic vignettes, usually three or four to an issue, illustrated by Italian creator Giovanna Casotto in a gorgeously realistic style, using grey wash inks. There's not much plot, and a certain repetitious quality, but the stories credited to D. Cajelli usually display a modicum more wit. Despite the provocative title and although explicit, by and large these are the type of stories that can be shared with a partner rather than hidden in the back of the cupboard.~FP

BIZARRE ADVENTURES

Marvel: *10 issues (25-34) 1981-1983*

The title *Bizarre Adventures*, to encompass more than one lead feature in *Marvel Preview* 20 and 23, must have boosted sales considerably, because it switched to that title with 25. The magazine format remains the same, though, with more adult-oriented stories and concepts in black and white, largely offering solo slots that wouldn't fit elsewhere in the Marvel line. Consistently good cover paintings entice for often average interior material. The best story of the run is Walt Simonson's adaptation of *The Lawnmower Man* in 29, a glorious bacchanalian celebration of excess worth the cost of the issue alone, although the other features disappoint. John Bolton's art on *Kull* in 26 is magnificent and overcomes a standard sword-and-sorcery story, and he's back in the otherwise meagre 32. *X-Men* fans might want to look out 27, with serviceable solos for Iceman and Nightcrawler and a daft Phoenix story, and 28's list of talent includes Frank Miller, Neal Adams and Michael Golden, none of them at their best. Miller's on far better form in 31, the best overall issue in the run. Seemingly cobbled together from inventory material with the theme of violence applied as an afterthought, the sheer contrast and variety works. Miller's followed by the over the top cartooning of Larry Hama before the styling of Bill Sienkiewicz, and there's also the solid old-fashioned art of Herb Trimpe, the disturbing Steve Bissette, and the excellent Mark Armstrong. The horror theme in 33 never gels, nor does 34's Christmas issue, also published in a standard colour comic format.~WJ
Recommended: 26, 29, 31

BIZARRE FANTASY

Flashback Comics: *1 issue 1995*

The most bizarre aspect of this is why anyone would want to publish pretty straight copies of 1950s Marvel monster stories, and then not do them as well.~FP

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*Available in a collected edition

BIZARRE SEX

Kitchen Sink: *10 issues 1972-1982*

Bizarre Sex more than lives up to its name – animals, aliens, robots, they all got 'em off and got it on in Kitchen Sink's ground-breaking underground anthology. Right until the end it retained a homemade quality that was by turns annoying and appealing. A typical issue mixed goofy comic strips drawn in cartoony styles with po-faced drama featuring stiff-figured, over-inked artwork. Issue 9 featured a full-length *Omaha the Cat Dancer* story, far and away the most sophisticated strip in the entire run. There's also a short follow-up tale in 10, with the story continued in *Omaha The Cat Dancer* 1. The only other work of note is Howard Cruse's Barefootz.~FJ

BLAB!

Monte Comix: *2 issues 1986-1987*
Kitchen Sink: *6 issues (3-8) 1988-1995*
Fantagraphics: *5 issues + (9-13) 1997 to date*

Blab! began as a professionally produced EC fanzine from Monte Beauchamp. The comic content is restricted to reprinted panels in 1 and four pages apiece by Dan Clowes and Kim Deitch in 2. The remainder of these paperback-sized publications is devoted to assorted comic creators recounting their memories of EC comics, and an interview concerning the influential *Mars Attacks* bubblegum cards. In 2 there's also assorted illustrations of Wolverton-style deformed humans by XNO. Both are excellent reading and were reprinted by Kitchen Sink, who instituted a squarebound package. Increased comic content was the order of the day, with strips by Richard Sala, Clowes and Spain along with Deitch and Joe Coleman illustrating text pieces, and a recollection section on the 1960s undergrounds. The comic content increased again in 4 (Clowes, Sala, Spain alongside Doug Allen, Drew Friedman, Jay Lynch and Gary Whitney, and Skip Williamson) and 5 (the same line-up, but replacing Lynch and Whitney with Lloyd Dangle).

With 6 the comics have all but edged out the features and interviews. Gary Lieb, Mary Fleener and Frank Stack join the regulars, and it's Stack who single-handedly raises the quality threshold of *Blab!*'s comics quota. Whereas almost all previous contributors seem to have seen *Blab!* as a home for dashed-off shorts or hollow whimsy (with the possible exception of Sala, who produces nothing but), Stack takes the infrequent publication schedule to produce noteworthy material. All his strips have a historical context, with the best in 7 concerning Shakespeare's deliberations about being asked by King James to postpone writing plays until he's rewritten the Bible. Other noteworthy material in 7 comes from Mary Fleener, Terry LaBan and the startling Chris Ware's Jimmy Corrigan, under an excellent Clowes cover that bears close examination.

From 8 *Blab!* is a squarebound 10" x 10" package with colour sections, 8's turned over to the brilliantly depressing Ware and Peter Kuper, who's ever-present thereafter. There's another excellent Frank Stack strip, this time about the excesses of Caravaggio, with several Drew Friedman illustrations and accompanying interview, and it's nice to see publisher Denis Kitchen drawing once again. With 9 most regulars are jettisoned and *Blab!* begins a distressing slide into vacuous mediocrity as it courts the fine art world. Beauchamp prioritises design, seemingly unable to distinguish genuine visionary talent from the King's new clothes, and the pages are filled with woeful collages (including Mark Mothersbaugh in 12) and brightly coloured strips whose only comment is on the gullibility of the editor. Even the formerly reliable Friedman disappoints, and not because he's relinquished his heavily-stippled style. Oddly, in the face of this, some portfolios display remarkable work, with Boris Artzybasheff (9), the Krampus (11, 12) and Beauchamp's compilation of odd catalogue ads (13) all compelling. The more worthwhile material includes Blanquet's shadow strips (11, 12), Sue Coe's horrific tale of a doomed cattle cargo ship (13), Tony Fitzpatrick's bizarre 'Dirty Boulevard' (9), Kuper, Archer Prewitt in 9 and 10, Spain's reflections on his 1950s youth (9-13) and Catholicism (11), and Chris Ware in 9 and 10. A compilation is due from Chronicle Books in 2003.~FP

Recommended: 1, 2, 7, 8

BLACK & WHITE

Image: *3 issue miniseries 1994, one-shot 1996*

A cross between superheroics and James Bond-style adventures, *Black & White* is the story of Whitney Samsung and Reed Blackett, hired to defend Whitney and thereafter cast into the role of bodyguard/guardian as she refuses to listen to reason and throws herself headlong into trouble. She's seeking vengeance against the company that killed her father. Creators Art and Pamela Thibert produce competent scripts, while Art Thibert's drawing is better than average, with some attention to detail. However, the series didn't catch on and was never finished, despite an attempt to relaunch it in 1996.~NF

BLACK & WHITE

Viz: *5 issue miniseries 1999**

Thought-provoking conclusion to the story part-serialised in *Pulp* (the previous episodes are reprinted in two volumes). Black and White are street urchins whose anarchic lives in Treasure Town encompass street wars, the Yakuza, police and aliens. This is an at-times surreal exploration of the psyche and the universal questions of good versus evil. The highly stylised story and artwork of Taiyo Matsumoto owes a lot to the European comics tradition whilst the overall effect is of trying to pull meaning out of a dream.~NF

BLACK AXE

Marvel UK: *7 issues 1993*

10,000-year-old assassin Black Axe is revived in modern-day Japan, where he uses his big black axe against ninjas, giant robots, Japanese Marvel hero Sunfire and fellow Marvel UK hero Death's Head 2. The idiosyncratic artwork of Ed Perryman may be something of an acquired taste, but it remains the most distinctive thing about this otherwise uninvolving series.~AL

BLACK CANARY

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1991-1992, 12 issues 1993*

After years of neglect and misrepresentation in *Green Arrow*, Dinah Lance, the Black Canary, was given a try-out miniseries. No one seems to have been more surprised at its success than DC, who'd been content with her third-class citizenship. Nevertheless, a tough, uncompromising script from Sarah Byam and striking visuals by the team of Trevor Von Eeden and Dick Giordano produced the sleeper hit of 1992. Without Giordano's sharp ink line on the regular series Von Eeden's art was too often blurred and confusing. Too many panels require squinting to figure what was going on. Although Byam's scripts remained thoughtful and interesting, too many social and political issues were brought forward too rapidly and a disastrous misjudgement was made when Black Canary ditched her traditional hell's-angel-cum-cocktail-waitress look for a 1990s punk outfit of cropped hair, boots, fishnets, a basque and a leather jacket. Contrary to editorial expectations this didn't make her look 'street', it just seemed she'd omitted an entire layer of clothing. This is the single action that probably ended Black Canary's solo flight. A pity, because until the rather schlocky final issue the stories remained strong. A hardcover Archive Edition collects her solo appearances from the 1940s to the 1980s, mostly drawn by Alex Toth, after which Black Canary was next seen in *Birds of Prey*.~HS

Recommended: Miniseries 1-4

BLACK CANDY

Black Eye: *One-shot 1998*

Matt Madden's debut is notable more for the promise of a blossoming talent than anything else. Carl drifts through life largely without participating, dedicated only to his regular sperm donations. At the clinic he's given pills that he takes without knowing their purpose or considering the consequences. Inevitably, circumstances eventually force Carl to make an important decision. Madden's writing and art is very naturalistic, and the story involves several potentially interesting dramas, but Madden never quite pulls them together, so the conclusion just induces a shrug of the shoulders.~FP

BLACK CAT

Harvey: *65 issues 1946-1958 (1-62), 1962-1963 (63-65)*
Recollections/Lorne Harvey: *10 issues 1988-1992, One-shot 1995*

"Linda Turner, Hollywood Star and America's Sweetheart, becomes bored with her ultra-sophisticated life of movie make-believe and takes to crime-fighting in her most dramatic role of all as...The Black Cat!" Phew. This blurb ran in most 1940s stories of our eponymous heroine, and aptly evokes the breathless pace of the series. A successful alumna of Harvey's *Speed Comics* anthology, the Cat was drawn by Joe Kubert in her first two issues, after which Lee Elias took over, and made the Cat a sophisticated Hollywood lady, as opposed to Kubert's busty virago. One of the few heroines of the 1940s who didn't start her career as a sidekick or a team member, the Cat was popular with both male and female readers. The girls liked the Hollywood setting, the cool toughness of the heroine, and Elias' carefully detailed clothing and fashions, while the boys liked the action scenes, and the way the Cat fitted into her low-cut satin costume.

By 1951's issue 30, things were changing, and that was the last we saw of the Cat for a while, as the title switched to horror and mystery stories, several among the most gruesome recorded in comics. Most of the stories, though derivative of the EC twist-ending formula, were beautifully illustrated, with Mort Meskin, Howard Nostrand, Bob Powell and equally gifted artists taking the helm. The Cat came back for issues 54-56, inventory material pulled in to keep the magazine regular while Harvey rewrote and redrew stories in the wake of the Comics Code Authority and their new standards, which must have puzzled the hell out of regular readers. Jack Kirby contributed some really off-the-wall work for issues 58-60, but, faced with declining sales, Harvey folded the title in 1958.

In the wake of the superheroic revival, 63-65 were published as reprint compilations of the Black Cat, in the hope that she'd catch on. Sadly, it didn't take, but the character was affectionately remembered, and was the subject of two later revivals. The first, entitled *The Original Black Cat* to distinguish her from Marvel's impostor, reprinted the Elias work (with Kubert in 3-4) with occasional new covers. The 1995 revival, dubbed *Alfred Harvey's Black Cat*, featured a new short story by Mark Evanier and Murphy Anderson in which an actress and stuntwoman, working on a biopic of the original Black Cat, finds herself recast as the heroine in life as well as on film. More Lee Elias reprints and some inferior new material filled out the issue. The announced second issue was never published, but is available online at www.blackcatcomics.com.~HS

Felicia Hardy, the BLACK CAT

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1994*

Marvel's imitation Black Cat, a former lover of Spider-Man, flies solo in what was promised in advance solicitations as a light-hearted, fun series. What emerged was a leaden, plodding battle with cyborgs, so one can only assume plans were altered. A scond miniseries is emerging at treacle-like pace, and is covered as a Spider-Man Miniseries enrty.~HS

BLACK CONDOR

DC: *12 issues 1992-1993*

A Native American develops the power of flight as the result of strange experiments, and is reluctantly drawn into the heroic life, guided, or haunted, by what appears to be the ghost of the 1940s Black Condor. Nice artwork by Rags Morales doesn't compensate for wilfully obtuse scripting.~HS

BLACK CROSS Special

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1988, one-shot ('Dirty Work') 1997*

The 1988 Special collects the first two episodes of Chris Warner's series originally published in *Dark Horse Presents* 1 and 3, and includes a new prequel establishing the background of the death squad from which Black Cross rebels. 'Dirty Work' has a more complex storyline as Black Cross seeks to prove himself trustworthy to a female gang leader. Set in a near-future totalitarian America, this is very much the comics equivalent of a spaghetti Western. Warner's script doesn't offer any surprises but his detailed artwork is effective whether in back and white or colour ('Dirty Work').~NF

BLACK DIAMOND

AC: *5 issues 1983-1984*

The lead character is a female James Bond fighting the hoards of QUANSA. The comic's based on a projected B movie to be followed by a projected TV series starring Sybil Danning. Needless to say, neither materialised. The back-up strip features Colt, Weapons Mistress, and might be of marginally more interest to fans of *FemForce*. The Paul Gulacy covers and pin-ups are the best thing about the title since neither strip really manages to rise above its fannish origins.~NF

Morningstar Book One: BLACK DOG

Trident: *1 issue 1990*

Better-than-average fantasy story written and drawn in his distinctive blocky style by Nige Kitching, with the last eight pages inked by Nigel Dobbyn. Kitching takes a traditional British legend (of ghostly black dogs which appear near water, harbingers of doom) and brings it up to date for his magical hero Morningstar to fight.~FJ

BLACK DOGS

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1993*

Ho Che Anderson's response to the 1993 Los Angeles riots is a confused and fence-sitting tale detailing an ongoing discussion between a black couple as to the merits of the action filtered through the thoughts of black leaders. Part polemic, part soap opera, it's an uneasy mix. Anderson's art is well worth a glance if you're unfamiliar, but at a miserly fourteen pages plus promo material, this isn't the place.~WJ

THE BLACK DRAGON

Epic: *6 issue miniseries 1985**

Chris Claremont is to be commended for taking a risk at the peak of his popularity as X-Men writer to pen this tale of 12th-century sorcery, although there's places where it creaks under his excess verbiage. *The Black Dragon* doesn't succeed as the classical tragedy it appears to be intended as, with Claremont's aptitude for characterisation all but deserting him, but it's never predictable and there's enough action to keep the pages turning. John Bolton, though, is on stunning form, with his art looking far better in the later black and white collected edition than in the muddy original colour comics.~FP

BLACK FLAG

Image/Extreme: *1 issue 1994*
Maximum Press: *5 issues (0-4) 1994-1995*

Dan Fraga's Black Flag is a hi-tech vigilante team consisting of Spot, Guerilla, Sniper, Geisha and Raiden, a genius child, a talking gorilla, a muscular hero, a beautiful woman and a master of the mystic arts. The only thing that really ties them all together is violence. Not worth getting out of bed for.~NF

BLACK GOLIATH

Marvel: *5 issues 1976*

A miniseries before such things were conceived. Stark technician Bill Foster taking a serum to become giant-sized seemed a good bet in a boom period. It was duff throughout, though. Come a recession this patronising title was cancelled, and Bill joined The Champions with White Angel, White Black Widow, White Hercules, White Iceman and Pallid Skeletal With A Fiery Halo Ghost Rider.~FP

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* Available in a collected edition

BLACK HEART BILLY

Slave Labor: *2 issues 2000**

Rick Remender and Kieron Dwyer concoct adult only tales of a skate boarding punk waster whose skull has been replaced with a robot head. Rude, crude with a bad attitude, this is a real forbidden pleasure. The AiT published collection also includes material for a never previously seen third issue.~WW

Recommended: 1-2

BLACK HOLE

Kitchen Sink: *4 issues 1995-1997*
Fantagraphics: *6 issues + (5-10) 1998 to date*

Charles Burns is not currently bettered at presenting, deep, disconcerting fantasy, wrapped in simple thick-lined art. *Black Hole* is his longest project, planned for thirteen issues, the spur to the story being a disturbing sexually transmitted virus. It causes irreversible mutation, ranging from lesser afflictions like webbed fingers to full-blown plague-of-boils deformity. Burns combines the horrors of the virus with the nightmares of 1970s high school social interaction to weave an unsettling story. The analogy is obvious, but by fusing it to the past it provides an innocence, and eventually for all the horror of the mutated teens resorting to life in a hidden community in the woods, there's even more horror in the manner in which those not afflicted are easily able to ignore them. It might be said that content is slim and price is high, but the mood of the story requires a leisurely pace. Confusingly, the Kitchen Sink issues aren't numbered on the cover, so those wanting to start should look for the cover illustration of shed human skin with a gaping hole in the chest.~FP

Recommended: 1-10

BLACK HOOD

Red Circle: *3 issues 1983*

Since his 1960s incarnation mincing about and cracking wise in the pages of *Mighty Comics Presents*, the Black Hood had been partially rehabilitated by Neal Adams, Al McWilliams and Gray Morrow-illustrated stories in the otherwise reprint *Archie Superhero Comics Digest Magazine*. The digest introduces policeman Kip Burland as a less flamboyant Black Hood, with the hood the only concession to crimefighting costume. Riding a motorcycle modified by fellow hero The Comet, Burland stars in a series of atmospheric short stories drawn by excellent old-school artists like Pat Boyette, Gray Morrow, Dan Spiegle and Doug Wildey. Alex Toth draws three excellent covers, and illustrates 2 and 3's back-up strips starring The Fox. It's not his best art, but there's little Toth that's poor. All in all an unpretentious and extremely well drawn series worth investigating.~WJ

Recommended: 1-3

The BLACK HOOD

DC/!mpact: *12 issues, 1 Annual 1991-1992*

As with other former Archie superheroes, there's an inventive !mpact twist on Black Hood: the hood empowers the wearer. The first issue is a Punisher-style parody at the end of which the character (who is introduced only after several guest appearances in other titles, in which he met all the other !mpact characters) is slain. The story really begins in 2 as 17-year-old Nate Cray inherits the distinctive hood. It enables him to become an athletic hero, but he's unsure why. Mark Wheatley and Rick Burchett (usually) weave an appealing story, and that the title is consciously aimed at younger readers matters not a jot. Cray is later the focal point for *Crucible*, tying up the !mpact line.~FP

BLACK JACK Special

Viz: *2 volumes 1998*

Osamu Tezuka's whiz-bang medical manga tales of a brilliant and handsome mercenary surgeon are insanely funny. There is a marvellous scene in 'Operation Down Under' in which he operates on his own abdomen, to remove a mutated tapeworm, while under attack from mad dingoes in a tent in the Australian outback. His assistant Pinoco, the former cystoma in an artificial four year old girl's body, who believes herself to be his wife, is a disturbing touch.~GK

Recommended: 1-2

BLACK KISS

Vortex: *12 issues 1988-1989**

Howard Chaykin's noirish sex tale *Black Kiss* came in for a lot of flak when first published. Although set in Reagan's America, from the look, sound and action of it, it could well have slunk in from the 1930s or 1940s. Cass Pollack, a small-time crook, finds his hated wife and kid murdered and himself in the frame for the shootings. In order to have the famous actress who happened to be giving him a blow-job on the motorway while the triggers were being pulled to alibi him he has to do a small service for her: retrieve from a mystery woman a film that will ruin her career. Some of Chaykin's end-of-issue revelations are rather predictable, but on the whole the scripting is fast and stylish. His black and white art looks rather crowded, packing a great deal into each panel and using detail to build up the sense of a coherent world inhabited by the characters. Right at the start it's established that they're all pretty unpleasant; it's also clear that they like to play sexual roles, which is what prompted a lot of the criticisms. No one who enjoyed *American Flagg!*, which is littered with moments of violent sex, should really complain that the fucking and sucking in *Black Kiss* oversteps the boundaries. It's definitely pornographic, but hardly harmful. Originally published in short segments, prior to being issued as a collection it was republished as three issues titled *Big Black Kiss*.~FJ

BLACK KNIGHT

Atlas: *5 issues 1955-1956*
Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1990, one-shot ('Exodus') 1996*

Stan Lee wrote the 1950s series, ably illustrated by Joe Maneely, most of which was reprinted in *Fantasy Masterpieces* and the first series of *Marvel Super-Heroes*. It's set in the court of King Arthur. Unable to oppose the machinations of Mordred and Morgan Le Fay openly, Sir Percy adopted the identity of the Black Knight. His ebony blade was cursed with repercussions for his descendant Dane Whitman centuries later, rendering him less mobile every time it drew blood. By the start of the 1990 series he's a statue. Roy and Dann Thomas condense the histories of the assorted Black Knights admirably in the first issue, there are plenty of guest stars, and Mordred and Morgan are up to their old tricks, but Tony De Zuniga and Rich Buckler's uninspired art torpedoes their efforts. The 1996 effort sets Whitman in the body of a 12th century ancestor and features Sersi and Apocalypse. It's rubbish.~WJ

THE BLACK LAMB

DC/Helix: *6 issue miniseries 1996-1997*

Much as you may like Tim Truman, this tale of a vampire avenger is terribly hackneyed. The Black Lamb visits vengeance on those who kill vampires, whoever they may be, and as such is a sort of bogeyman to human and vampire alike. As concepts go it's a dead end, with a vaguely futuristic setting to qualify it as part of the Helix science-fiction line.~NF

BLACK LIGHTNING

DC: *Series one 11 issues 1977-1978, series two 13 issues 1995-1996*

The man with the electric force field was DC's attempt to portray a modern black superhero in the 1970s. Created by

* Available in a collected edition

Tony Isabella, the series had Black Lightning battling the 100, a criminal organisation run by the aptly named Tobias Whale. The last issue had a back-up starring Golden Age character The Ray, but that didn't save the series from cancellation. Tony Isabella revived his creation in 1995 and fared a bit better than the original, with somewhat grittier stories. There was certainly a decent urban feel to them, but not much seemed to have changed over the decades.~HY

BLACK MAGIC

DC: *9 issues 1973-1975*

A reprint series that featured pre-comics-code horror stories edited and primarily drawn by the team of Joe Simon and Jack Kirby. It's high quality as you would expect from these two, one of the industry's most successful team-ups, especially the eerie art style. Other artists contributing included Mort Meskin and John Prentice making this a lot better than most new mystery/horror comics during the 1970s.~HY

BLACK MAGIC

Eclipse: *4 issue miniseries 1990**

There is much that is good about Masamune Shirow's work, and much that is bad. That it emanates from a largely alien culture exacerbates the often annoying differences in plot-structure and pacing you experience when reading Appleseed. Black Magic reprints his earliest series, a rather obvious (but nonetheless complicated) re-telling of the Greek creation myths set in a far future were a genetically-engineered mankind lives on Venus, ruled over by a bioroid called Zeus and closely watched by the Nemesis computer. Nemesis has created another bioroid to challenge Zeus' supremacy and hidden her among the ordinary populace until it's time to fight him. Shirow tells the story of Typhon the bioroid with the mixture of pomp, charm and humour peculiar to his work. The trappings are rather too grand for such a simple story and the development of character is jerky, as huge amounts of space have to be found for battles. Interesting for fans of his work, but not the place to start exploring Manga.~FJ

BLACK MIST

Caliber: *4 issue miniseries 1994*, 3 issues 1997-1998*

The miniseries (titled 'Anguish of the Mist') tells how Christian Allen, a US P.O.W as the Great War draws to a close, 'dies' as a result of an experiment by German doctors and becomes a monstrous being roaming the German trenches, slaughtering soldiers with a black, acidic mist. Allen's inner struggle to overcome the monster he has become is not original but is handled well. 2 has a guest appearance by Caliber hot-shot Kilroy. The second series is part of the Caliber Core group of titles and follows directly the events in *Red Diaries*. Dr Lonnie Talbot's corpse is stolen by Thugs (the cult, not gangsters), revived as an avatar of the Goddess Kali, and let loose on the ills of modern society with a kiss of death and swirling, acid mists. An above average use of an old, old plot. Worth a look.~WW

BLACK ORCHID

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1988-1989**

DC/Vertigo: *22 issues, 1 Annual 1993-1995*

The Black Orchid débuted in 1973 in *Adventure Comics* 428, a flying, superstrong mystery woman whose true identity and origin were never revealed. After a few stories, she fizzled out into such obscurity that writer Neil Gaiman, on proposing a revival of the character to DC, was allegedly greeted with blank looks and one puzzled question: "Blackhawk Kid? Was he in the Legion of Super-Heroes?" Fortunately, Gaiman persisted, and the three-issue series gave us a new take on the Orchid, solving some mysteries while generating others, in a suspenseful and haunting tale that established the Orchid as a major player on the darker side of the DC Universe. Superbly illustrated by Dave McKean at a time when he still bothered to draw, it's a thoroughly satisfying read. Somewhat after the event, DC decided to add an ongoing *Black Orchid* series to their new Vertigo line, and Dick Foreman initially set her in an urban environment, where she worked surprisingly well. Rather too soon, the action switched to the rainforest, and things began to ramble rather, despite the ironic humour that characterised Foreman's work. Coupled with the replacement of opening artist Jill Thompson by less talented hands, it all added up to an impression that some heroes don't stand up to being explained, analysed, or even portrayed in too much detail. The annual ties in to the 'Children's Crusade' crossover.~HS

Recommended: Miniseries 1-3.

BLACK PANTHER

Marvel: *Series one 15 issues 1977-1979, 4 issue miniseries 1988, 4 issue miniseries ('Panther's Prey') 1991, series two 50 issues + 1998 to date*

When Jack Kirby rejoined Marvel in the late 1970s the Black Panther's much lauded run in *Jungle Action* was abruptly cancelled. Kirby immediately put his own stamp on King T'Challa of Wakanda, the Black Panther, pretty much ignoring everything that had happened since he created him for *Fantastic Four* 52. His Panther eschewed all political and social relevance in favour of fantastic science and breakneck adventure. In short order the Panther meets the world's most rabid and homicidal antiques collectors and becomes involved with time machines, invasions from the future, escaped convicts, lost civilisations and lots and lots of monsters before returning to his own hidden kingdom. Here Kirby once again whips up enough new ideas to feed succeeding writers for decades. He introduces the Royal Family of the Wakandas, deals with the economic and mutagenic power of Vibranium (the mystery element that is the only bankable resource of the Panther's homeland) and most importantly, returns a flavour of ethnicity to what is fundamentally not a land of Americans of colour. They may not have been accurate portrayals of Africans, but Kirby's cast were recognisably not the people that you saw and heard on your own streets. That flavour of the exotic would be better used later, but it noticeably started here. Kirby left halfway through another fantasy opus with 12, involving molecular vampirism and new powers for the Panther. His replacements brought the story to a rapid conclusion and returned T'Challa to New York and the less risky arena of mainstream superheroics with the Avengers featuring heavily in 14 and 15. The impetus was lost and for the second time a *Black Panther* series ended in the middle of a tale, being finally concluded in *Marvel Premiere*, which became a kind of clearing house for cancelled titles in its own latter days.

He bummed around in various Marvel titles before a miniseries that dealt, albeit rather timidly, with the issue of apartheid. The neighbouring white ruled African nation of Azania abuses Wakandan citizens to such an extent that not only does T'Challa lose his position as King but also the sponsorship of the Panther Spirit that is the fundamental source of his abilities. Peter B. Gillis and Denys Cowan provide a good-looking, well intentioned, but ultimately insubstantial story that is still better than the next miniseries, three years later following a long serial in *Marvel Comics Presents*. In 'Panther's Prey', Don McGregor and Dwayne Turner slickly rehash McGregor's 'Panther's Rage' from *Jungle Action*. Yet another band of rebels attempts to depose the King whilst the author tries to cram resolutions to all the hanging plot and characters threads left unresolved from his previous run, resulting in a bland and overblown mess.

The next return was under the Marvel Knights banner with Christopher Priest catapulting the Panther into the heart of contemporary political and social context as well as the heartland of the Marvel Universe. Racial and tribal hatreds in the nation of Ghudaza destabilise Wakandan society when refugees from genocide flood into the

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* Available in a collected edition

Hidden Kingdom and force T'Challa to cede control to their spiritual leader the Reverend Dr. Achebe. Relocating to New York with his close entourage, he is assigned an aid, Everett K. Ross, from the US Office of the Chief of Protocol – responsible for wrangling foreign diplomats and dignitaries on American soil – and begins long range plans to regain his kingdom. Ross becomes the narrative voice for the series, giving The Panther a sense of awesome mystery, as the reader is no longer privy to the hero's innermost workings. There is some truly inspired plotting, especially in 'Enemy of the State' (9-12) where T'Challa regains control of his country by declaring war on America, and when, inevitably, long-time foe Killmonger finally rears his dreadlocked head (15-20). Priest constantly inverts comics tradition to produce captivating superhero stories shot through with his trademark sharp, funny dialogue. In another break with custom, Priest has also worked hard to include the minutiae, no matter how dumb or dated, from all previous series. Even the time-busting King Solomon's Frog (series one 1-4) makes a bewildering reappearance during a tale of past and future selves (45-50). With capable art from the likes of Mark Texeira, Mike Manley, Joe Jusko and Sal Velluto this incarnation of the Black Panther is an absolute joy to read.~WW

Recommended: Series Two 1-6, 9-20

The BLACK PEARL

Dark Horse: *5 issue miniseries 1996-1997**

Appearing in so many films and TV shows since his break in *Star Wars* has obviously given Mark Hamill an appreciation of the elements resulting in a decent script, and here he combines with Eric Johnson to produce just that. The theme concerns just what would prompt someone to don a costume and fight crime in the real world. The mantle falls on court clerk Luther, part-time voyeur whose object of desire is abducted in his presence. Lashing out, he kills one of the kidnappers, but can't prevent her kidnap. His escape is filmed, and the film stolen by a talk-show host on the slide, doctored and screened to show a hero dubbed the Black Pearl escaping. Luther subsequently adopts the identity, tracking the remaining kidnappers down and killing them. Public reaction veers from gung-ho endorsement to concerns about civil rights via opinions between, with the talk-show host reviving his career via extensive Black Pearl promotion. This comic has some interesting points to make, and enough fine touches displaying the care applied to the scripts, such as Luther having to bolt to stop his answerphone message from activating during a public broadcast. The art team of H.M. Baker and Bruce Patterson provide clean, detailed and appealing visuals conveying the necessary small details very well, making for a solid adventure thriller.~FP

Recommended: 1-5

BLACK PLAGUE and Jimmy the Leper

Keenspot Entertainment: *2 issues + 2001 to date*

Funny gross-out superhero parody from Paul Southworth and Roger Sims. Jimmy the Leper is the long-suffering sidekick of his elder brother, The Black Plague, who has the power to inflict diseases at will and is a venal and vindictive hero at best. Jimmy wasn't always a leper, after all. In their premiere outing they save Cesspool Junction from a squid who's the reincarnation of Adolf Hitler and 2 sees them selling their bodies to science to make ends meet and maybe pay the hospital for sewing Jimmy's extremities back on. Great stuff!~WW

Recommended: 1

BLACK SUN

WildStorm: *6 issue miniseries 2002-2003*

In Hong Kong, Inspector Maggie Sun is an anti-procedural, reckless police officer, whose father, Hsu, is her commander. Her rich uncle, Zhao, is involved with some very dangerous non-human villains, who appear to be linked to the latest, addictive, toy fad, Wrist Dragons. This is a well told, if rather clichéd, tough cop story from Marc Andreyko, but Trevor Scott's artwork is occasionally muddled by atrocious colouring.~NF

THE BLACK TERROR

Eclipse: *3 issue miniseries 1989-1990*

In a world where a Capone is Governor of Illinois, Ryan Delvecchio appears to be just another Mob enforcer. At night, however, he becomes the Black Terror, a masked vigilante trying to bring down the Capones' criminal empire. Allison Capone has her own plans, that involve displacing her father and destroying the world's financial centres. Frankie Dio, Ryan's partner in crime, has his own hidden backers who would be as happy to grab the power for themselves as bring down the Capones. This moody, noir thriller is written by Beau Smith and Chuck Dixon in an efficient, hardboiled manner but it's Daniel Brereton's artwork that raises the story from the humdrum. The images of Allison, in particular, always catch the hint of her true nature. Overall, it's a good read. Brereton's not reached his best yet but there's plenty to enjoy.~NF

BLACK TIDE

Image: *4 issue miniseries 2001*

Mike Miller illustrates a slight yet muddled tale of three superspies who unbeknownst to some of them are in fact semi-reincarnated royalty from the hidden but omnipresent Atlantean empire that exists below the floor of the Atlantic Ocean. Writer Debbie Bishop jams too much by-play and back-story into what is basically a mindless shoot'em-up. Dissatisfaction is compounded by the miniseries coming to a cliffhanger but not ending, readers being told to wait for a succeeding series from another publisher at a future date. Unprofessional and unacceptable~WW

BLACK WIDOW

Marvel: *Graphic Novel 1990, 3 issue miniseries 1999*, one-shot ('Web of Intrigue') 1999, 3 issue miniseries 2001*, 3 issue miniseries 2002*

Perennial bit-player Natasha Romanov, the Black Widow, has enjoyed a lengthy comic career, but had to wait until the 1990s for any success. Following appearances as an alluring villain in *Iron Man* and *Avengers*, she reformed and progressed to cover status in early 1970s *Daredevil* and a decent series in *Amazing Adventures*. The Black Widow's first full-length solo stories were in the patchy *Marvel Fanfare* 10-13, collected in the 1999 one-shot. The graphic novel, 'The Coldest War' by Gerry Conway, George Freeman and an army of inkers, was equally patchy, but interestingly played up the character's cold war origins, as did later appearances. Much better was the 1999 miniseries by Devin Grayson and J.G. Jones, which pitted Romanov against a blonde replacement and made its artist a star, thanks to some of the decade's finest art. The 2001 follow-up was another quality production, with Jones being replaced by an equally impressive Scott Hampton. Sadly, a third miniseries by Greg Rucka and Igor Kordey looked rushed, and its sleazy subject matter might well have killed an entertaining title.~DAR

Recommended: 1999 miniseries 1-3

Gene Day's BLACK ZEPPELIN

Renegade: *5 issues 1985-1986*

An anthology title created in the late 1970s, featuring work by Gene Day, his brothers Dan and David, and various creative friends, including a young Dave Sim. Day's busy schedule never allowed him time to publish, and after his untimely death friends and family dusted off the old pages and finished it. Most stories are horror and fantasy tales by young enthusiasts, which show promise but are immature, thus more interesting as history than entertainment. The first issue encapsulates the balance of the series as a whole, with scripts by Day, illustrated by himself and brother Dan, plus strips from Charles Vess and Sim.~NF

BLACKBALL COMICS

Blackball: *1 issue 1994*

Short-lived anthology series (and company) bringing together Kevin O'Neill, Keith Giffen, Simon Bisley and others to little effect. O'Neill's 'John Pain' retreads some of the ground of *Marshall Law*, while Keith Giffen's Trencher is more unreadable, expressionistic experimentation.~NF

BLACKHAWK

DC: *Series one 166 issues 1957-1968 (108-243), 1976-1977 (244-250), 1982-1984 (251-273), 3 issue miniseries 1988, series two 16 issues, 1 Annual 1989-1990, 1 Special 1992*

Created by Will Eisner and Chuck Cuidera Blackhawk was originally published by Quality Comics, in both this and *Military/Modern Comics*. Blackhawk leads the team of fighter pilots named after him. Formed during World War II, their original raison d'être was as refugees from occupied countries fighting Nazis, and a hardbound collection of their earliest stories is available as Blackhawk Archives. At the time of their acquisition by DC they were a tired bunch, having spent a decade seeing off Nazis, then assorted Communist-sponsored threats. Keeping the solid Dick Dillin as artist, DC dispensed with the Commies, introducing more science fiction and supervillains, the most frequently recurring of whom was former Nazi Killer Shark. They also returned Lady Blackhawk, an adventuress who often accompanied the team, and made a positive step in transforming Chinese racial caricature Chop Chop into a more rounded human being. That said, the comics were unremarkable, with little to differentiate Blackhawk from other DC adventure titles published concurrently. All applied a simple formula of an attention-grabbing cover featuring an astounding situation, all too often explained away by ridiculous contrivance inside, two to three short gimmick-plot-based stories per issue and little characterisation. What made the Blackhawks unique was their ability as pilots, and a long career as combat adventurers, yet this was of little relevance to most stories.

Gaudier uniforms débuted in 197 and Bob Haney become writer with 202. He gave the cast and stories some individuality, starting with an origin and motivation for Chop Chop in 203. The back-ups were formalised into series, with the individual tales of the team members in 'Detached Service Diary' the best. The changes obviously did little for sales, however, and from 228, during the height of the Batman TV show's success, an all-time misguided editorial judgement transformed the Blackhawks into the most preposterous superheroes imaginable. Each team member assumed an identity conforming to a particular skill, with the most embarrassing being radio operator Chuck, now clad in blue pyjamas spattered with pink ears and rechristened The Listener. Only Blackhawk himself retained a modicum of dignity amid this sorry camp bunch, and it was the kiss of death after twenty years, a last-ditch attempt to restore honour in 242-243 coming too late. Cancellation was a mercy killing.

The 1970s revival was uninspired, but correctly restored the team to Blackhawk Island as a respected mercenary and security force. Mark Evanier and Dan Spiegle are the creative spark for the next revival, and, recognising that the Blackhawks have the greatest impact in World War II, their contribution is set in 1940, combining the frequent appearances of Hitler common to comics of the period with strong stories. And for the first time the entire squad have characters transcending national stereotypes, although Blackhawk himself is still rather the brave blank slate. Evanier also restores the 'Detached Service Diary' in the company of a stunning selection of artists (260 and 268 are nothing but). Producing the best Blackhawk stories to date didn't convince buyers, but at least the first Blackhawk series died an honourable death.

A Howard Chaykin shock-tactic makeover finally gave Blackhawk a character. It wasn't a particularly pleasant one, with him designated the callous libertine, previously the exclusive province of the French André. The miniseries proved popular enough to warrant another stab at a regular series in *Action* 601-635 before a second ongoing title. It moves the team forward to 1947, with Blackhawk operating an air charter service acting as a front for CIA-sponsored activities. The more distasteful aspects of the miniseries are tempered by Martin Pasko and Rick Burchett, who deal largely with the murky consequences of an association with the CIA and the anti-communist paranoia that fuelled the era. From 4 those in power who consider the Blackhawks a liability take action, and from that point the title is very good, second only to the Evanier and Spiegle run. It tinkers with the Blackhawks personnel for the first time in fifty years, and is solid adventure with interesting narratives and imaginative plot twists. Sadly, once again, this wasn't enough to attract an audience able to sustain the title. Doug Moench concludes things, rapidly finishing Pasko's plots and starting his own, which, although adequate, don't match preceding issues.~WJ

Recommended: Series one 259, 264-267, 269-271, Series two 6-10

BLACKJACK

Dark Angel Productions: *3 issue miniseries 1996-1997, 2 issues ('Blood & Honor') 1997-1998, 1 volume ('Blood & Honor') 1999*

The creation of writer, Alex Simmons, Blackjack is a negro soldier-of-fortune whose adventures are set in the 1930s. The first series introduces Arron Day and his supporting cast and pits him against an old enemy of his father, the Cobra. With exotic settings (Egypt in the first series, China in the second) and strong female as well as male leads, this is a good, thoughtfully written action adventure series. The accomplished artwork on the first series, by Joe Bennett (reminiscent, in different places, of Joe Kubert and Matt Wagner), is unfortunately not present on the second, which suffers from ten different artists. The collected 'Blood & Honor'completes the miniseries (originally intended as four-issues).~NF

BLACKMARK

Bantam: *1 volume 1971*

Fantagraphics: *1 volume 2002*

Unusually, for the time, a paperback book rather than a comic, and the innovative storytelling technique of typeset text illustrated by comic panels disguise what is in reality a fairly ordinary sword and sorcery strip. Although a genre piece, Gil Kane's superbly dynamic art and solid grasp of language raises Blackmark well above most of its rivals. Sporadic inking from Neal Adams doesn't do any harm either. This book was reprinted in *Savage Sword of Conan*, and a second novel saw print years later in *Marvel Preview* 17. Both are collected in the Fantagraphics volume.~DAR

BLACKMASK

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1993*

Jim Baikie's moody, noir style gives this retro pulp thriller atmosphere, but Brian Augustyn's script lacks depth and suspense. Harking back to Hollywood's preoccupation with organised crime, Augustyn updates the setting to the 1950s and his script reflects the nihilistic overtones of the classic 1960s thriller (by the likes of Donald Westlake and Lawrence Block). His main character is a shellshocked Korean veteran, but unfortunately neither he nor any of the bit players engage your sympathy. Comes over as a bit of a technical exercise.~NF

BLACKOPS

Image: *5 issue miniseries 1996**

A hi-tech spy story throwing a team of government agents against a would-be world ruler specialising in the construction of robots and high-power battle suits. It's all very Cold War, and laughable when authenticity is conveyed by the use of dozens of military acronyms, each of which has to be explained with a footnote. That said, there's enough action and deception to keep up the interest, and it's encouraging to see spy novels as an influence in the place of old comics.~FP

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* Available in a collected edition

BLACKWULF

Marvel: *10 issues 1994-1995*

If the pages-long fight scenes had been trimmed a little there might have been something interesting going on. As it is there are about twenty new superpowered characters involved in an interstellar plot about genetic manipulation stretching back centuries that all comes to a premature end after the sales figures have been scanned.~FP

BLADE

Marvel: *Series one 10 issues 1994-1995, one-shot ('Crescent City Blues') 1998, one-shot ('Sins of the Father') 1998, series two 3 issues 1998-1999, 6 issue miniseries 1999-2000*
Max: *6 issue miniseries 2002*

Blade is an Afro-American vampire hunter created by Marv Wolfman and Gene Colan during their critically-acclaimed run on *Tomb of Dracula* in the 1970s. His mother was bitten by a vampire just as he was about to be born, an attack that proved fatal for her, but conveyed upon the infant the status of a 'Daywalker', one possessed of all the strengths, and none of the weaknesses, of a vampire. It also gave him an incredible loathing of vampires, and he has dedicated his life to slaying them. After *Tomb of Dracula* folded, Blade was left homeless until the short-lived *Nightstalkers* series, where he teamed with two other *ToD* alumni Frank Drake and Hannibal King. Following this modest success, he was tried solo again in 1994, but it was an unhappy mix of modern shocker and 'Streetwise' dude clichés left over from Blaxploitation movies. The whole lacklustre premise should have remained in the 1970's. A few years later, Blade was optioned for a movie starring Wesley Snipes, which became, to everyone's astonishment, Marvel's first successful movie franchise, a stylish and accomplished horror film which has spawned one sequel, with more in the pipeline. 'Sins of the Father' was the comic adaptation, preceded by 'Crescent City Blues', which in many ways dug the foundations for the movie. Blade learns that Deacon Frost, the vampire who killed his mother, has been organising vampires to take on the Mafia in New Orleans. Reuniting Blade with his old artist, Gene Colan, it was an effective combination of old and new sensibilities.

Under Marvel's short-lived 'Strange Tales' imprint, three issues appeared in which Blade roamed around New Orleans mopping up the undead while facing the machinations of the mysterious Dominique and Michael Morbius. All that scripter Don McGregor proved was that he had lost none of his notorious propensity for loquaciousness since the 1970s, but at least it was competent, which is more than could be said for the next foray launched in 1999. Drawn and (using this term in the vaguest possible sense) written by the inexplicably popular Bart Sears, it was so determined to be 'kewl' and 'tuff' that it is completely impenetrable. Our hero runs around dressed in what looks like a pair of opaque support tights (all that exposed skin v. practical for vampire-hunting...) while fending off the attentions of a sinister industrialist with a hidden agenda and an uber-vampire. A 1940s hero is brought back from Limbo in 4, only to die a pointless death shortly thereafter. One would be indignant about this if the whole mess wasn't so damn soporific.

Never holding back from flogging a dead horse, Marvel actually managed to beat some life back into it with the 2002 series. Under Marvel's adult-oriented (tits n' swearing) Max imprint scripter Christopher Hinz and artist Steve Pugh produced a tense and atmospheric thriller reminiscent of the film, but not derivative of it. A new breed of vampire is on the rise, and Blade is forced into an uneasy alliance with a secret organisation who fight supernatural threats. Blade is given an interesting supporting cast, most of whom survive to the end, and some genuine relationships with others. The pacing is a little odd, as 5 ends on a semi-cliffhanger, and 6 is a fairly good, but completely separate, stand-alone story with no connection to the previous issues. Since the series was planned as six issues, this is a little perplexing. Nevertheless, it's by far the best Blade solo series to date, and it is to be hoped that there will be follow-ups.~HS

BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL

Dark Horse: *74 issues +, 1 Special 1996 to date*

Hirokai Samura, the man behind this extraordinary Modernist re-interpretation of the classic samurai revenge comic, is probably the most important creator not working in English to be introduced to Western audiences in the 1990s. Drawing upon a long tradition of carefully observed action artwork, he brings a tightness of line and breadth of technique to his black and white work that is quite stunning, frequently using pastel effects and pencil work alongside inking that ranges from almost ethereal to controlled and detailed, to action frames that look like a herd of spiders have trampled through an ink drift. The sensitivity of his line is immensely pleasurable and the design of his splash pages, often carried out in soft pencil in contrast to the scenes of extreme violence they portray, is at once beautiful and terrifying.

Dark Horse published a one issue special introducing his scruffy, but arrogant, twelve-bladed hero Manji, cursed to live forever following the introduction of mysterious worms into his blood stream that repair almost any damage by a shuffling old woman claiming to be 800 years old. Manji is a wild dog Ronin, known as 100-cop-killer. He's cursed with the theoretical immortality after killing the lord for whom he slew the 100 men, on discovering the lord himself was a thief. As a result his worldview is a little jaundiced – that and being hideously hacked, maimed and wounded on a regular basis. In reparation for his unthinking slaying of 100 lawmen, Manji vows to kill 1000 genuinely bad blokes, but having had the samurai system of honour blown apart by his realisation about his own lord, he has increasing difficulty identifying who they are. Eventually he winds up with a price on his head for the brutal slayings of three seemingly innocent travellers (actually renegade swordsmen), done by a psychopath he later tries to kill. Throughout the comic Samura plays with ideas of honour, right and wrong.

He begins what's turning into an epic tale by teaming Manji up with Rin, a teenage girl who's trying for revenge on the bunch of renegade swordsmen who, two years earlier, killed her father and mother when they eradicated the fighting school her father ran. These renegades, under the charismatic leadership of Anotsu Kagehisi, want to destroy the numerous fight schools in Japan and unite all the fighters under their banner, teaching that anything that keeps you alive and lets you win is permissible. So far so good, you think, she's in the right, he's good for helping her, these ruffians are definitely wronguns. As the story develops, and different characters are brought to the foreground, perspective begins to shift. As Manji and Rin encounter more and more of the renegade swordsmen involved in the attack, some of whom have left the gang for ideological reasons, some for practical ones, such as becoming single parents, we're offered a series of takes on the violent event that sets the whole story in motion, and the reasons each had for taking part, from sheer blood lust to ideological righteousness.

Samura systematically removes your right to like his 'hero' and 'heroine' as they question their behaviour, although this makes them more likeable simply as characters. He stops and follows Anotsu's tale, revealing his political motivation, and introduces a gang of state-sponsored assassins led by the machiavellian and seemingly cold-hearted Hyakurin, sentenced to death for killing her husband after the death of their child, for some unexplained reason. She's released along with other killers a la Dirty Dozen, provided they do the government's dirty work. When Manji and Rin throw in their lot with them, it allows Samura to explore even more shades of grey as they set out to murder Anotsu. At the same time, Blade is a coming of age story, a bildungsroman, and takes the traditional western form of a journey. Rin journeys through Edo period Japan looking for revenge, and growing into maturity.

Samura's use of language is startling, and may not please some purists. He switches from formalised utterances to street slang within the same word balloon, and has his characters exchange poetic couplets when they swear at each other. This gives a startling modernity and vitality to the period setting. Similarly some later issues are extremely violent. Some of the torture scenes are unpleasant and shocking, and carried out in full view of the reader. They're gut-wrenching, even in a comic featuring bloody fights too numerous to count, including some amazing sequences like the one where Manji uses dripping, hacked off bits of his own limbs to trick assassins on his trail into thinking he's hiding in trees. It's not for the weak stomached.

The other difficulty with the series is that Samura did not want his artwork 'mirrored' (the flipping of pages before the words are added so they read from left to right instead of the oriental right to left). Wherever possible the panels are cut and re-pasted, but at times you'll find you have to read from right to left to make sense of the action! A small price to pay for what is developing into a masterpiece not only of samurai comics, but of manga, full stop. Issues to 72 are now collected in books.~FJ

Recommended: Special, 1-74

Sergio Aragonés' BLAIR WHICH?

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1999*

Feeble humour cash-in on *The Blair Witch Project.* In Aragonés' version of events, it's a group of cub scouts camping in the same woods who are responsible for the documentary makers' terror. The laughs are non-existent.~DB

BLAIR WITCH

Oni Press: *One-shot 1999, 4 issue miniseries (The Blair Witch Chronicles) 2000*

A surprise box office hit in 1999, Eduardo Sanchez and Daniel Myrick's The Blair Witch Project was a low budget spookfest ingeniously made to look like a 'recovered' documentary recording of 'genuine' supernatural activity. In the one-shot writer Jen Van Meter tries the same sort of trick, claiming that her trio of tall tales are based on a bizarre mini-comic issued by one Cece Malvey in 1983, which may or may not be a knowing nod in the direction of the hoax Australian poet 'Ern Malley'. As with the film, the strips all revolve around a small town called Burkittsville, where a vengeful witch haunts the deep, dark Blair Woods. The anthology series follows the same basic formula of unwitting innocents encountering the witch to be cursed by her, but Van Meter's varied and allusive storytelling often succeeds in evoking the film's sense of creeping dread. Van Meter is helped by such sympathetic artistic collaborators as Tommy Lee Edwards, Guy Davis and Bernie Mireault, although the covers on all issues are uniformly poor. All in all, as unnecessary movie cash-ins go, this one really isn't too bad at all.~AL

Recommended: 2

BLAIR WITCH Dark Testaments

Image: *One-shot 2000*

A prequel to *The Blair Witch Project*, exploring the background to the murders mentioned in the film. Helped by Charlie Adlard's bleak artwork, Ian Edginton's strangely eerie tale doesn't attempt to explain too much of what happens in the woods, retaining the sense of mystery that made the film such a hit.~DB

BLAKE AND MORTIMER

Editions B&M: *6 volumes 1986-1988*
Comcat: *2 volumes 1989-1990*

Robust English adventurers Captain Francis Blake and Professor Philip Mortimer made their début in the September 26th 1946 edition of the Belgian children's anthology *Tintin.* Written and drawn by baritone opera singer and former Hergé assistant Edgar P. Jacobs, from the start the strip was distinguished by the author's obsessive attention to detail, as well as a 'clear line' drawing style that showcased his formidable design skills. Inspired by the works of H.G. Wells and Jules Verne, Blake and Mortimer's exotic science-fiction adventures are amongst the most revered of all European strip classics, 'juvenile' comic albums still capable of engaging adult imaginations.

When the outbreak of World War II put an end to Jacobs' promising operatic career he resumed his first calling, as an artist contributing illustrations and cartoons to a variety of publications. From the mid-1940s Jacobs worked as an assistant to Hergé, re-formatting old *Tintin* pages, adding glorious colour to black and white stories, working on the strip's authentic backgrounds and décor (most notably for *King Ottokar's Sceptre*) and making an appearance on the front of *Cigars of the Pharaoh* as mummified Professor 'E.P. Jacobini'. Encouraged by Hergé, Jacobs began work on the first Blake and Mortimer adventure 'The Secret of the Swordfish' in 1946, a vast narrative eventually collected into three albums, which were published between 1950 and 1953. This futuristic war story introduced many of the strip's defining motifs: Jacobs' love of technology and archaeology at the expense of human feeling, huge chunks of expository dialogue, recurring villain Orlik, and a peerless story-telling technique. Marred by its racist depiction of 'The Yellow Peril', the three volumes of 'Swordfish' nevertheless chart the maturation of Jacobs' style. By the following story-line, the two-volume adventure 'The Secret of the Great Pyramid' (1954-1955), the marriage between style and content was complete, with Jacobs immersing himself in the world of Ancient Egypt to produce a mesmerising story about the hidden tomb of heretic pharaoh Akhnaton. Next was Jacobs' undisputed masterpiece, the single-volume adventure 'The Yellow Mark' (1956). Set in fog-bound London, this moody mind-control mystery pits Blake and Mortimer against a seemingly superhuman burglar who marks his crimes with the letter m, the yellow mark of the title. Using his own extensive photographic reference collection, Jacobs created a love-letter to England's capital, his inherent conservatism clearly enraptured by London's dark history, timeless monuments and respectable institutions.

After 'The Yellow Mark' Jacobs completed only four more forty-four-page albums: 'S.O.S Meteors' (1959), a French-based noir with Orlik as advance guard for a Soviet invasion, 'The Time Trap' (1962), an almost solo Mortimer time-travel romp, 'The Queen's Necklace' (1965), a fairly straightforward detective adventure, and the first volume of 'The Three Formulae Of Professor Sato' (1972). The second volume of Sato remained uncompleted after Jacobs' death, and was eventually finished by former Hergé assistant Bob DeMoor in 1990. Whilst Jacobs' work lacks the sharp character humour of Hergé's Tintin – Blake and Mortimer remain little more than functional stereotypes, the dotty Prof and stiff-upper-lipped military man – its imaginative scope and passionate verisimilitude continue to inspire and seduce readers and creators.

Despite Blake and Mortimer's European pre-eminence, Jacobs' oeuvre remains largely unknown in America and Britain. In the mid-1980s Jacobs' estate established Blake and Mortimer Editions and finally produced English editions of 'Swordfish', 'Pyramid' and 'The Yellow Mark' (as 'The Yellow M', for some reason). Despite their attractive size and faithful reproduction these volumes were poorly publicised, ineptly translated and are now out of print. Also hard to come by are the two volumes issued by Catalan, through their children's imprint Comcat Comics. Despite their smaller size, these versions of 'Atlantis Mystery' and 'Time Trap' boast far better translations, and are well worth seeking out.~AL

Recommended: *Atlantis Mystery, The Time Trap, The Yellow M*

BLANCHE GOES TO...

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1992, one-shot 1993*

The whimsy and nostalgia forming the strongest threads of Rick Geary's works are united in his tale of a new arrival firstly in 1907 New York, and then in 1915 Hollywood.

There's a decent period feel to New York, as Blanche studies under an eccentric musician with an odd secret, but the follow-up better. As in the previous issue, her story is told as illustrated letters home. By emphasising the expanse of Los Angeles, the general naïvety, and the head of the film studio attempting to impart wholesome entertainment with a moral message, Geary implicitly contrasts them with today's equivalents in a wistful fashion. There's an edge to the story, though, with agitation concerning the poor working conditions in the early picture industry, but for Geary it's more an occurrence for Blanche to witness than any comment. It's all drawn in his gloriously simple, yet detailed style, and the conclusion hints at an era floating away. Magnificent.~WJ
Recommended: *Blanche Goes To Hollywood*

BLANDMAN

Eclipse: *One-shot 1992*

Despite being titled to attract *Sandman* fans, this wretched parody casts its net over comics as a whole in 1992, focussing more on DC titles than any other. That the creators are only identified in miniscule type in the indicia probably speaks of their shame at having produced such a woeful attempt at a cash-in.~FP

BLAST CORPS

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1998*

Buzzy art by Pop Mhan and stupid writing in this shoot-'em-up based on computer game. A collection of reprints from *Nintendo Power* magazine.~WW

BLASTERS Special

DC: *One-shot 1989*

Writer Peter David performs a minor miracle by taking a bunch of feeble throwaway characters created by DC's Invasion crossover and combining them with the Justice League's old mascot Snapper Carr to forge the most eccentric superteam yet. Finding that none of the genetically altered humans can find a purpose on Earth, they hook up with a spacefaring cat-woman and head off for adventures in the outer galaxy. The Blasters won't be to everyone's taste with lots of in-jokes, comedy clichés and breaking of the fourth wall, but the light tone of the comic is a pleasant bubblegum read. James Fry and Robert Campanella's art remains just the right side of cartoony to retain its appeal.~HS

BLAZE

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1993-1994, 12 issues 1994-1995*

Johnny Blaze, the original demon biker at Marvel, stars in limp supernatural encounters in the hope of mounting the then lucrative *Ghost Rider* bandwagon. Happily, the anticipated demand was of short duration, and within eighteen months he was back to a supporting role in his successor's comic.~HS

BLAZE OF GLORY

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 2000**

John Ostrander makes exciting fun from not immoderately unintelligent and uneducational ludicrous revisionist meta-fictional retelling of *The Magnificent Seven Samurai*. It's recast with all the old Marvel western characters right down to Caleb Hammer, Red Wolf and even the 'relevant' Gunhawks. Suitably adequate art by Leonardo Manco is not enhanced by Mariana Manco's colouring.~GK

BLAZING BATTLE TALES

Atlas: *1 issue 1975*

In common with other Atlas titles you got more graphically portrayed violence for your buck, but otherwise an ordinary war title.~FP

BLAZING COMBAT

Warren: *4 issues 1965-1966*

This was packaged like a standard bloodthirsty war comic: "Exciting Battle and Adventure", it says on the cover, and "Illustrated Excitement in War". How many outraged letters were sent along the lines of: "What kind of war comic do you call this? You must be a bunch of pinkos, making out that the Germans and even the gooks are human beings, and never showing our boys but to have them fighting each other or running scared." They didn't print such letters if they arrived – maybe the potential critics were overawed by the quality of the work. It's not too hard to imagine such a reaction, since this is an astonishing comic. Almost all the stories are written by Archie Goodwin, also the editor, and they're mature, intelligent, sobering and always readable. Add to this a generous seven stories per issues and stunning black and white artwork from people such as Alex Toth, John Severin, Reed Crandall, Joe Orlando, Wally Wood, Gene Colan, Russ Heath, Gray Morrow and Angelo Torres, and it truly is breathtaking. Everyone should read this comic. There's barely a weak story in the four issues, but some deserve special mention: 'Cantigny' (1) for Read Crandall's fine pen and ink work; 'Enemy!' (1) for John Severin and a story of one American disturbed by another's brutality; 'Holding Action' (2) for John Severin and a depiction of the long-term mental effects of combat; 'Foragers' (3) for Reed Crandall's wash work and the reality of enforcing a scorched-earth strategy; 'U-Boat' (3) for Gene Colan and an exceptionally strong story of confused loyalties; 'Survival' (3) for Alex Toth and a grim post-World War III story; 'Souvenirs' (3) for John Severin and a gruesome moral tale; and 'Give and Take' (4) for Russ Heath's perfect artwork. Surely the best comic Warren ever produced, a selection of stories appear in a flimsy collection.~FC
Recommended: 1-4

BLAZING COMBAT

Apple: *2 issues ('Vietnam And Korea') 1993, 2 issues ('World War I and World War II') 1994*

As the subtitle suggests, the first series reprints the Vietnam and Korean war stories from the Warren comics, and the second the World War stories. Alongside the first series, though, there's material from Don Lomax reprinted from the *Vietnam Journal* collections, and featuring his reporter from that series. It's equally sympathetic and hard-hitting, and the remaining material has already been canonised. As the cheapest way of obtaining otherwise expensive masterpieces these series are indispensable.~WJ
Recommended: 'Vietnam And Korea' 1, 2, 'World War I and World War II' 1, 2

BLAZING SIX-GUNS

Skywald: *2 issues 1971*

Like all of Skywald's short-lived colour comics, this was a 52-page bonanza of humdrum new strips deftly mixed with humdrum reprints. The star of the show was the astonishingly average Sundance Kid by Len Wein and Dick Ayers, a character who soon graduated to his own equally unremarkable title. Passable material from the Avon and M.E. archives rounded out the package.~DAR

BLEAT

Slave Labor: *1 issue 1995*

Often screamingly funny odds and sods from the hearteningly demented mind and pen of Basilio Amaro. In this one issue you've got several condensed comics ('Good Cop, Bad Cop' is the best), wine reviews, a guide to the people who use communication forums on the Internet, a great introduction, a brilliant downbeat back cover, and wonderful cartooning. In a parallel universe Amaro lives in a luxury penthouse apartment, hosts his own talk show, and his inside-back-cover comments are true. More, more, more, please.~FP
Recommended

Peter Kuper's BLEEDING HEART

Fantagraphics: *4 issues 1992-1993*

Kuper is a true original, adopting a stark, fast style, often scratched onto black board, sometimes stencilled. His art is unique and instantly recognisable among comic artists, yet he's more appreciated as an illustrator. *Bleeding Heart* has autobiographical recollections alongside quirky nonsense, dream recitations, travelogues and the political commentary for which he's best known. This is useful in collecting Kuper strips that have previously appeared elsewhere (most frequently in *World War 3* and *Heavy Metal*), but the consequent lack of unity damages the magazine as a whole, and only the fourth issue contains a significant proportion of new material. That said, there's at least one essential strip in each issue, and such is Kuper's adaptability that they're completely different in tone and style. 'Gorillas' in 1 recounts a trip to Tanzania and the difficulty associated with a trip to see mountain gorillas, while 2's caustic premonition about New York, 'The Wall', is an all too believable fantasy. 'The Jungle' in 3 is a ghastly tale of urban 'renewal', and 4's tales of relationships and masturbation are frank and funny.~FP

Recommended: 1-4

BLINDSIDE

Image: *1 issue 1996*

By the numbers renegade covert agent with a gun, but able to see through walls. To read the fawning editorial by creator Marat Mychaels, though, about how he'd nurtured the character for a decade you'd imagine he'd come up with a startling original concept, not just adapted Hitman. What moments of pleasure occur are from the occasional wit of Robert Loren Fleming's script. The advertised second issue was published in part in Asylum 11, and Blindside hasn't been seen since.~FP

BLINK

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 2001*

In the alternate X-Men universe of The Age of Apocalypse Blink is a teleporting mutant who accidentally ends up in the anti-matter Negative Zone. Amnesiac, she's used as a pawn in a battle between major baddies Annihilus and Blastaar to control a super weapon that could destroy the universe. Uninspired writing from Scott Lobdell and Judd Winick, with competent art by Trevor McCarthy and a legion of inkers. The entire series, which is without an ending, is nothing but a loss-leader for another new comic *The Exiles*. Shameless and exploitative.~WW

BLIP

Bardic Press: *One-shot 1998*

Blip is the Book of Little Independent Publishers, and serves its purpose by offering promotional previews of a number of alternate (usually self-published) series. To make it a little more interesting, some previews were created especially for this collection, including those for Craig Taillefer's *Wahoo Morris*, Bill Knapp's *The Furies*, Teri S. Wood's *Darklight*, Joe Zabel's *Trespassers* and David Yurkovich's *Threshold*. Scott Morse's 'Harvest Season' is also new, but not connected to any specific series of his. The other previews are for *Dreamwalker, Astounding Space Thrills, Thieves and Kings, Shades of Grey, Strange Attractors, Galaxion, Finder* and *Mythography*. An additional feature is a two-page jam strip by Michael Cohen and Dave Sim – a bit of nonsense about symbols and psychoanalysis.~NF

BLISS ALLEY

Image: *2 issues 1997-1998*

Bill Messner-Loebs weaves some interesting urban tales about a down-and-out, all amusingly told in an unpatronising way. There's some weird and wacky characters making up a city's homeless society, including a floating rat. Messner-Loebs, always a versatile writer, has taken Eisner as an artistic inspiration for an unusual and engaging title.~HY

BLITZKREIG

DC: *5 issues 1976*

An attempt to show World War II through the enemy's eyes, which never really lived up to expectations. DC's top war story writer, Robert Kanigher, scripted and Ric Estrada's artwork, though not exceptional, suited the series. While DC made an attempt to be unbiased, we must nevertheless remind ourselves that the Germans did actually lose the war. Both of them, in fact.~HY

THE BLONDE

Eros: *3 issue miniseries ('Double Cross') 1991*, 5 issue miniseries ('Bondage Palace') 1993-1994*, 3 issue miniseries ('Phoebus III') 1995, 6 issues ('Twelve Pearls') 1996-1997*

Translations of the adventures of Italian foot-fetishist Franco Saudelli's extremely popular supercriminal The Blonde. Saudelli manages to incorporate bare feet, high heels and foot bondage at every opportunity as The Blonde shows off her rope tricks in these light-hearted tales. His style is smooth but naturalistic, and his love of the female form shines through. Although he regularly draws from life and uses photos to work unusual angles and compositions into his strips, unlike many artists his end result looks neither stiff nor disjointed. 'Twelve Pearls' as never concluded.~FJ

Recommended: 'Double Cross' 1-3

BLOOD: A Tale

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1988**
DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1996*

Laboured, tedious necroporn about the trials of a young vampire man, with incestuous overtones and something to offend everybody, if they can force their way past J.M. DeMatteis' purple prose and the wispy, arty semi-nudity. Not PC, and sadly not VG either, despite a superficial overripe prettiness courtesy of Kent Williams' art. A cop-out reincarnation non-ending destroys whatever shreds of patience remain. The Vertigo issues reprint the four Epic issues, with new covers but, sadly, no added coherence.~HS

BLOOD AND SHADOWS

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1996*

Another tale of the walking (and frankly rather tedious) undead from the pen of Joe Lansdale. Chet Daly is hired to find a missing person and ends up trekking through realities as he fights The God of the Razor, a terrifying monster that slaughters its victims and wears parts of their skin, never able to completely destroy it. Unappealingly drawn by Mark Nelson, there are some grotesque elements that qualify this as a modern horror story but ultimately it's too derivative to be at all compelling.~NF

BLOOD BROTHERS

Eternity: *4 issue miniseries 1989*

A continuation of the story from *Bloodwing*, this slightly more cohesive tale explains the origin of the mysterious avenger known as Bloodwing: A genetiform (clone) possessed by the God of an alien race. Told against the backdrop of the Church of the New Flesh's attempt to subvert the Genetics Rights movement and seize control of Starbridge, and with the hero rushing about in a half-hearted imitation of someone actually doing something, it still fails to engender even the mildest thrill.~WW

BLOOD CLUB

Kitchen Sink: *One-shot 1992*

There's no current artist able to breach the mental barrier erected to withhold childhood fears in the manner of Charles Burns. His characters populate a twilight 1950s oozing sleaze or wholesomeness with little middleground, and there's always the lurking threat of the uncanny. *Blood Club* is an extrapolation on a children's campfire horror tale given the Burns twist and rendered in his thick lined and shaded style. As ever in his Big Baby tales, there's the clash of innocence and sordid reality. Nice. Confusingly for a one-shot, this is numbered 2 on the cover, being part of a uniform reprinting of Burns' Big Baby works, continuing from *Curse Of The Molemen* and preceding *Teen Plague*.~WJ

Recommended

BLOOD FEAST

Eternity: *2 issue microseries 1991*

Sub-standard adaptation of the Herschell Gordon Lewis film, which has been dubbed 'the first American splatter movie'. There's lots of poorly-drawn decapitation and buckets of blood as Ramses Faud, a deranged caterer, wantonly slaughters, usually nubile women in various states of undress. He takes a single body part from each corpse in his quest to re-enact an ancient Egyptian ritual. It fails to enthral, and even if you love gore, you'll hate this.~WW

BLOOD IS THE HARVEST

Eclipse: *4 issue miniseries 1992*

Marylynne Joseph's journalist brother is killed while investigating Lavia International. When she begins asking questions the company is revealed as a front for corporate vampires, but luckily she's saved by two vampire killers. This doesn't take itself seriously, thank goodness, but even a tongue-in-cheek approach doesn't compensate for minimal plot and unattractive art (which a change of artists fails to rectify).~WJ

BLOOD LEGACY The Story of Ryan

Image/Top Cow: *4 issue miniseries 2000*

Kerri Hawkins' tale of a 700 year old immortal has to surmount the drawback of three pencillers and no less than nine inkers over four issues abbreviating her long novel. It starts promisingly with a corpse being delivered to the care of medical research Dr Susan Ryerson and making a remarkable recovery. Thereafter, though, it's all downhill with a grating pomposity about the dour immortal Ryan, and the series sinks into gratuitous titillation as more of her past is revealed. A novelised version was later releashed.~WJ

BLOOD OF DRACULA

Apple: *Series one 19 issues 1987-1990, series two 2 issues 1991*

Three takes on Dracula are combined in the one title. The lead story in most issues occurs in 19th-century Bukovia and has the stale smell of Hammer Horror about it. 'Death Dreams of Dracula' is an abstract feature allowing for stories involving Drac only peripherally and at any time. Most segments are very slight, seemingly no more than an opportunity to engage a guest artist, with the best being Pat Boyette's Milton Caniff tribute in 7. This slim idea was later extended to a four-issue miniseries. Most interesting of the three is 'Dracula 2199'. Revived in a technologically advanced age that refuses to concede his existence, Dracula strives to reclaim his world. 15 comes with a flexi-disc, and 16-19 replace 'Death Dreams' with Berni Wrightson's Frankenstein illustrations. Ultimately the three-features format is an unsatisfactory mix, never allowing enough space in any issue for writer Rickey Shanklin to develop ideas. The second series is titled *Big Bad Blood of Dracula*, and actually features very little Dracula.~FP

BLOOD OF THE INNOCENT

Warp: *4 issue miniseries 1986*

Interesting and well researched telling of the Jack the Ripper story rather let down by shoehorning Dracula into the mix.~FP

BLOOD ON THE MOON

Last Gasp: *One-shot 1978*

This is the comics equivalent of a PBS documentary, an early work from Jack Jackson that he would later expand into his graphic novel *Comanche Moon*. It's the story of the final Comanche Chief Quanah Parker and his ultimately fruitless attempt to prevent white settlers dominating the southern states. It's odd to see Jackson leavening his dry style with gags and anachronistic language, while his always admirable art is far tighter and more detailed than the style he would eventually evolve.~WJ

BLOOD PACK

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1995*

An ill-conceived and ill-executed mess which concerns the soporific all-fighting antics of a group of what one hesitates to call characters who are recruited for a 'real world' type TV show by some naughty 'Producers' who are, surprise, out to control the world. Some of them look like X-persons and some of them look like toys. They all look awful.~GK

THE BLOOD SWORD

Jademan: *53 issues 1988-1992*

The Blood Sword clocks in at a generous sixty or so pages an issue, which is just as well because kung-fu sequences can occupy anything up to three quarters of them on a regular basis. And for the true aficionado the various moves are labelled! Martial arts combat is generally stilted in comics, with only a rare artist able to depict the poetry of action. Sadly, the primary artist Wing Shing Ma isn't of that calibre, although he is very good, and improves throughout the run. By the final dozen issues he's developed a finer line and better storytelling, and some pages are stunning.

The story starts with the conveniently named Hero searching out a mentor to retrieve a family heirloom, the blood sword, which considering it's the title sees little use during the run. 1-8 detail the attempts to free an enslaved mining community complete with Gene Colan Dracula swipes in 4 and 5. After developing a *Magnificent Seven*-like cast few make it through to the gang warfare in Chicago storyline that follows to 18. The action is frenetic as an ever more strangely named selection of characters pit themselves against Hero. One wonders why none ever just try to shoot him, mind. Tragic events precede Hero arriving in China (25), then returning to Chicago where a resolution of sorts occurs in 29. That issue also inexplicably switches focus to Kim Hung, the son Hero believes dead, now a precociously talented teenager. Father and son are reunited in 32 with rather a neat twist, under deceptive circumstances, although the truth comes out the following issue. If you've ever wanted to see Boy George as a kung-fu villain don't miss 36-38. 41 and 42 are as good samples as any, starring some villains who manage kung-fu in armour, and the best of the supporting characters, the armless Ghost Server. With the repetition of plot paramount, a couple of issues can be fun, but there's no depth of character to induce anyone to come back for more.~FP

BLOOD SWORD DYNASTY

Jademan: *41 issues 1989-1993*

Featuring the characters from Blood Sword, this continues the story of Kim Hung (Hero's son) as he becomes entangled in a struggle for the leadership of Hell Clan. The three factions (Elders, Bloods and Crips) are all choosing a champion, with various fighters challenging others in order to prove themselves worthy of consideration. Initially, Kim is simply a bystander, drawn into fights that threaten his friends (1-9), but a duel with Ask-Me-Not sees his new wife, Cher and Ask-Me-Not's girlfriend, Grace, caught in the middle and apparently lost (10-17). Kim now accepts the nomination of the Bloods and prepares for the competition between champions, only to be as surprised as Ask-Me-Not when the latter's expected nomination by the Elders is given to another (18-25). With the Clan leadership decided, the focus shifts to Hero, who's marked for assassination by Fiery Bird, and finds himself in the middle of a family feud on Fiery Bird Island (26-35). The final issues re-unite Hero and Kim, only for the Hell Clan to launch an attack on the island. This is beautifully drawn by Wing Shing Ma, but does suffer from the fact that most of the characterisation exists only through the endless kung-fu contests. There is, however, some romance and as the series progresses, a growing intensity, so that the outcome of these fights becomes more significant.~NF

BLOOD SYNDICATE

Milestone: *35 issues 1993-1996*

The experimental 'tear gas' used by the authorities to disperse the 'Big Bang', a huge gang battle, killed almost every gang member present. Those who survived gained strange, often disfiguring, powers, and banded together to establish themselves as Dakota City's toughest gang ever. As you can surmise from the premise, the Blood Syndicate are not nice people. They finance themselves by violence and theft, admittedly against other criminals, but still illegal, and don't hold back from maiming or killing opponents. They include crack addicts, racists, sexists, homophobes and other unpleasant types amongst their members. But being assembled from several fragmented gangs, which included women, gay men and various races, they are forced to get along, to mutually exploit each other's power. From this forced alliance a sense of family arises, of clan, which is intriguing to watch develop.

Blood Syndicate isn't a 'Big Event' title. The characters don't stagger from one crisis to another. Rather, the tension, in between the fight scenes, of which there are many, lies with the questions that arise between the protagonists. Will Brickhouse and Third Rail consummate their burgeoning relationship? Can they, since she now seems to be made entirely of stone? Will Fade blurt out the truth about Masquerade's gender before Masq reveals the truth about Fade's gender preference? Is DMZ really a 'brother from another planet'? It's these, and other questions, the human questions, that keep you coming back for more. Ivan Velez Jr, who writes thirty-two of the thirty-five issues, tugs on the heartstrings intelligently and deftly, creating an engrossing and poignant narrative that avoids overt sentimentality. CrissCross, the regular artist for most of the run until 30 (after a début issue drawn by Trevor Von Eeden), handles both drama and the bitter, bleak comedy of the characters well. Where the series is let down is by the colouring – and this is a criticism levelled, without exception, at the entire Milestone line. Much fuss was made of their 'Milestone 100' colouring process, but all it seems to do is enable them to colour in a hundred shades of grey, beige and mud. It makes their comics look dull and uninviting, which is a shame, as they're a generally well written line with much to offer.~HS

Recommended: 1-10

Cabbot: BLOODHUNTER

Maximum: *1 issue 1997*

Cabbot is a big angry brute, one of several such specimens who populated the wretched Bloodstryke title, adopting the titular name himself. As such expectations for the quality of a solo series were low, but this is an occasion where expectations are confounded. While sticking well within the parameters of brutal mayhem, writer and artist Rick Veitch adds inventive (and positively sadistic) touches as Cabbot takes another trip through the wringer. It's not the Sistine Chapel of comics, but within its limitations it was far better than might have been expected. It was continued, although never concluded, in Supreme 45-47.~FP

BLOODLINES

Aircel: *1 issue 1987*
Blackburn: *2 issues (2-3) 1987*
Vortex: *4 issues (4-7) 1987-1988*

A complicated thriller with symbolic undertones, written and drawn in a clipped, hard-to-follow style by writer and artist Rob Walton, assisted by Rick Taylor. Rival leather gangs battle for control of the streets and the drug trade that goes with them. This, however, masks "a full scale war of undisclosed divine importance", to quote Walton. Deborah Judges, an enforcer for one of the gangs, and fellow member Church Boy, face a crisis of conscience over the deaths their work involves. With cast members such as the horse-like Manasseh, Treblinka and police officers Maxine Daley and Thomas Pilate, you're left in little doubt as to each character's metaphorical function. Sadly 7's summing up seems to be a desertion before the plot has run its course, presumably not Walton's choice.~SW

BLOODLUST

Slave Labor: *1 issue 1990*

The opening chapter of a story about a war between two factions of vampires and a vamp caught in the middle. The art is far from the finished article, and despite some nice ideas, that this was just the set-up, and that story was never completed renders *Bloodlust* irrelevant.~FP

BLOODPOOL

Image/Extreme: *4 issue miniseries 1996**

A bunch of trainees for the Youngblood team set up on their own after the Youngblood funding is cut. The ideas and dialogue are feeble, the storytelling and artwork atrocious. That's all you need to know.~FC

BLOODSCENT

Comico: *One-shot 1988*

Utterly pointless and predictable horror tale about a serial killer who in turn finds himself stalked. Dean Allen Schreck's captioned prose is accompanied by Gene Colan artwork reproduced from his pencilling, and although long adept at depicting moody horror, here he's given little to do beyond illustrating what's already in the captions. A more successful combination is provided by the prose back-up strip with Bernie Mireault illustrations, but the story is as dull as dishwater, an apt metaphor in this particular instance.~FP

BLOODSEED

Marvel UK: *2 issues 1993*

A mighty-thewed barbarian roams the frozen wastes, and, courtesy of artist Liam Sharp, encounters an equally startlingly endowed woman following the usual fantasy rule of "The colder it is, the less you wear". One of Marvel UK's Vertigo wannabe Frontier line, this takes advantage of the "Mature Readers" to present nudity and implicit nomping, but otherwise remains barbarians by numbers.~HS

BLOODSHOT

Valiant: *52 issues (0-51), 1 Yearbook 1993-1996*
Acclaim: *16 issues 1997-1998*

A Mafia hitman is set-up, disgraced, jailed, abducted, has his blood replaced by nanites and is left amnesiac. Some days it isn't worth getting up, is it? It's not all bad news, though. The nanites are able to repair body tissue almost instantly and they allow Bloodshot to control machinery. With that and armed to the max he's able to work for the British secret service as James Bond played by Rambo. He comes, he sees, he blows away, unless he's suckered, in which case he sees and blows away. 1-28 are dull, but with more challenging adversaries and better art matters improve slightly with 29. So what does it take to make Bloodshot a decent comic? Simple really: Kevin Van Hook's replacement as writer by Mark Moretti. Already-in-place artist Sean Chen produces dynamic action art, and Moretti's interesting plots and crisp dialogue make 40-48 worth a glance.

The Acclaim reworking of the premise is certainly visually more interesting – thank you Sal Velluto – but Len Kaminski's plot stretches the search for Bloodshot's identity far too long. Once concluded Bloodshot wanders around poking his gun barrel here and there with the lack of any supporting cast emphasising the plot deficiency. The defining characteristics of this series, though, are Kaminski's truly appalling narrative captions, gloriously failed attempts at terse soundbites. Fans of wretched writing should spare no effort to locate issues. Here's a sample from 13, by which time he's really hit form: "More than two decades later the heart of the mystery still beats; jackhammer muscle engine driving the haemorrhaging of reality"! And there's plenty more where that came from.~WJ

* Available in a collected edition

BLOODSTONE

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 2001-2002*

Eighteen-year old, Elsa Bloodstone arrives in America and accidentally finds herself taking on the monster hunter mantle of her dead father, Ulysses. Before long, she's meeting Dracula and the Living Mummy whilst trying to keep her new occupation a secret from her mother. Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning can tell a good story but the series is let down by the dull, un-atmospheric artwork.~NF

BLOODSTRYKE

Image/Extreme: *Series one 23 issues (1-22, 25) 1993-1995, series two 4 issues (0-3) 1995*

A team of dead characters is quite a novelty, but in the appalling first few issues they're indistinguishable from any other Rob Liefeld creations. *Bloodstryke* has large splash pages, fight scenes, all kinds of misproportioned superheroes, more fight scenes, characters almost crushed by badly placed word balloons filled with expository dialogue, and some more fight scenes. When they're not beating villains up, they're beating each other up. With all that in each and every issue it would be simply churlish to request a plot as well. Replacing one set of crazy guys with a bunch of new characters, one of whom inherits the title's name, doesn't change anything. Did I mention the fight scenes?

The second series, *Bloodstryke Assassin*, takes the singular Bloodstryke for more of the same, pin-ups, fights and crazy sound effects. In 3 alone there's BROOSH!, BRAKKA BRAKKA BRAKKA, BUDDA! BUDDA! BUDDA!, VOOSH!, PTANG!, PCHOW!, and CHOOM! And that's only the first five pages!~FP

BLOODWING

Eternity: *5 issue miniseries 1988*

Twelve hundred years from now, Starbridge, a huge space station, is being fought over by four rival mega-corporations. It's the usual blend of high-tech nonsense as *Casablanca* meets *Blade Runner* and the few honest cops and administrators battle to keep a semblance of order in a corrupt and corrupting society. Into this mess comes Bloodwing, a mysterious avenger who helps and harms with no discernible motivation. There is a baffling array of sub-plots that go nowhere, including a subversive movement called 'Back To Earth', the Genetic Rights activists and various power cabals all jockeying for position, but none of it really makes much sense. This was compounded by Eternity publishing episode three in issue 2 and the second part of the story in issue 3. It came to an abrupt conclusion, declaring itself a miniseries with the last issue and the story continued in *Blood Brothers*.~WW

BLOODWULF

Image/Extreme: *4 issue miniseries, 1 Special 1995*

One of Rob Liefeld's, let's be polite, 'derivative' characters unexpectedly comes up trumps in the hands of writer Andy Mangels and artist Daerick Gross. On a quest to find his kidnapped mother, Image's Lobo clone proves much funnier than his spiritual parent ever was, in a pot-pourri of atrocious puns, sight gags, gratuitous violence (but funny gratuitous violence!) and wholesome family life. Lightweight, but great fun. The special is by a different creative team, and dismissable.~HS

BLOODY MARY

DC/Helix: *4 issue miniseries 1996, 4 issue miniseries ('Lady Liberty') 1997*

Written by Garth Ennis and beautifully drawn by Carlos Ezquerra, these are stories of a world at war, not so very far in the future, with Britain and the US fighting mainland Europe. Bloody Mary is the middle-aged survivor of a crack fighting team who, in 1, must find and kill her old commander before he sells a secret to the Europeans that will ensure their victory. In 'Lady Liberty' Mary is sent to stop a cult that has taken over New York and whose leader has vowed to impregnate 144,000 women. A very dark satire on the UK's current failing relationship with the rest of the world, Ennis' scripts are brutal, but witty. Each series is well executed and redeemed by its humour.~NF

BLUE

Image: *2 issues 1999*

This had the makings of a good series. The orphaned Blue lives with her Uncle, whose job is retrieving rogue robots illegally produced by the military in preparation for war. When Blue encounters one, she destroys it with ease, and makes the acquaintance of a mysterious hooded benefactor. She also has a normal school life to contrast the extracurricular excitement. The art is lovely in places, but inconsistent, probably due to being credited to three people, and some of the colouring is ghastly. Nevertheless, an intriguing comic that died too early.~WJ

BLUE BEETLE

Charlton: *Series one 4 issues 1955, series two 11 issues (1-5, 50-55) 1964-1966, series three 5 issues 1967-1968*

After a long and largely undistinguished career at Fox Comics throughout the 1940s, Blue Beetle was acquired by Charlton for a very poor four-issue run in 1955. Mind you, the 1964 series was no better: with infantile stories (one, embarrassingly, by a young Roy Thomas) and breathtakingly inept art from basement hacks Bill Faccio and Tony Tallarico the comic struggled to reach the dizzy heights of mediocrity. Still, with 'great' villains such as Mr Thunderbolt and Praying Mantis Man, and a hero whose physique resembled the Pillsbury doughboy, there's sniggers aplenty to be had here. The peculiar numbering, by the way, was unique to Charlton, who wouldn't think twice about cancelling a recently introduced series to continue the numbering of a completely unrelated title. In this instance it was mediocre horror comic *Ghostly Tales*.

Charlton's last attempt at reviving the character was a different kettle of fish entirely. It premiered as the back-up strip in *Captain Atom* 83-86: archaeologist Dan Garrett was gone, and in his place was scientist Ted Kord, with a new costume, a nifty flying vehicle, the bug, and a new artist, Steve Ditko. The new series had all the action and excitement of the strip Ditko had just left, *Amazing Spider-Man*, but lacked Stan Lee's ear for dialogue. Still, two particularly notable issues are 2 and 3. The first told how a dying Dan Garrett passed on the mantle of the Blue Beetle to Kord, and the latter featured outlandish villains The Madmen, surely prototypes for Ditko's DC creation The Creeper.

Another Ditko creation, The Question, ran as a back-up strip in each issue, contrasting with the light-hearted Blue Beetle strip. The Question was Vic Sage, a somewhat acerbic and sanctimonious TV newsman, whose Question alter ego (basically Sage with a blank mask covering his face) was frighteningly uncompromising. For some reason, although he wrote both series, Ditko credited them to D.C. Glanzman, who worked in Charlton's production department. 5, the best issue, reeks of Ditko, as both strips feature stories mercilessly attacking modern art and liberal values. The feverish intensity is breathtaking, though it's doubtful anyone will actually agree with his seething invective. A sixth issue, drawn by Ditko, wasn't printed at the time, but its Blue Beetle strip appeared in the now rare *Charlton Portfolio*. The Question strip, a continued story intended to run over four parts, and almost completed at the time of cancellation, was later published as *Mysterious Suspense*.~DAR

Recommended: Series three 1-5

BLUE BEETLE

DC: *24 issues 1986-1988*

The first issue could be the template for the traditional superhero comic. Blue Beetle comes out of retirement to kick the issue off, and his alter ego millionaire chemist Ted Kord is on top of the world, in demand and popular, with an efficient secretary, cute lab-researcher girlfriend and an Asian-American former college buddy. In addition to the firestarting villain, though, there's the foreshadowing: a lab assistant up to no good, a surly type rummaging around an island tying in to the Beetle's origin and the police about to re-open the investigation into the death of his predecessor. Len Wein and Paris Cullins follow through with all plots for a pleasingly good-natured, if unsophisticated, superhero series. Early villains include a welcome return for the Madmen in 3 from Blue Beetle's Charlton days, followed by a bunch of DC's more colourful old villains such as Dr Alchemy, Chronos and the Calculator. The latter's appearance in 8 is the best sampler, telling a complete story in the one issue. The Question guest-stars in 5-7, the Teen Titans grace 11-13, Ross Andru pencils from 15 and everything comes to a satisfactory conclusion with the final issue. What more could you want? Maybe Steve Ditko.~FP

BLUE BULLETEER

AC: *One-shot 1989, one-shot 1996*

Cheesy World War II adventures of a Bulletman and Bulletgirl knock-off. Poorly executed graduate from Fem Force. One for the fanboys only.~WW

BLUE DEVIL

DC: *31 issues, 1 Annual 1984-1986*

Stuntman Dan Cassidy encounters an escaped demon and finds himself merged with his B-movie stunt suit, leaving him big and blue with horns. Cassidy comes to terms with his new identity, moves into a house connected with other dimensions, and also appears to act as a 'weirdness magnet'. With a CV like that *Blue Devil* was never going to be gut-wrenching melodrama, and fun is the watchword for writers Gary Cohn and Dan Mishkin. Unfortunately they straddle a thin line, resulting in slapstick comics some of the time, albeit slapstick comics drawn by Paris Cullins and Gary Martin and later Alan Kupperberg and Rick Magyar (then Bill Collins) in an excellent flowing style. Sometimes, though, the silliest ideas work well, as with the introduction of Kid Devil in 14. For a flavour try the annual, guest-starring a selection of DC's stranger heroes, or 25, the St Patrick's Day special.~WJ

BLUE EYES

White Lightning: *5 issue miniseries 2001-2002*

Maria returns to school in Japan after several years in England, immediately turning to old flame Tatsuya, who remembers that at their last meeting she promised him sex on her return. Maria, however, proves to be only the first girl who wants to prove her love for Tatsuya. Fans of top heavy women may well be delighted with this otherwise undistinguished hardcore. A second miniseries is scheduled for 2003.~NF

BLUE HOLE

Christine Shields: *2 issues 1995-1997*

The main features are about how a shape-shifting dog, Cotton, meets Ruby and the Kerosene Boy, and follows their surreal adventures (including pirates and Tony Millionaire), plus the dreams of Violeta Francesca and her wilful refusal to follow a pre-ordained script. There's a Kerosene Boy tale in 2, about two recently dead souls. Both issues have occasional pages telling true stories (a naked man swimming with dolphins, a couple shot in the local park). Christine Shields has a similar approach to storytelling (dreams, facts and non-sequiteurs) as Dame Darcy, but uses more open and varied cartooning styles.~NF

BLUE LILY

Dark Horse: *2 issues 1993*

An Angus McKie creation based on Dave Weir's short story. Rusty Spade – metallic, semi-sentient, cigar-smoking, philosophising, robotic private dick – is hired on an ostensible missing-persons case that subsequently proves to be the tip of an iceberg. This dense read is lovingly littered with complex and subtle puns, but the relentless, metaphysical dialogue turns from fresh and challenging to overbearing. The non-publication of the final two issues of this projected four-issue miniseries delivers unfulfilment.~APS

BLUE LOCO

Kitchen Sink: *1 issue 1998*

Mark Landman came to prominence via some terrific short strips in *Snarf*, and this was the first solo outing for his computer generated artwork. Visually a treat, with all manner of surreal cartoons and psychedelic effects, compared to earlier strips the shock value is diluted when spread over an entire comic. That said, for those of you dying to read a strip called 'Fetal Elvis' reprinted from *Buzz*, or 'The Misadventures of Spud-X' (Popeye reborn as a potato) this is the comic for you.~DAR

BLUE MONDAY

Oni Press: *3 issue miniseries ('The Kids Are Alright') 2000*, 4 issue miniseries ('Absolute Beginners') 2001*, one-shot ('Love Cats') 2002, one-shot ('Dead Man's Party') 2002*

Bleu Finnegan, blue-haired Adam Ant fan and her friends Clover and Erin have to enjoy (endure) typical high school antics, romances and substitute teachers. 'The Kids Are Alright' concerns Bleu's attempts to acquire tickets for an Adam Ant concert, while in 'Absolute Beginners', attempts to recover a compromising videotape require her to accept a date from one of the boys who filmed it. A budding romance creates plenty of misunderstanding before a Valentine's Day dance in 'Love Cats' and a Halloween party, cut-short by bad weather causes those remaining to indulge in some amusing, parody-horror story telling, in 'Dead Man's Party'. This last is amusing, but doesn't engage with the characters as well as previous issues.

With its well-observed dialogue littered with references to British music, mostly from the 1980s, its manga-influenced expressions and its generally stylish storytelling, this is an amusing and very entertaining tale of modern American youth from creator, Chynna Clugston-Major. The collection of 'The Kids Are Alright' also contains all of the Blue Monday stories from previous appearances in *Dark Horse Presents*, *Action Girl* and *Oni Double Feature*.~NF

Recommended: 'The Kids Are Alright' 1-3, 'Absolute Beginners' 1-4, 'Love Cats'

BLUE MOON

Mu Press: *5 issue miniseries 1992-1993*, one-shot ('A One and A Two') 1995*

Lyssa Strada is thirty-two and seems unable to assert herself, either at work or in deciding whether to go out with a housemate, Mac, who has a crush on her. Another housemate, Eleanor, is working on a discombobulationotron, which somehow means that Lyssa can step through a door and find herself living the life of a pirate in a world populated by familiar looking characters as well as young Miranda and her boyfriend, Caliban, a big green demon. Essentially a comic romance, this is wittily and pleasantly drawn by Charlie Wise in a style similar to that of Phil Foglio. The one-shot actually reprints 1-2, while the whole is available in a 1998 collection from Morgan Publishing Inc.~NF

BLUE RIBBON COMICS

Red Circle: *4 issues 1983-1984*
Archie: *10 issues (5-14) 1984*

A showcase series to support Red Circle's re-introduction of Golden Age characters as stars of their own books during the early 80s. On the whole *Blue Ribbon Comics* suffered from changes in editorship and direction but did produce some interesting material. Two issues (1 & 10) reprint Fly material by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby and Al Williamson and there's more Kirby in 5, which contains reprints of Lancelot Strong: The Shield. New stories feature the following characters: Mr Justice (2); The Fox (6,7); Black Hood (11), Agents of Atlantis (9); Jaguar and The Web (14).

There are two worthwhile pieces: the Steel Sterling story in 3, a delirious romp through themes that have always motivated scripter Robert Kanigher's characters (in which a cute puppy bears the same relationship to Steel as 'my brother' the wolf does to Enemy Ace); and issue 8,

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* Available in a collected edition

a Black Hood special featuring stories drawn by Gray Morrow, Al McWilliams and Neal Adams with Dick Giordano on inks. And a Toth pin-up. Classic stuff.~NF
Recommended: 3, 8

BLUEBEARD

Slave Labor: *3 issue miniseries 1992**

A dark and disturbing story about a man who adds to his wealth by marrying and murdering lonely rich women. Interesting storytelling from James Robinson, using a different character as the narrative voice for each chapter, and artwork from Phil Elliott, successfully adapting his open, clean style to a darker mood to match the tale.~FP
Recommended: 1-3

BLUEBERRY

Epic/Titan: *5 Graphic Novels 1989-1990, Lieutenant Blueberry 3 Graphic Novels 1991, Marshal Blueberry 1 Graphic Novel 1991*
Mojo Press: *1 volume (The Blueberry Saga 'Confederate Gold') 1996*

Charlier and Giraud's *Blueberry* is one of the best-loved and best-received Western series in the history of comics, running to some twenty-three volumes (plus several *Young Blueberry* volumes) following the career of Mike Blueberry during the most turbulent years of America's history. It starts with the Civil War, the building of the railroads and destruction of the Indian Nations to the onset of 'civilisation' that killed off the life of soldiering, tracking and hunting that Blueberry and his friends enjoyed.

Epic begin their reprints towards the end of the saga, with one of the most complex and harrowing series of graphic novels reprinted in five colour volumes. They were later reprinted (poorly) in a single black and white edition by Mojo Press. The mature Blueberry, in the army and on patrol near the turbulent Mexican border, intercepts a message for President Grant, concerning a shipment of Confederate gold that went missing in the final days of the War. Blueberry is sent to look for it, but to give him cover government agents arrange for him to be courtmartialled and escape with a price on his head. When he finds that the gold has disappeared from its hiding place he becomes a wanted man in earnest. The *Blueberry* graphic novels, starting with Chihuahua Pearl, see the hero imprisoned, embroiled in a plot to assassinate the President, hiding out with the Apaches during "The Long March" and facing a Mexican firing squad. Everyone and his brother wants that gold, and most of them believe Blueberry knows where it is.

The three, slimmer Lieutenant Blueberry volumes and single Marshal Blueberry volume come from an earlier period, around the time of the construction of the Atlantic-to-Pacific railroad, when two companies were vying to see who would get furthest into the American heartland (claiming land rights as they went). Charlier's scripts are particularly good at interweaving history and fiction, with Blueberry playing an interesting, but not significant, role in many historical events. The art, by Jean Giraud (better known as Moebius), is realistic but splendidly wrought, full of vibrant detail but very smoothly paced and fast-moving, despite quite a wordy script. Excellent throughout.~FJ
Recommended: Blueberry 1-5, Lieutenant Blueberry 1-2, Marshall Blueberry 1

BOB MARLEY: Tale of the Tuff Gong

Marvel Music: *1 issue 1994*

Charles E. Hall scripts a eulogistic recounting of the life of reggae legend Marley, illustrated by Gene Colan. Peter Kuper provides maps and spot illustrations and there's also a brief illustrated history of Rastafarianism. Pretty, but lightweight.~WW

BOB THE GALACTIC BUM

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1995*

John Wagner and Alan Grant treat the American comic-reading public to the sort of inventive whimsical and humorous science-fiction series they've written so adeptly in the pages of 2000AD over the years, accompanied by long-time cohort, artist Carlos Ezquerra. Or at least that was the idea. Bob is transparently W.C. Fields attempting to finagle favour with the idiot heir to five galaxies stranded in space with him. Lobo, heavily cover-featured for commercial purposes, limits his contributions throughout, and overall there are not enough jokes packed in to compensate for a paucity of plot. The repeated jokes about the blind axemen consistently raise a smile, though.~FP

BOBA FETT

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1995-1996, one-shot ('Battle of the Bounty Hunters') 1996, one-shot ('Twin Engines of Destruction') 1997, 4 issue miniseries '(Enemy of the Empire') 1999*, one-shot ('Agent of Doom') 2000*

Three one-shots comprise the first miniseries. In 'Bounty on Bar-Kooda', the bounty hunter is hired by Gorga The Hutt to kill the eponymous space pirate to ingratiate himself with his future Hutt father-in-law, whilst in the follow-up, 'When The Fat Lady Swings', Gorga's new bride is kidnapped and Boba Fett has to rescue her whilst avoiding Bar-Kooda's revenge-mad big brother, Ry-Kooda. The third story, 'Murder Most Foul', has Ry-Kooda even more anxious to get our hero, smarting from his humiliation at the end of the previous episode. It's all well-written and painted by John Wagner and Cam Kennedy, but it's nowhere near their usual high standard.

In 'Battle of the Bounty Hunters', Fett must compete with IG-88 to deliver Han Solo's carbonised carcass to Jabba The Hutt in a Pop-Up hardcover. 'Twin Engines of Destruction' has Fett fighting an imposter intent on stealing his reputation as the Galaxy's greatest Bounty hunter in a plodding and predictable tale. 'Enemy of the Empire' restores much-needed humour to leaven the usual brutality. John Wagner and Ian Gibson tell the story of Fett's first meeting with Darth Vader as the Bounty Hunter is hired to track down an Imperial deserter and a mysterious chest, in a solid adventure romp, lavishly illustrated. 'Agent of Doom', by John Ostrander and Cam Kennedy is a superficial yarn outlining the hunt for xenophobic genocidal alien killers. Strictly for the dedicated.~WW
Recommended: Enemy of the Empire1-4

BODY BAGS

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1996-1997**

Mack is a giant of a man who wears a satanic smiley-face mask when he goes about his business, which is bounty-killing. On his uppers with a dying father, the last thing he needs is for his cocky and resourceful 14-year-old daughter Panda turning up and wanting to join the family business. Cute and stacked, she can also handle herself, and isn't about to take 'no' for an answer. Writer and artist Jason Pearson sets Body Bags a few years in the future, and has realised a convincing society with some amusing throwaway extrapolations on today. The seemingly over-the-top nature of Mack's behaviour, particularly when confronting a drug dealer in the first issue, will possibly outrage some readers. Suitably warned, however, delight in the imaginative characters, settings and dynamic art.~FP
Recommended: 1-4

BODY DOUBLES

DC: *One-shot 1998, 4 issue miniseries 1999-2000*

The voluptuous contract killers from *Resurrection Man* were given a solo tryout as part of the *New Year's Evil* series facing off against their fellow assassins. It's a light and sometimes amusing read from Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning, with Joe Phillips' pencils accentuating the girls' finer points. The miniseries by the same team stretches the joke too thin.~FP

BODYCOUNT

Image: *4 issue miniseries 1996**

Originally advertised as Casey Jones and Raphael, bar room brawler and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle become involved in a running gun-battle between mercenaries, siding with Midnight, an extremely pneumatic Elektra look-alike. Her adversary is Johnny Woo-Woo, who works for Dong from Hong Kong. This might sound funny until you see how many goons, cops and bystanders are smeared by automatic weapons, collisions and explosions, with a surfeit of blood and violent death depicted throughout. An article in the collection relates how Kevin Eastman wrote and laid out the story before Simon Bisley re-drew it. Considering how much effort went into the artwork and colour, the lettering is squashed and amateurish. Some dialogue is corny enough to convince that this is supposed to be satire, but the repeated relish with which the carnage is shown shouts "double standards".~SW

BOG: Swamp Demon

Hall of Heroes: *4 issues 1996-1997*

Bog is the demon, Bauggroth, escapee from Hell, planning a new, non-evil, life on Earth. Both Heaven and Hell seem opposed to this plan, sending Mogog and Etherial respectively to kill Bog, who's befriended a young woman, Stephanie and a priest, Father Renault. At the point where the three of them appear to be linked to the fate of the whole human race, the series ends, though there is an out of continuity story in the *Hall of Horrors* anthology. The series isn't sure whether it wants to be a horror or superhero title while the covers by Steve Bissette promise much more than the interiors can deliver.~NF

BOGEYMAN

San Francisco: *2 issues 1969-1970*
Company and Sons: *1 issue (3) 1970*

Rory Hayes was a deeply troubled artist whose crude, childlike style had a powerful intensity. *Bogeyman* was his horror title, and its material was uniformly disturbing, primarily for the insight it appeared to give into Hayes' psyche. It's also of great historical importance as one of the first underground horror comics, and by the second issue it had attracted a number of underground stars. Jay Lynch (2, 3), Jim Osbourne (2) and Greg Irons (3) are among those weighing in with significant contributions, but it remained very much Hayes' title.~DAR

The BOGIE MAN

Fat Man Press: *4 issue miniseries 1989-1990**
Tundra: *1 issue 1992*
Atomeka: *4 issue miniseries ('Chinatoon') 1993*

Francis Clunie is possessed of a personality disorder through which he's convinced he's Humphrey Bogart in *Maltese Falcon* mode. The first series has him causing chaos in Glasgow, and comes complete with a glossary. John Wagner and Alan Grant's hilarious scripts are adroitly rendered in totally deadpan fashion by Robin Smith, making them even funnier. Removing Clunie to the USA for the one-shot results in a diluted Bogie Man, although not without funny moments. That the concept withstands a repeat performance is demonstrated by Clunie's return to Glasgow and to form for 'Chinatoon'. Paradox issued a second collection of the first series in their pocketbook format.~FP

Recommended: Fat Man Press 1-4, Atomeka 1-4

BOHOS

Image/Flypaper Press: *3 issue miniseries 1998*

Dissatisfied teens try to cope with daily life, attend a movie and a music festival, and cop attitudes. The women are far too smart and witty to be realistic, but not smart enough to see how daft psuedo-aviator shades look. The guy needs no accessories to be dumb, while the art strives to be cute, and is given an oddly stained glass effect by unappealingly vivid colouring. It's all meant to be funny, but isn't except in the most earnest manner, leading to expectations of a laughter track every time a page is turned. The most interesting aspects of the comics are the essays by real teenage girls on the editorial pages, but that's undermined by the blatantly sexist ads for other Image titles that follow. For friends of the creators only.~FP

BOLD ADVENTURE

Pacific: *3 issues 1983-1984*

A showcase for the scripts of Bill Dubay, *Bold Adventure* featured an eclectic mix of SF/Fantasy and adventure serials. 'Time Force' (1-3), illustrated by Rudy Nebres, is about how good Armageddon will be. 'The Weirdling' (1-2), drawn by Trevor Von Eeden, features an amnesiac who seems to be able to turn into a shadow. Alex Niño illustrates a story about mercenaries (2-3) and John Severin draws the first part of 'Spitfire' (3). Though all four artists mentioned are generally worth a look, these stories don't inspire their best work.~NF

BOMBA the Jungle Boy

DC: *7 issues 1967-1968*

Based on a TV series, this was a worthy try at the jungle hero theme. Following a poor start the series steadily improved under the talents of Denny O'Neil and Jack Sparling. But nothing really to beat your chest about.~HY

BONE

Cartoon Books: *20 issues 1992-1995**
Image: *6 issues (21-27) 1995-1997**
Cartoon Books: *23 issues + (28-50) 1997 to date*

Three cousins of indeterminate species, Fone, Phoney and Smiley Bone, are run out of their community by outraged townspeople, and become separated and lost in the desert. By different circuitous routes, they find their way to a forested valley, and are forced to rebuild their lives amongst wonderful and terrifying creatures, not the least of which are the human townspeople. Though owing more than a slight debt to Walt Kelly's *Pogo*, Jeff Smith successfully created a charming and intricate fantasy world, with memorable antagonists (the quiche-eating rat creatures), and occasional hilariously surreal moments (The Great Cow Race 10). Given this level of creativity and imagination, Smith's revelation about his heroine Thorn's past fell particularly flat. Not wishing to divulge a major plot twist, "oldest fantasy cliché about a character's parentage", will let you work it out. Yawn. I mean Y*A*W*N. This misjudgement irritated many people to the point of giving up the series. Smith's endearing characters rallied from this error on their creator's part for a time, and the series remains a solid, meticulously crafted read. It's just a shame that as the plot veers away from the character-based humour and poignancy of the first dozen issues, and more into (someone has to say it) bog-standard fantasy quests and battles, the Bone cousins look increasingly out of place in what's ostensibly their own comic. It should be noted that early issues have multiple printings, and that Image, during the short time they took over publication of the series, also reissued 1-20 with new covers, and Cartoon Books have since reissued the Image issues just to cause further bewilderment. Check the interiors before buying. In addition to keeping the individual comics in print, there are numerous collections.~HS

BONESHAKER

Caliber: *One-shot 1994*

Phil Hester's surreal Euro-style science fiction thriller of a hulking and unlikely hero trying to return to his home world. Intriguing, but works better as a serial, as in its original outing in *Negative Burn* 11-15 where it ran as 'Adventures on the Planet of Exile'.~WW

BONEYARD

NBM: *8 issues + 2001 to date*

A young man, Michael Paris, decides to check out in person the small plot of land he's inherited from his grandfather before finalising its sale to the town council. Reaching the small town of Raven's Hollow, Paris is astonished to be greeted by the populace as a local hero. It turns out his inheritance is the local graveyard, and whom the townsfolk wish to evict the strange and disturbing monsters who inhabit it. These include the gorgeous vampire Abbey and a terrifyingly friendly lady sea monster with a jealous husband. Torn between the Mayor and the townsfolk on one side, and Abbey, Nessie and the denizens of the Boneyard on the other, Paris takes his stand, and overcomes the greater evil, only to face the spectre of a still greater one – the Internal Revenue Service! Writer/Artist Richard Moore has created a delicious confection, a modern-day Addams Family, but this time a chosen family rather than a nuclear one; Paris bonds with the endearing monsters against the duplicitous 'normal' world, and his halting relationships with them are a charming and compelling read. A collection of 1-4 is available.~HS

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* Available in a collected edition

Recommended: 1-8

Sergio Aragonés' BOOGEYMAN

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1998**

Assorted deserving cases (including the critic in 1) receive their come-uppance in a series of short stories from Aragonés and Mark Evanier. Their characteristic wry observations about humanity are present and correct in diverting tales that would be very dark indeed if not for Aragonés' humourous cartooning. The covers join nicely into one large illustration.~WJ

PI: THE BOOK OF ANTS

Artisan: one-shot 1998

Written by Darren Aronofsky, this is a pared-down, in many ways more accessible, version of his own film. Max Cohen is a mathematician searching for the hidden numerical pattern that will lay the secrets of the stock market open to him. Barely able to function outside the apartment in which he's built an elaborate computer, he struggles with headaches and an infestation of ants. The crosshatched artwork of Edward Ross Flynn perfectly captures the downward spiral of Max's existence.~NF

Recommended

BOOK OF BALLADS AND SAGAS

Green Man Press: *4 issues 1996-1997**

Fey, self-published title from Charles Vess, who prettily illustrates traditional folk tales interpreted by his writer mates, including the ever-popular Neil Gaiman and, strangely, the acidly-observant detective novelist Sharyn McCrumb. Some original ideas from the writers are balanced by Vess' traditional approach to illustration. 1 starts badly with two reprints, and although Vess reprints the ballads and discusses folk literature, his strips add no commentary; they illustrate, for those lacking in imagination, but that's all. Pretty package; pretty insubstantial too.~FJ

BOOK OF FATE

DC: *12 issues 1997-1998*

Follow-up to Fate featuring the same anti-hero, Jared Stevens, a tomb-robbing Indiana Jones wannabe specialising in mystic artefacts, who unwillingly becomes the new Doctor Fate. Composed of exactly the same amount of Order and Chaos, he rejects both, spending his time whining and running from a variety of mystic menaces. Avoiding the warring Lords of Order and Chaos, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and even Amethyst, Princess of Gemworld, he goes on a drinking binge to oblivion with his new pal Lobo. Creators Keith Giffen, Ron Randall and Alan Grant produce the most uninspired work of their careers.~WW

Charles Vess' BOOK OF NIGHT

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1987*

Mostly a series collecting Charles Vess' work for *Epic Illustrated*, it also contains some early and obscure pieces that hadn't seen print before. In this latter category are 'Bug Tales' (1), 'Morrigan's Tale' (1) and 'Priest' (2). 'Legend' (2) and 'Spirit' (3) are short self-contained fantasy pieces while 'Jack Tales' (2, 3) are two magical adventures of a young man whose companions are small flying robots. The longest piece is 'Children Of The Stars' (1-3, from Epic Illustrated 8-10), which is another fantasy piece about a young woman's quest to destroy the demon lord who wiped out the People of the Stars, leaving her and her brother the only survivors. 'Legend' and 'Spirit' are both written by Laurie Sutton but the rest of the material is all by Vess. His delicate, sinewy and detailed pen and ink work is always a pleasure to read despite the often light and insubstantial stories.~NF

BOOK OF THE DEAD

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1993-1994*

Aptly-named reprint comic featuring the earliest appearances of Man-Thing in stories from *Savage Tales* 1-2, *Astonishing Tales* 12 and *Fear* 10 onwards. Alongside are reprints of *The Frankenstein Monster* and some choice 1950s horror reprints. The Man Thing stories by Gerry Conway and Gray Morrow, Neil Adams, Jim Starlin and co. are expensive collector's items, so make this a well-planned reprint. Man Thing sits well with Mike Ploog and Gary Friedrich's customised account of the modern legend of Frankenstein.~SW

The BOOKS OF FAERIE

DC/Vertigo: *3 issue miniseries 1997*, 3 issue miniseries ('Auberon's Tale') 1998*, 4 issue miniseries ('Molly's Story') 1999*

The first two of these *Books of Magic* spin-off miniseries, by Bronwyn Carlton and Peter Gross, concern the machinations of Lord Amadan. This is firstly in explaining the secrets of Queen Titania and Tim Hunter's parentage, secondly in a prequel that explores the nature of power in Faerie and sets the scene for a royal downfall. These are visually appealing without being cutesy, but 'Auberon's Tale' is far more interesting, not needing to toe any line about the dull Hunter.

'Molly's Story' sees Molly, ex-girlfriend of Hunter, cursed by Queen Titania not to be able to touch the ground, involved in a confrontation between Faerie, the demon, Barbatos and the witch, Briar Rose. John Ney Rieber's smug, unsympathetic script fortunately doesn't detract from the engaging character of Molly, but the jarringly distorted artwork of Hermann Mejia (1-3) is off-putting.~NF

The BOOKS OF MAGIC

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1990-1991*, one-shot (Arcana Annual) 1994, 75 issues, 2 Annuals 1994-2000*

Thirteen-year-old Tim Hunter is the designated heir to the power of magic in the DC Universe, and four supernatural experts – the Phantom Stranger, John Constantine, Dr Occult, and Mr.E – must determine whether he can be allowed to attain that power, or whether he must be destroyed to save humanity. Neil Gaiman writes the miniseries, with four different artists, respectively John Bolton, Scott Hampton, Charles Vess and Paul Johnson, each sumptuously illustrating one of the episodes. The star turn is Vess' lavish and intricate portrayal of the Realm of Faerie in 3. Following this success, the one-off *Arcana Annual* formed part of the *Children's Crusade* crossover, and reintroduced Tim to the comics world, setting him up for his own title. *The Books of Magic* ongoing series, written by John Ney Rieber and drawn, mostly, by Peter Snejbjerg, follows young Tim as he struggles through adolescence, a tricky enough minefield for anyone, let alone someone of his potential power. Compared to the epic and dazzling miniseries, a lot of people find the ongoing series a tad subdued, but it's merely working with a subtler canvas. Aware of the monster that he may still become in the future, searching for the truth behind his parentage, and coping with hormonal barrages, Tim keeps his perspective through all these upheavals with a hard core of common sense and a refreshingly mordant sense of humour which is a pleasure to behold.

With 51 Peter Gross takes over as writer and artist, and takes the series in a different, but equally intriguing direction. There are occasional stylistic misfires (the initial penchant of Gross for doing bait'n'switch 'deaths' of his leading characters – or are they? – gets old *very* quickly) but he shows invention in refreshing the series. The Other, the new nemesis of this run, is chillingly effective, and in a storyline that is even more densely-plotted than previously Tim faces loss, bereavements, and other major life changes. His transfer to boarding school in 53 not only cues up some major dramatic plot threads, but also generates very funny misunderstandings.

Books of Magic is probably one of the least 'new reader friendly' series around; despite its undoubted quality, which is much more consistent than the acclaimed but highly variable *Sandman*. The involved narrative and general lack of pyrotechnics prevents it from drawing in punters. No doubt this led to its eventual demise, as the inevitable falling-off in readership was not replaced. Nevertheless, although far better read in the collected complete story arcs than in the original monthly instalments, *Books of Magic* is a quiet treasure, greatly underestimated.

Mention must also be made of the superlative cover illustrations by Mike Kaluta throughout most of the series, intriguing scenes that attract without misleading readers as to the content. Given the general fondness of Vertigo's editors for muddy soft-focus artwank in various shades of grey or beige as their covers of choice, the clarity, detail and quality of Kaluta's work is a pleasant relief~HS
Recommended: Miniseries 1-4, 1-75

BOOM BOOM

Aeon Press: *4 issues 1994-1995*

An admirable diversity of subject matter and artistic styles from David Lasky over four issues is counterpointed by a tendency to meander. This means the issues don't always reward, but more than merit investigation. 2's recounting of the manner in which James Joyce came to write *Ulysses* is unusual enough for comics, but by drawing in faux Kirby style Lasky shunts it well into uncharted territory for the best of the run.~FP

BOONDOGGLE

Knight Press: *4 issues 1995-1996*
Tapestry: *One-shot ('Special') 1996, 2 issues 1997*

Bumper (Beauregard McGillicuddy) is an attention deficit suffering six year old, living at the Hossenfeffer Boarding House with his guardian, Aristotle (a rabbit), Flea (Bumper's dog), Potpre (a pig). Roxanne is Bumper's long-lost sister, looking for her brother in the town of Boondoggle, where she runs across Barbados Salinger, who is the resident slacker and leader of the 'Slack Pack'. The running joke is that Bumper causes chaos wherever he is (a bus, a concert, a waffle house, and a 7-11 – the latter admittedly during a robbery). Steve Stegelin has an interesting premise and the comedy dialogue and large cast are well handled, but his artwork for the Knight Press issues is cleaner and easier on the eye than on later issues.~NF

BOOSTER GOLD

DC: *25 issues 1986-1988*

Dan Jurgens' creation was perhaps the least altruistic hero ever to hold down a mainstream title. Michael Jon 'Booster' Carter was a promising 25th-century sportsman who threw away the chance of a stellar career by fixing games for a quick buck. Ruined by the allegations, he ended up a cleaner in a superhero museum, where it occurred to him that if he nicked a time-machine he could travel back to the past with future technology that would give him relative superpowers. And a quick check on the late 20th-century movements of the stock exchange could net him a small fortune while he was at it. While this could have made for an unsympathetic character, Jurgens made him a loveable rogue, throwing in numerous red herrings and sly hints about his mysterious background before the full truth came out in 6. Surprisingly, the revelation did harm sales – leading to an interesting letters-page debate – and Booster was soon packed off (along with his strong supporting cast) back to the future to suffer a little for his crimes, before it was revealed that everything he'd done had been leading to a destiny which had to be fulfilled. He returned to the present A Better Person, but the series never really found its way again, lost in guest stars and crossovers until it petered out in the middle of the cross-company multi-parter, *Millennium*. The character moved into, various incarnations of the Justice League. Issue 6 is notable for the first appearance of the post-*Crisis* Superman.~JC.
Recommended: 1-9, 13-15

BOP

Kitchen Sink: *1 issue 1982*

A great John Pound cover depicting dancing jukeboxes gives a false impression of a largely disappointing attempt to merge music and comics. That the articles outshine most of the strips sings volumes. Page after page of dull material is finally vindicated by the brilliant Alex Toth, managing to convey more life and rhythm in five pages than in the entirety of the previous forty-nine.~FP

BORDERWORLDS

Kitchen Sink: *7 issues 1986-1987, one-shot ('Marooned') 1990*

Intelligent science-fiction series written and drawn by Don Simpson. On a deteriorating artificial world, political renegades and pirates cross paths and try to avoid the attention of the authorities. Strong characterisation and a willingness to develop the situation slowly mean that the individual issues never seem to have a great deal of action but everything suggests that this would have been a classic if it had ever been completed.~NF
Recommended: 1-7, 'Marooned'

BORIS' ADVENTURE MAGAZINE

Nicotat: *3 issues 1988 (1), 1996 (2-3)*

The 1988 issue was a rather pointless Rocketeer parody issued alongside the regular comic when it would have fitted there just as well. The 1996 continuation is an altogether different beast. The cute, cuddly Boris still occupies the lead strip with comic parodies (Punisher in 1, Captain America in 2), but there are also two back-ups. Bikini Beach Patrol is a parody of *Baywatch* style tit'n'arse TV and there's an un-named science-fiction strip with even more cute cuddly animals. All very nicely drawn, but following a well trodden path.~FP

BORIS KARLOFF TALES OF MYSTERY

Gold Key: *97 issues 1962-1980*

Titled *Boris Karloff Thriller* for the first two issues (which were 80-page giants), this was the first Gold Key anthology title, and the early issues contain some fine artwork. You can't go wrong with the likes of Crandall, McWilliams, Orlando, Torres, Williamson, Wood and Jeff Jones (in 21). The stories are initially competent too, if uncredited. After the first twenty or so issues the quality dropped and the later trend for Filipino artists at Gold Key meant that if you've seen one 1970s issue you've seen them all, although McWilliams still appears occasionally.~SW

BORIS THE BEAR

Dark Horse: *12 issues 1986-1987*
Nicotat: *22 issues (13-34) 1987-1992*

Starting as a parody with a cute robot teddy bear beating up characters starring in other titles, creator James Dean Smith moved beyond to social humour as he began self-publishing with 13. Smith's appealing artwork is a strongpoint of the title, which otherwise has largely one-dimensional characters and repeated jokes. This works for *Groo*, but Smith and collaborator Steve Mattson aren't quite up to making recurring encounters with the neighbour's cat funny. The series isn't without charm, though, and typical of the run are 9 and 10's defection of G.I. Joseph or 15's day in the life of Boris. If you like them you'll probably enjoy the others. 32 and 33 are different, stepping out from the fiction into 'reality'. 1-3 were reprinted in colour by Dark Horse as *Boris' Instant Color Classics*, and Boris returns in *Dark Horse Presents* 64, then in *Boris' Adventure Magazine*.~WJ

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* Available in a collected edition

BORN TO BE WILD

Eclipse: *One-shot 1991*

Benefit book for PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals). Worthy and sporting many big names like McFarlane, Moebius, Morrison and Starlin, but with the exception of the Neil Gaiman story not very interesting.~HS

BORN TO KILL

Aircel: *3 issue miniseries 1991*

Art seemingly aimed at the paedophile and script that veers between sixth form pretension and tough guy bollocks makes for an altogether very disturbing comic. Thankfully long forgotten, but certainly not forgiven, you'll be soiled just by touching an issue.~FP

BOSTON BOMBERS

Caliber: *6 issues 1990*

A superior action thriller set on an alternate Earth, Indra Devine is a secret agent for the League of Nations, formed after World War I, whose credo "Peace Through Strength" prevented World War II from occurring. Devine is a kind of female Doc Savage, and since on this earth, Christ was a woman, as is the Pope (who is Jewish), she's treated with a lot more respect than you'd think likely. The main antagonist is The Roman Empire, which never converted to Christianity and now resides in South Africa. In a world devoid of advanced technology (the fastest transport available is a prop plane and everything has the cool retro look of 1940s action movies) the series boils down Devine's choice of rescuing a friend or saving the planet. Despite the seeming vacuous familiarity of the plot, *Boston Bombers* rattles along at great pace and with such style and panache (courtesy of writer Ron Fortier and artists Chris Jones and Gary Kato) that you can't help but enjoy it.~WW

Star Wars BOUNTY HUNTERS

Dark Horse: *One Shot ('Aurra Sing') 1999, one-shot ('Scoundrel's Wages') 1999, one-shot ('Kenix Kil') 1999*

Three bounty hunters are spotlighted at various stages in the Star Wars timeline, (and the Titan collected edition adds a Boba Fett story). By virtue of Tim Truman art, *Aurra Sing* is the best of them. *Scoundrel's Wages* explains Lando Calrissian's location in *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *Kenix Kil* occurs just prior to the *Crimson Empire* stories. None are bad, but none are particularly good either. A collection reprints all three issues.~WJ

Alex Robinson's BOX OFFICE POISON

Antarctic: *21 issues, 2 Specials 1996-2000**

Originating as a minicomic, *Box Office Poison* began with Kyle Baker as inspiration. While not possessing Baker's facility for witty dialogue, his late 1980s/early 1990s art style is apparent in the early issues, but Robinson rapidly embraces his own style thereafter. His is confident and expressive cartooning that rarely lapses into the overly twee.

From an early hesitancy *Box Office Poison* develops into an intelligent contemporary soap opera. There's a broad, mainly likeable cast, from whom Robinson largely remains detached enough to combine trauma with comfort. Short chapters are punctuated by well considered pages of questions put to the cast ("If you could change one thing about yourself..." etc), and Robinson fires off knowing barbs about the comics industry with a continuing plot concerning a crusty old artist ripped off decades previously. If soap opera character quirks were its only strength this would merely be *Strangers In Paradise*, but what makes it far superior is Robinson's exceptional talent for comedy and for inspired elements of characterisation. When he has the old comic artist meet his character, the encounter is surprising, somewhat surreal and entirely hilarious. Better still, the scene works on its own in 18, but later revelations twist the meaning 180 degrees. Foreshadowing is a device Robinson masters early and uses throughout.

The best way to appreciate *Box Office Poison* is with Top Shelf's value for money collection of the entire series. Being black and white, though, it omits the *Kolor Karnival* special, almost the only stressful period for contented couple Steven and Jane, which is also worth seeking out. The other special, numbered zero, reprints Robinson's first minicomics later incorporated into both collections.~FP

Recommended: 4-8, 11-21

BOY COMMANDOS

DC: *2 issues 1973*

One of DC's short-lived experiments with a reprint line, these two comics re-present some classic Joe Simon and Jack Kirby stories from the 1940s, in which four boys – from America, France, the Netherlands and Britain – take on the Axis in World War II. A silly premise, but hugely popular in its day, and Simon and Kirby's work still crackles with energy over the decades. Further reprints also graced *Mister Miracle* 4-8.~HS

BOYS

Highwater Books: *One-shot 2000*

This is a collection of autobiographical, single-page strips, written by Joan Reidy and drawn by Ron Rege Jr. In each, Reidy describes, briefly, but explicitly, various sexual experiences with the unnamed boys of the title. Rege draws each in a nine-panel grid, ornamenting the strip in different ways and sometimes overlaying patterns over the page as a whole. Despite the simplistic cartooning, the combination is effective, creating a resonance for the otherwise uncomplicated stories, and making the whole attractive.~NF

BOYS' RANCH

Harvey: *6 issues 1950-1951**

In his long career Jack Kirby dropped many milestones, and despite its brevity, this is rightfully considered one of them. It was one last hurrah for the kid gang comics so popular in the 1940s, and among the best. When a ranch owner dies protecting his property he bequeaths it to Clay Duncan and three youngsters who helped him out. Dandy is the upstanding young gentleman, Wabash the country boy with smarts, and Angel the blonde-haired wild child. Kirby and Joe Simon collaborated on all aspects of the comic, running three solid stories every issue, along with a few tips and features pages and some spectacular double page pin-ups. The best story in the run is 'Mother Delilah' in 3, in which a saloon owner manipulates Angel causing him to question his self-worth, but, typically, this strong dramatic effort is backed up with a comedy tale about Wabash's Grandpa. The original issues command extortionate prices now, but the early 1990s hardback collection is easily obtained.~WJ

Recommended: 1-6

Larry Harmon's BOZO

Dell: *4 issues 1962*

Blackthorne: *2 issues ('in 3-D') 1987-1988*

Innovation: *One-shot ('The World's Most Famous Clown') 1992*

Bozo was introduced on a children's record before starring in his first television show in 1949. In 1956 Larry Harmon, bought the franchise rights and a new show made him something of a phenomenon, with over a hundred Bozos in America, Germany, France and Japan. Dell published four Bozo issues as part of its *Four Color* series (285, 464, 551 and 594), before publishing four issues of his own title under the Larry Harmon banner. Blackthorne's 3-D issues, by Hal Lane and Andy Ice, have Bozo disappear for twenty years and then, when scientifically reconstituted

* Available in a collected edition

by his friend Butch (albeit temporarily shorter than when he went), have his mind switched with a dinosaur's while running for President. It's nowhere near as funny as it sounds. The main story in the Innovation issue is a reprint of Dell's *Four Color* 285 from 1957, in which Bozo and a new friend, a boy called Sparky, discover some tar creatures after being kicked out of the circus for being too nice. Other strips involve a talking lion and a human cannonball.~NF

THE BOZZ CHRONICLES

Marvel/Epic: *6 issue miniseries 1985-1986*

I say, I say, I say, what do you get if you cross a big yellow blancmange with *Sherlock Holmes*? A very poor series attempting to put a twist on the ET theme by having a blubbery alien investigating mysteries in Victorian England. Unfortunately, not a joke.~FJ

B. P. R. D.

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 2002**

A spin-off from Mike Mignola's *Hellboy* series, the Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defence sends a team of field agents to rescue Elizabeth Sherman from the mystical city of Agartha. There, descendants of the first humans, who are spiritually connected to a pre-human super race, are being used to re-establish its dominance over Earth. Fish-man, Abe Sapien, homunculus, Roger and new recruit, Johann Kraus, a spirit without a body, take part in this fun, pulp adventure, co-written by Mignola, Christopher Golden and Tom Sniegoski. For the artwork, Ryan Sook adapts his style to an approximation of Mignola's own, but that's no bad thing.~NF

THE BRADLEYS

Fantagraphics: *6 issue miniseries 1999**

Largely resized reprints of the Bradleys stories from *Neat Stuff*, themselves worth reading, this also collects Bradleys material from elsewhere. Later issues also feature new material, particularly 4, which contains strips reporting on a comedy festival, a collaboration with rock journalist Everett True, and Buddy Bradley by a German cartoonist (also in 5).~WJ

BRAIN BOMB

Behemoth Books: *1 volume 1999*

This anthology features the work of twenty-five cartoonists as part of a national program, 'Cartoonists in the Classroom', aiming to teach and encourage children to draw comics and promote reading. Several creators supply new episodes of their regular series, including Scott Roberts (*Patty Cake*), Jay Hosler (*Clan Apis*), Rachel Hartman (*Amy Unbounded*) and Chris Yambar (*Mr. Beat*). Others of note include J. Torres, Scott Morse, Jenni Gregory, Mike Manley and Harold Buchholz. There is perhaps too great a proportion of fantasy and superhero strips, though that might be a deliberate attempt to engage the proposed readers' imaginations. Bonus features describing how to create a comic, how to draw, and how teachers can incorporate *Brain Bomb* into their lessons are all well presented and informative.~NF

BRAIN BOY

Dell: *6 issues 1962-1963*

The adventures of teenager Matt Price, who has potent mental powers including telepathy, telekinesis and auto-suggestion. Matt is used as an agent by a government undercover agency and wages a secret war on other, less moral, ESP-ers. The first issue is drawn by Gil Kane, although the inker does his best to disguise the fact. An interesting idea, but a poor series.~SW

BRAIN CAPERS

Fantagraphics: *1 issue 1993*

Mario Hernandez is a decent loose illustrator with a sympathetic eye for a story, and this collection pulls assorted work from anthologies between the covers of one comic. Looking at relationships is a favourite topic, but while not dull neither do his strips spark. There's also a Richard Sala parody, and the best of the bunch, a selection of 'Fake Foreign Funnies', which are just what the title indicates, with odd goings-on accompanied by indecipherable word balloons.~FP

BRAINBANX

DC/Helix: *6 issue miniseries 1997*

A science fiction story written by Elaine Lee with art by Temujin. Orc Research raises animals for organ transplants, but employee Ellis Shepherd thinks there's something else going on, and he barely escaped with his life when he tried to investigate. He can't return, so the regulators have sent in a special kind of spy: Anna Elysian, a telepath linked to Shepherd, giving us two minds in one body. The story starts as a thriller (and continues as a fairly solid one), but is soon dominated by the mind-stretching science fiction aspects, which are strong, ambitious, and well-handled. There are occasional attempts to make you interested in the characters but these are mercifully brief, and you can go back to enjoying the story as an absorbing intellectual exercise; this gives it the feel of a Philip K. Dick story, in its weaknesses as well as its strengths. The details of the artwork are crude, but it tells the story well and conveys some difficult ideas very effectively.~FC

BRAINSTORM COMIX

Alchemy Publications: *6 issues 1975-1978*

Quite the confusing title to chronicle, as the issue cover-numbered 3 is actually, if you consult the indicia, 4, with 3 bearing the logo Mixed Bunch. Furthermore 5 is *Brainstorm Fantasy Comics* 1. Twenty years on, that's irrelevant to all but completists, and what's of note is *Brainstorm* being the first sustained underground comic in the UK, and the early work of major contributor Bryan Talbot, whose strips are collected under the same title. They largely star "psychedelic alchemist" Chester P. Hackenbush, a sort of psylocibin-fueled Dr Strange. At this early stage in his career Talbot was already producing imaginative visuals, with 4 quite stunning, but storytelling was a secondary concern. For *Mixed Bunch's* early Luther Arkwright strip Talbot did rein in, and while a glimpse of what he would develop with the character, it's largely peripheral to it. That issue also features early work from Hunt Emerson, and there's a well-received John Higgins cover on 5. 6, titled *Amazing Rock'n'Roll Adventures*, is almost all Talbot's exaggerated fantasy about mass-produced pop music, elements of which have come to pass in the intervening years. Talbot would improve still further over the years, but discipline would offer only rare opportunities for the type of full-on illustrations on view in Brainstorm.~FP

BRASS

Image: *3 issue miniseries 1996*
WildStorm: *6 issue miniseries 2000-2001*

A janitor finds out he has cancer, becomes a murder suspect and, when chased by the police into the New York sewers, is infected by the Brass virus, which mutates his body into that of a metallic fighting machine. Though scripted by Aron Wiesenfeld, this is really Richard Bennett's book. It's a showcase for his Manga-influenced, incredibly detailed artwork. The use of zippatone gives it an edge and there are some good dramatic panels, but there's also too much reliance on odd panel shapes which have a tendency to make the story over-dynamic. An oversize version of the first issue in black and white has also been published. Don't expect too much new work from Bennett (this was in the works from 1993) but, with time, expectations of quality should be high. The second miniseries, unfortunately, written by John Arcudi, heads off into science fiction-land, as Brass was, it seems, created in order to help some pacifistic aliens defend their planet. Volunteer alien fighters, who are therefore outcast from their race, ensure a whining tone. Bennett and Carlos D'Anda ensure that it all looks pretty, though.~NF

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* Available in a collected edition

BRAT PACK

Tundra: *5 issue miniseries 1990-1991**

In the wake of the Maximortal's disappearance, the city of Slumburg has fallen into the hands of a new breed of 'protectors': venal, psychotic, dissipated, they exacerbate the city's troubles. Even though these brutal 'heroes' need no help, they all keep a young 'assistant' in their stable, and, when these sidekicks perish in the line of duty, make seeking out a replacement their first priority. What's the hidden agenda? Rick Veitch, fresh from his ejection from *Swamp Thing*, gives the old kid-sidekick cliché a new twist with this savage and repulsive, but horribly compelling, exploration of why grown men and women would run around the rooftops with spandex-clad teenagers. And yes, in at least one case, it is exactly what you're thinking, but there's a great deal more to it than that. If you can find the collection, read that rather than the miniseries, since it has new material, better editing and proofreading, and a rewritten ending that's much more coherent than the original.~HS

BRATS BIZARRE

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1994*

Superpowered juvenile delinquents rebel against a repressive future regime. After three issues of pointless fighting, the 'good' paranormals (agents of said regime) are converted to the Brats' side and everyone settles down to partying, crude sex and terrorising normals. Sadly less interesting than it sounds.~HS

THE BRAVE AND THE BOLD

DC: *200 issues, 1 Special 1955-1983, 6 issue miniseries ('The Best of...) 1988-1989, 6 issue miniseries 1991-1992, 6 issue miniseries 1999-2000, 80-Page Giant Annual 2001*

The Brave and the Bold began, as the title suggests, as a historical adventure comic, and the Robert Kanigher and Joe Kubert Viking Prince strips (1-24) are still fondly recalled today. The Silent Knight, a medieval mystery man who fought crime without speaking so no one would recognise his voice in 1-22, doesn't quite have the same appeal, having the disadvantage of not being drawn by Kubert. The Golden Gladiator in the first half dozen issues isn't remembered at all, with good reason.

25 introduced a second editorial phase, a series of three issue tryout runs for prospective new titles. While not quite as influential as its companion title *Showcase* in introducing lasting new concepts to DC's line, *The Brave and the Bold* certainly had its share of successes, hitting gold with its second feature, The Justice League of America (28-30) by Gardner Fox and Mike Sekowsky. This team bought together DC's most popular heroes of the time – Flash, Green Lantern, Wonder Woman, Aquaman, the Martian Manhunter – and in minor roles due to editorial conflicts, Batman and Superman. Superhero team-ups were much the novelty in the early 1960s, and the JLA moved almost directly into their own title. The Mission Impossible style escapades of Suicide Squad (25-27, 37-39) and explorer Cave Carson (31-33, 40, 41) didn't catch on, although the former's title prompted a decent quality run for another idea in the 1980s. The other success of the tryout period was Hawkman. This was elegantly drawn by Joe Kubert in the 1940s, and the artist returned to illustrate a new Hawkman in 34-36* and 42-44*, this time an alien policeman from the planet Thanagar. In a first for comics, he was joined by his superhero wife, Hawkgirl, who was very much his equal. They fought crime using Thanagarian science and ancient Earth weapons. Strange Sports Stories, while drawn impeccably by Carmine Infantino in 45-49, failed to find an audience as a solo feature, although they were similar to material that had been appearing in DC's science fiction comics in smaller doses for years.

It was with 50 that *The Brave and the Bold* premiered the idea that would, with a few modifications, see out the remainder of the run: team-ups. The first was a nice attempt featuring two of the Justice League's lesser lights, the Martian Manhunter and Green Arrow. Assorted odd teamings continued until 65 (including a memorable teaming of Flash and Atom illustrated by Alex Toth in 53), but spliced by two further features that would progress to greater success. The conception of the Teen Titans was 54, with the teen sidekicks – Robin, Kid Flash and Wonder Girl (later joined by Aqualad) – uniting to defeat the diabolical Mr Twister, the first of a succession of inane villains to plague the 1960s Titans. They returned in 60, while 57 and 58 introduced Metamorpho, who had had the ability to transform his body into any element. He teamed with other oddball heroes The Metal Men in 66 before moving into his own title. 61 and 62 return two further 1940s superheroes, Starman and Black Canary, in a pair of decent stories by Gardner Fox, beautifully illustrated by Murphy Anderson. In 67 Batman teamed with the Flash, and remained a fixture of the title until cancellation. He'd already appeared in 59 and 64, and for years had teamed with Superman in *World's Finest*, but in the mid-1960s, with a TV series running, there was no doubt which of the pair was the more popular. Having Batman star in another title made perfect sense. His early run of team-ups was workmanlike, but undistinguished, and it took the arrival of artist Neal Adams to breathe some life into the title from 79's teaming with Deadman. Drawing the title regularly until 86, then 93's trip into the *House of Mystery*, and contributing to 100, his remained the best art seen on the series. His most notable issue is 85, which beefed up Green Arrow considerably, introducing his new look. The writer of the title by this point was Bob Haney. Although never a favourite with continuity obsessed fans, Haney was consistently inventive, delivering suspenseful plots, intriguing mysteries and generally packing a lot of story into a single issue. His run is also distinguished for its unusual co-stars, with far from obvious selections such as Metal Men, Plastic Man and Sgt Rock recurring. Post-Adams Nick Cardy, and more commonly Jim Aparo, at his peak, were the regular artists for a run of entertaining and tightly plotted stories, and most issues between 86 and 110 are decent material. 100 in particular stands out, with a poisoned Batman sending Robin, Green Arrow and Black Canary on a desperate search for an antidote. 112-117 were hundred page issues, offering an odd selection of reprints in addition to the lead feature. However, with the exception of 124's spirited and odd teaming of Batman and Sgt Rock the title was in a slow decline.

There was never really a recovery. Haney struggled on, never matching former glories, until 157, at which point an editorial decision was made to run with stories from an assortment of writers, most frequently Mike Barr. Aparo remained to draw most issues, with the occasional break, his looser style no longer showing a hint of Adams. Marv Wolfman and Dave Cockrum teaming Batman with ace flyers the Blackhawks during World War II in 167 was interesting, Martin Pasko had a trial run for his revival of Swamp Thing in 176, and the Metal Men finally discover what happened to one of their number, Nameless, in 187. The best writer of the later issues was Alan Brennert. His contributions were limited, but each is memorable. 181 returns Hawk and Dove, giving them some historical context as 1960s throwbacks, 182 teams Batman with the twenty-something Robin of an alternate Earth, and 197 has the older Batman of that Earth marrying Catwoman. The latter, drawn by Joe Staton and George Freeman, is a gem. Also of note is the back-up series running between 167 and 193's full length teaming with Batman: Cary Burkett and Dan Spiegle provide generally imaginative stories of Nemesis, a master of disguise. The series finale in 200 is written by Mike Barr and illustrated by Dave Gibbons, teaming Batman with his alternate Earth counterpart. It was a nice epitaph to both an era and a series, The Brave and the Bold having been cast aside to release Barr and Aparo for *Batman and the Outsiders*.

The Best of the Brave and the Bold represented the Neal Adams drawn classics from 80-83, 85 and 93, along with a Viking Prince strip in each issue. Green Arrow, the

Question and the Butcher feature in a convoluted plot involving IRA gunrunners and Native Americans in the 1991 miniseries. Somewhere there's a message about ecology, but writers Mike Grell and Mike Baron fail to keep the interest up, while artist Shea Anton Pensa needed a lot more practice on his storytelling. The most recent miniseries is a decent tribute to the Barry Allen and Hal Jordan versions of Flash and Green Lantern. Written by Mark Waid and Tom Peyer, and illustrated by Barry Kitson, each issue looks at a different period during their long association. It's a fun nostalgic read with many guest-stars including Green Arrow, and the 1940s Flash and Green Lantern. The 80-Page Giant Annual shows us what it might have looked like if printed in 1969. The Green Arrow/Martian Manhunter, Batman/Flash reprints make sense, but a 1940s Boy Commandos/Newsboy Legion story, great as it is by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby is stretching it a bit. So is a tale starring Captain Atom and Nightshade (drawn by Steve Ditko) originally published by Charlton! Mustn't moan though, as it's a great effort.~HY
Recommended: 28-30, 34-36, 42-44, 57, 58, 61, 62, 65, 79-86, 100, 102, 181, 182, 197

BRAVE OLD WORLD

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 2000*

Toying with the idea that the world's computers would crash as the year hit 2000, Bill Messner-Loebs sparks his plot via some technobabble that sends a disparate group of Cornell University researchers back to 1900. Some die on arrival, and with no apparent means of return given the technology of the day, others adapt to the new era the best they can. One determines to create a computer from the materials available. From that point the story plays out in unpredictable and engaging fashion. Guy Davis apparently had something to do with the good art, although you wouldn't know it under Phil Hester's finishes.~WJ
Recommended: 1-4

BREAK-THRU

Malibu: *2 issues 1993-1994*

A flashy Ultraverse title, efficiently illustrated by George Pérez, book-ending an arc through eleven different regular series. The first issue is bitty as it has to set up stories told elsewhere about the many members of the enormous cast, but 2 is a pretty good high-blood-pressure all-in bout in space fit to excite any bred-in-the-bone superhero buff.~GK

BREAKFAST AFTER NOON

Oni Press: *6 issue miniseries 2000*

When the Midland manufacturing company, Windsor Potteries, faces its last days, many of its employees are made redundant. Rob and Louise, an engaged couple, are forced to rethink the planned direction of their lives, with results that bring their relationship to a crisis point. Artist/writer Andi Watson focuses on the minutiae of everyday life with this simple, but resonant story. He doesn't hesitate to bring out the worst aspects of his protagonists: Rob's an egocentric, self-deluding wastrel, Louise is a short-tempered, nagging snob, and neither of them like their supposed best friends much! Watson still manages to invest them with enough appeal that you can understand their mutual attraction, and care about the outcome of their story. And what this man can do to suggest subtle and complex emotional states, with a few deceptively simple pen strokes, has to be seen to be believed. An unprepossessing subject, presented with clarity, empathy and warmth.~HS.
Recommended: 1-6

BREAKNECK BLVD.

MotioN Comics: *3 issues (0-2) 1994*
Slave Labor: *6 issues 1995-1996*

Nineteen year-old, Frank Dunkard, frustrated by his overbearing mother and lazy brother, heads for a club on the sleazy, Bentley Boulevard, where he quickly loses his clothes to hustler Blu-J. Fortunately, he's befriended by kind-hearted stripper, Scarlett Dee, who has sex with him and introduces him to the gay, philosophical, Pall Blighter (whose story is told in 5). Together with they track down Blu-J and, despite taking a good beating Frank recovers his belongings. Thereafter, he finds himself drawn back to the locally named, Breakneck Boulevard, where he continues to be way out of his depth amongst its street-hardened inhabitants. His new friends' motto is "Better Dead Than Bored", but it's Frank's ignorance that drives his adventures in a riot, in pursuit of a handbag thief, in helping an old school friend score drugs and on a date with Scarlett's best friend. Timothy Markin's script is sharp and his characters realistic, if hardly charismatic, but the series is let down by the technically-limited and never fluent artwork.~NF

BREATHTAKER

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1990**

An outstanding tale by writer Mark Wheatley and artist Marc Hempel. This modern-day version of the succubus myth features a strong female lead, Chase Darrow, a genetically engineered beauty who prematurely ages her infatuated lovers, including government superhero The Man. Hempel's deceptively simple style captures the necro-kinkiness of Wheatley's surreal script, which neatly balances humour and pathos. The rather unsatisfying ending was revised for the graphic novel collection.~AL
Recommended: Collected Edition

'BREED

Bravura: *6 issue miniseries 1994*, 6 issue miniseries ('Breed II) 1994-1995*

Jim Starlin returns to his overused themes as Ray Stoner, Vietnam veteran and half-breed demon-son is drawn into a war with his father's species who have been raiding Earth for decades preparatory to a full scale invasion. All the while whining that he just wants to be left alone, Stoner learns to be the best demon fighter in the world and gets into fight after fight after fight. The series folded before any real conclusion, or event, occurred. Created on autopilot.~WW

BRICKMAN

Harrier: *One-shot 1986*

Batman parodies are commonplace, but it's rare to find one that's actually funny. Brickman is. With its protagonist driving around in his brickmobile, throwing brickarangs (bricks) at criminals like the Man-Brick, and having a clockwork Houdini in his utility belt to help him escape deathtraps, Lew Stringer's *Brickman* is very silly laugh-a-panel stuff, and his cartooning is excellent.~FP

BRIGADE

Image/Extreme: *4 issue miniseries 1992-1993, 23 issues (1-22, 25) 1993-1996,*

Mindless and poorly drawn superhero team that fights its way through outer space, the bottom of the sea, and just about anywhere they go. Chief steroid case Battlestone and an annoyingly interchangeable cast of characters (the heroes and villains all look the same and sometimes speak each others' dialogue) pose unconvincingly, declaim badly and hit each other constantly. Even the late arrival of veteran comics writer Marv Wolfman and frantic roster changes couldn't save this turkey. When your parents said comics were bad for you they meant this one.~WW

A BRIGHT SUNNY DAY

Desert Island Comics: *One-shot 2001*

John Cocopiazo is better known for his minicomics, but here steps up a notch to present a day in the life of the shallow John Victory. He awakens with a hangover and co-worker in his bed, and over the next few hours fragments of his previous night's behaviour come back to him. Well drawn and written, the killer page is the final one revealing the future of the cast and the truth behind the story.~FP

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* Available in a collected edition

BRINKE OF DESTRUCTION

Chaos!: *One-shot (Brinke of Eternity) 1994*
BV Books: *One-shot 1994*
High Top: *3 issue miniseries 1995-1996*

The vanity project of model and co-author Brinke Stevens, here casting herself as the half human daughter of an alien warrior, The Fallen Angel. With her pal Alex she's in conflict with her evil half sister Arcana. Mankind's ecological excesses have led to cosmic judgement, and appointed guardian of the Earth by Gaia, Brinke defeats Earth's aggressors but then finds herself banished by the President for speaking out against the administration. The mono one-shot sees her on another world seeing off a planetary invasion, and the last panel returns her to Earth. Bob Hanon's artwork is dismissive but handles the flashbacks to Brinke's exile well. In the High Top series Brinke goes through a rite of passage involving Gaia and the legacies of her parents. She and Alex have to save the Earth from the machinations of Arcana and her Armageddon Chamber. Mike Holliman's artwork is barely competent and the colour makes it look like the contents of a school exercise book. Still, the diminutive Brinke is portrayed as being seven feet tall, so it has no doubt served its purpose.~SW

BRIT-CIT BABES

Fleetway: *One-shot 1993*

A below par *Cagney and Lacey* rip-off from the normally excellent John Wagner as the Vice Squad of the British Mega-City try to stop a white slavery ring from smuggling bimbos off world. Reprinted from the UK *Judge Dredd: Megazine*, but the static and bland art from Steve Sampson and high cliché content don't explain why.~WW

BROID

Eternity: *4 issue miniseries 1990, 4 issue miniseries (Shatterpoint) 1991*

Two generations after his disappearance, war-bot engineer and pilot Broid emerges into a new world that desperately requires his talents. The giant robot battles are subordinate to the characterisation, although they're obviously what creator Tim Eldred most enjoys drawing, making for unusual depth in such a comic. He also gives time to the villains of the piece, explaining their motivations, and in the boldest stroke of all, reveals the final act on the first page, confident it won't matter. A decent adventure comic.~WJ

BROKEN HEROES

Sirius: *12 issue limited series 1998-1999*

Captain Freebird is a lascivious, freewheeling Vietnam veteran whose look comprises cowboy boots, flared jeans, stars and stripes coat and front tooth, dirty shirt, star rimmed sunglasses, overhanging moustache and a long clump of straight, tow-coloured hair. Cap's hippy-go-lucky outlook leads to a series of semi-adventures where Freebird helps various old friends as the FBI gradually tighten their net. They consider Freebird to be a dangerous subversive. Memorable cast members include Cap's nemesis Agent Koontz, his old Mexican wrestling partner Fernando in 4, his cosmonaut buddy Ivan in 3 and then 7-8's Laughing Bear, his estranged son George in 9 and the Marlboro Man in 12. The Fillbach Brothers tell a loose story that looks like Rick Geary drew it with his left hand. Whilst the artwork is an acquired taste the comic is script driven and their anachronistic protagonist is a memorable one. Rock lyrics, TV quotations and characters like sporting goods salesman Tom Wolfe resonate with the times Freebird has come from and add to the comic's light-hearted feel.~SW

BRONX

Eternity: *3 issue miniseries 1991*

Argentinian creator, Alberto Saichann, offers two bleak, cynical vignettes per issue. His characters, including a boxer, a musician, an actor and a barfly are down on their luck, sometimes obsessive – like Jordi Bernet meeting Jack Davis on skid row.~NF

BROOKLYN DREAMS

Paradox Press: *4 issue miniseries 1995**

There have seemingly always been autobiographical insertions into the work of J.M. DeMatteis, and they've seemingly always been weighed down by the desire or necessity to tell a story unconnected with those events. Here there's no such wall, and although they hide behind a created identity, the rambling recollections have the ring of authenticity. Narrated with knowing hindsight, the bulk of the story told concerns adolescent experiences of Brooklyn in the early 1970s, with detours back through a childhood punctuated by explosive parental disagreements and forward to parental communication and judgement as an adult. The woolly mysticism that often renders DeMatteis' writing unpalatable is absent, replaced by a fair dose of philosophical pondering, and plenty of the humour he rarely injects into serious material.

To hang the success of the project entirely on DeMatteis, though, is to undervalue the contribution of artist Glenn Barr. He switches effortlessly, and effectively, from skimpy cartooning, through glorious wash work and into detailed pen and ink sketches, conveying every necessary mood and nuance. A less talented and adaptable artist would have made a right hash of the imaginative exaggerations that characterise the story, and he stamps his own personality on *Brooklyn Dreams* as much as DeMatteis does. In four paperback-size volumes *Brooklyn Dreams* places the work of the majority of the autobiographical comics creators in the shade. It's great.~FP
Recommended: 1-4

BROOKS ROBINSON

Magnum: *1 issue 1992*

If you want the career of possibly the best ever third baseman encapsulated from birth to first World Series in 1966, this is the painless version written and drawn by Joe Orsak with inks from Joe Sinnott. The back-up features a biography of 1950s Pirate Frank Thomas. This doesn't quite achieve the standard of Magnum's Mickey Mantle comic, but should appeal to fans of Robinson. It was planned to run three issues, but stalled at first.~FP

BROTHERMAN: Dictator of Discipline

Big City Comics: *10 issues 1990-1994*

Engaging adventures of Antonio Valor, go-getting young lawyer who also practices his own brand of Affirmative Action as the ultra-funky Superhero, Brotherman. Set in the Harlem-like Big City, it's an effective blend of urban ethnic comedy, adventure and social polemic that sets its sights squarely on the modern African-American situation, and creators Jason, Guy and David Sims manage the difficult trick of making it palatable to mainstream white audiences also. Sharp dialogue, good plots, intriguing villains and great art – in the style of Mort Drucker – make this series well worth a look.~WW
Recommended: 1-2, 4-6

THE BROTHERHOOD

Marvel: *9 issues 2001-2002*

As the series starts high school senior Mikey Asher is unaware he is about to develop mutant abilities, but is contacted by The Brotherhood, who know of his condition. The Brotherhood is a cadre of terrorists striking back against the persecution mutants suffer on a daily basis, and their gloomy worldview is well reflected in stylish pencils from Essad Ribic (1-3), Leonardo Manco (4-6), and Sean Phillips (7-9) with Kent Williams inking throughout. The most bizarre aspect is an editorial one, choosing to credit the writing to "X", in the belief that no comic written by Howard Mackie would sell. He's turned out rubbish in his time, but this bleak contemporary treatment of a problem dating back to Marvel's earliest days isn't among it. It's downhill from the opening segment, and from the disturbing high school, to the revolutionary rhetoric, Mackie's sources are obvious, but for six issues he weaves a fair story from them, only to descend into melodrama by the end.~WJ

BROTHERS OF THE SPEAR

Gold Key: *17 issues 1972-1976*
Whitman: *1 issue (18) 1982*

The strip created by Gaylord DuBois had been the back-up in Tarzan for twenty years drawn by Jesse Marsh and Russ Manning. It finally moved into its own title when Gold Key lost the rights to publish *Tarzan*. Unfortunately the adventures of the two young primitives, one black, one white, were drawn by Jesse Santos' Filipino studio, who did nothing other than prove they were back-up material through and through. The Whitman issue reprints the second Gold Key story.~SW

The Twisted Tales of BRUCE JONES

Eclipse: *4 issue miniseries 1986*

Bruce Jones can be talented both as writer and artist, but you'd be hard pressed to realise it from these feeble twist-ending horror and science-fiction stories. Largely reprinted from late 1960s and early 1970s Warren magazines, they do Jones no favours, and I would suspect earned few royalties, despite the excess, and gratuitous, female nudity.~WJ

Boof and the BRUISE CREW

Image: *6 issues 1994*

Spun-off from Boof's own title, clear and amusing cartooning from Tim Harkins is a plus for this comedy of errors about a greedy homunculus and his space-hopping idiot chums. Particularly well coloured, but the script is full of in-jokes and not funny enough.~GK

THE BRUTE

Atlas: *3 issues 1975*

A frozen giant caveman was defrosted in 1975, and, quel surprise!, was prone to mindless rampages through civilisation. Poorly written and poorly drawn.~FP

BRUTE FORCE

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1990*

Odd eco-themed comic developed in the hope of attracting TV cartoon interest. Members of endangered species put on exo-skeletons to become avengers of the environment. Routine stuff.~HS

The Craptacular B-SIDES

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 2002*

In Raven's Perch, New Jersey, three high-school graduates are invited to form a local superhero team by a down-at-heel entrepreneur. Their first adventure leads to a meeting with the Fantastic Four and some Skrulls. This proves to be a mistake by writer, Brian David-Marshall, as the small-town feel and camaraderie is sacrificed for the sake of a team-up and a chance to deliver a few digs at the Fantastic Four's age and conservatism. A backup in 1 that explains how their friend, Feeva, left them to enrol at the Pegasus Institute, a superhero school, is much better. This is also helped by the artwork of Chris Cross, whose cleaner lines are much more appealing than the washed-out style of Brett Weldele.~NF

BUBBLEGUM CRISIS Grand Mal

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1994**

Big global company. Evil, bad, nasty. But, hey, lighten up, don't worry, because the Knight Saber can save MegaTokyo. Who're they? Four ineffably cute women. But don't get the idea they're bimbos. Oh no. One of them runs a lingerie shop, and another is a rock star. *Bubblegum Crisis* is every bit as daft as sounds, and presumably intentionally so. Adam Warren has obviously watched way too many Japanese animations, and successfully subsumes any elements of his own art style to make this seem genuine manga. One could ask why, when there's plenty of similar material already out there, not least *Dirty Pair*, which Warren also drew.~FP

BUCK GODOT: Zap Gun for Hire

Donning/Starblaze: *2 Graphic Novels 1986-1987*
Palliard Press: *6 issues 1993-1995*

Phil Foglio and Barb Kaalberg's pleasant, cartoony artwork might lead you to conclude that Buck Godot is a comedy science-fiction strip about a 'zany' private eye. In fact it's an extremely convoluted space opera with hardly a chuckle in sight. Creator and writer Foglio overcrowds his storyline with alien religions, interplanetary alliances and cosmos-threatening conspiracies, while neglecting to develop his rather one-dimensional title character. The story remained incomplete.~AL

BUCKY O'HARE

Continuity: *5 issues 1986, 1 Graphic Novel 1986*

As written by Larry Hama and drawn by Michael Golden, the Toad Empire is plundering the universe right, left and centre, and the United Animals Security Council has responded by setting up a defensive fleet: three used frigates and one combination orbital dry-dock and snack bar. Bucky O'Hare is the captain of one of the frigates (the 'Righteous Indignation') and the UASC paperwork is something brutal. It's a very funny comic, with great dialogue and no cuteness. Well, apart from the Toads, who are endearing villains with their compulsive honesty about their fear of Betelguesian Berserker Baboons (they even mention it in their battle song). Read and enjoy, and forget about the cutesy cartoon series that followed.~FC

Recommended: Graphic Novel

BUDDHA ON THE ROAD

Aeon: *6 issues 1996-1998*

Biting, black satire from Colin Upton in the shape of Norman, a Canadian soldier newly returned from a tour as a peacekeeper in Bosnia. He discovers that God and the Devil are real and that moreover, Satan has chosen him to be the Lord Anti-Christ and lead the hordes of hell in final battle against the Heavenly Host. The sex and violence of the strip are subverted by the cartoony style that gives the material a real punch. Well worth a look.~WW

BUFFALO WINGS

Antarctic: *2 issue microseries 1993*

In isolation these college soap opera snippets dressed up in funny animal skins elicit a shrug of the shoulders. If you've come to know and love the cast through their appearances in *Wild Life* you may take something from these prototypes, but otherwise it's only worth noting John Nunnemacher's improving cartooning over a variety of styles.~WJ

BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER

Dark Horse: *52 issues +, 1 Annual 1999 to date*

As is the case with most properties licensed by Dark Horse for comics, fans of the original material can come to *Buffy* comics confident they're buying a well produced product faithful to the source. Poor issues are rare, and ironically written by TV writers in most cases, and while it took until 13 before the art team of penciller Cliff Richards and inker Joe Pimentel arrived, their talent for likenesses and mood ensures the comic looks good. Andi Watson (1-19) has a light touch, writing the cast interaction with ease, and capturing the whimsical charm of the TV show. Don't be put off by the length of 'Bad Blood' running from 9 to 19. The continuing thread concerns a female vampire wanting to be transformed by a plastic surgeon, creating her own vampires, and culminating in a duplicate Buffy, but most individual issues have another focus and make sense. Christopher Golden is more at home with the darker side of Buffy's world. His 'Blood Of Carthage' story in 21-26 is a good effort, uniting several cast members against a seemingly unbeatable foe while throwing in some nice character touches to boot. Golden also writes 29-30, which cross over with *Angel* 15-16. The writing team of Tom Fassbender and Jim Pascoe take over with 31, as the issues correspond to the end of the fourth TV season, and produce more conveniently collected four issue story arcs. They begin slowly, although their characterisation hits the right note from the off, but by their second story, starting in 35, they've achieved the correct blend. Their issues to 46 are the best approximation of the TV show to date, even solving a continuing problem for the comics concerning action sequences that would use five minutes of screen time occupying a third to a half of the comic. Their best effort is 35-38 in which a missing slayer returns in unexpected fashion. Scott Lobdell and Fabian Nicieza share the writing from 47, and follow a deliberate editorial agenda to divorce the comic from the TV series, producing stories about the cast that no longer tie-in to set continuity. 47-50 have a neat twist ending, but getting there is hard, and from 51 the clock turns back to the days just after Buffy realised she was a slayer.

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* Available in a collected edition

Dark Horse offer each issue with either a photo cover or the more traditional illustration and for those concerned about a timeline, the early issues roughly correspond with the second TV season and the series moves forward from there. More detailed information can be found on the Buffy page of the Dark Horse website. Knowledge of the TV show isn't essential to enjoyment of the comic, but surely few read it without watching the show, and editor Scott Allie is to be congratulated for maintaining an involved and thought-provoking letters page. Those wanting to dip their toes into Buffy, so to speak, could seek out 8, Richards' tryout as artist and Watson's best single issue story. There's more Buffy in *Dark Horse Presents* 141, an all-Buffy issue, 150, the 1998-2000 annuals, and all Buffy stories are available in collections.~FP

Recommended: 35-38

BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER Miniseries and One-shots

Dark Horse: *Graphic Novel ('The Dust Waltz') 1998, 3 issue miniseries ('The Origin') 1999*, one-shot ('Spike and Dru') 1999, one-shot ('Spike and Dru: The Queen of Hearts') 1999, one-shot ('Giles') 2000, one-shot ('Spike and Dru: All's Fair') 2000, one-shot ('Jonathan') 2001, one-shot ('Lovers Walk') 2001, one-shot ('Willow & Tara'*) 2001, 3 issue miniseries ('Oz') 2001*, 4 issue miniseries ('Haunted') 2001-2002*, one-shot ('Lost and Found') 2002, one-shot ('Reunion') 2002, 2 issue microseries ('Willow and Tara') 2002*, one-shot ('Tales of the Slayers') 2002*

If there's an easy way to separate the wheat from the chaff here, it's to avoid anything written by Christopher Golden. He's not bad, dropping in the requisite amount of monsters and managing to have the dialogue sounding right, but there's little imagination or humour and none of the surprises or emotional content marking a superior writer. Golden's best is the nasty Spike and Dru short in 'Lover's Walk', collected in the trade paperback along with the one-shots. To avoid other Golden, though, means missing Terry Moore's art on the first 'Willow and Tara' and Ryan Sook's work on the first two Spike and Dru one-shots. Thankfully there's 'Ring of Fire' in which Sook's Mignola influenced art gives a dark horror gloss to a script from TV writer Doug Petrie (who also wrote the moody *Buffy* 19). It features all the characters one reasonably might like to see from second season *Buffy*, and better still gives them all a purpose for being there. By contrast 'The Dust Waltz' is *Buffy* by numbers, and 'The Origin', adapted from *Buffy* creator Joss Whedon's original film script, is very traditional and predictable for a property that would come to redefine horror TV.

TV writer Jane Espenson writes 'Haunted', and ' Reunion', the latter speculation among Buffy's friends about what happened between her and Angel during TV season six. 'Haunted' is far better, though, set just after season three with Buffy facing a recurring foe and elements leading into that season's TV revelations. Well drawn by Cliff Richards and Julio Ferrera, most Buffy fans should enjoy it. Both Jeff Matsuda and Gene Colan draw portions of 'Tales of the Slayers', which reads like two short stories slapped together, and while both artists are good, the contrasting styles jar. It's worth noting that, as with the regular series, most issues come with the choice of photo or illustration cover, and actor James Marsters co-writes the first Spike and Dru one-shot with Golden, while the latter collaborates with Amber Benson on all Willow and Tara comics.~WJ

Recommended: 'Ring of Fire'

BUG

Marvel: *One-shot 1997*

Although starting off well, this comedic tale featuring the insectoid warrior from *The Micronauts* deteriorates. He battles Annihilus and jump-starts the Marvel universe, but there's only one gag which is repeated ad infinitum. Ho ho-hum.~WW

THE BUG HUNTERS

Trident: *One-shot 1990*

Giant rampaging robots working for the law handled with some wit. Originally devised in four page segments copyrighted 1986, there's not enough variety in this format, but artist (and in this instance writer) Jerry Paris is one of comics' great lost talents.~FP

BUGBOY

Image: *One-shot 1998*

Beginning with the idea of presenting a child who actually has all the adventures children fantasise, Mark Lewis turns out a beautifully drawn cartoon style adventure. That it was completed over seven years and there are differences between the early pages and later ones matters not a jot. The downside is that there's not enough plot to sustain the charm over forty pages, and the story drags long before the end.~WJ

BUGHOUSE

Cat-Head: *5 issues 1995-1996*

Top Shelf: *1 volume 2000*

Anthropomorphic allegory using cartoon insects as variously disguised icons from the world of popular jazz music. Jimmy Watts was just your average Catholic kid, horny, self-absorbed, rebellious and plagued by unnecessary guilt. Then his folks got him a saxophone. His life takes a whole new turn, even to the point of having semi-mystical visions. He has a destiny. He's going to Bugtown to be a musician. He wins a scholarship to the City Music College where he meets young pianist Slim Watkins and they discover shared tastes for fine, loose women, getting drunk and playing jazz. Their rise in the boozy, druggy world of popular music, where their slow, seemingly inevitable descent into drug addiction mirrors their meteoric success with their band Bughouse draws heavily on the history and legends of America's semi-mythic Jazz Age. It also comments on the pressures of creativity, the dumb things talented people do to cope with it, and ultimately how some survive and others simply don't.

Steve Lafler crafts a deceptively compelling little gem whose strength lies in fresh characterisation over an archetypal plot. The series has been collected twice with substantial revisions both times. The 1996 version reprints 1-4 with supplemental pages and a twenty page prequel, whilst the 2000 edition expands to 192 pages with substantially more extra material. In each case, though, the spiritually downbeat 5, which deals with the aftermath of the drug-related death of one of the major characters and how his friends cope with his loss is omitted and replaced with a different "ending". The *Baja* graphic novel revisits the characters. Compulsive reading for anyone with an open mind.~WW

Recommended: 5, 2000 collection

BUGS BUNNY

DC: *3 issues 1990*

Reasonable Chuck Fiala artwork fails to lift this from the ranks of third-rate parody. A quest for magical busts of Elmer Fudd sends Bugs and Daffy Duck around the world. En route they meet most of the major Warner Bros stars, throwing in references to recent movies or other studios' characters along the way. Nowhere near enough of the anarchic surrealism that illuminates the best cartoons; and nowhere near enough of Bugs Bunny himself.~NF

BULLETPROOF MONK

Image: *3 issue miniseries 1999**

Bulletproof Monk was a hero in China during the 1940s. Lung Kai Yun, known to everyone in present-day San Francisco as Kar, wears an amulet with the Monk's name on it. Against his guardian Uncle's advice he falls in with local gangster Boss Wei's daughter. On inheriting control of the gang she abruptly shuts Kar out of her life. Meanwhile a Chinese agency has sent Flower Soldier to find The Bulletproof Monk. Everyone knows Kar is the key in this rite of passage drama – even Kar himself. This is only the opening chapter of a much longer saga – possibly involving the rising and advancing of a spirit. Creators Brett Lewis and Michael Avon-Oeming get off to a strong if crammed start before R. A. Jones replaces Lewis as scripter in 2, allowing the pages to breathe. The artwork, inked by Jason Baumgartner, is imaginative, stylish and takes colour well. There will be inevitable comparisons with Bastard Samurai where Oeming's need for illustrative realism has eroded even further. Kar's amoral approach to the material world makes for a memorable protagonist.~SW

BUM WAD

Yahoo: *1 issue 1971*

It's very rare that underground comics were printed in colour, which makes it a shame that the colour used here is hideous, and largely pointless. That, though, places it tune with the remainder of the comic featuring ugly art, and feeble jokes, although fifteen years later Richie Retch could have slotted straight into the U.K's *Viz* comic. They'd have done a better job, mind.~WJ

BURGLAR BILL

Trident: *1 issue 1990*

Why Paul Grist hasn't been elevated to the ranks of cartooning greats is an unexplained mystery to be brought to the attention of Arthur C. Clarke. All the elements characterising his work are present and correct in this early piece. The simple, clear and adaptable art is delightful, and the writing well observed and insightful. Burglar Bill's appearance is merely a cameo in a story concentrating on how the childhood fantasies of first-week-on-the-beat policeman Stephen Hill contrast with reality. A gem.~FP

Recommended

Bram Stoker's BURIAL OF THE RATS

Cosmic Comics: *3 issue miniseries 1995*

This lesser known Bram Stoker story was adapted for film by Roger Corman, so it made sense for his comic company to issue a tie-in. It's absolute nonsense about Stoker himself becoming involved with a community of independent women who worship rats. The b-movie sexuality is blatant, but it's nicely drawn by the unique combination of Francisco Solano Lopez and Val Mayerik. Look out for the particularly mad cover on 3.~WJ

BURIED TREASURE

Pure Imagination: *3 issues 1986-1987*
Caliber: *5 issues 1990*

Interesting selection of lovingly reconstructed 1940s stories from Greg Theakston's Pure Imagination studio. Western, funny animal, supernatural, romance and 'true life' stories sit side by side, making an odd mixture, but with many stellar names from comics' earliest days represented (Kirby, Simon, Cole, Frazetta, Kubert, Wood, Toth, Briefer, Williamson) they packed a lot into eight issues.~HS

BURNING CIRCLE

Tusk Entertainment: *One-shot 2001*

David Boller revives his *Kaos Moon* character to promote his vision of a personal multimedia entertainment website. All but the last of three well drawn short stories are rather insubstantial, and it's a shame the website address printed so prominently on the cover doesn't exist anymore. For more of Boller's work (and that of Mary Hildebrandt) go to www.tuskentertainment.com.~WJ

BUSHIDO

Eternity: *4 issues 1988-1989*

Miki Matsumoto's family are amongst the leaders of a corporation, all of whose members have telekinetic powers, that covertly aids the police against the Yakuza. After assassinating the American Vice President, her brother hires the Yakuza to kill Miki and their parents. This was a promising thriller from Bruce Balfour and Ben Dunn (Lea Hernandez pencils roughly half of 3), but has not been finished.~NF

BUSHWHACKED

Eros: *One-shot 1996*

Ann and Marsha go camping. Ann is a nature lover and finds the stud of her dreams, after first of course initiating Marsha into the joys of outdoor sex, whilst Marsha hates everything to do with the Great Outdoors – except possibly sex with Ann – and therefore almost gets raped by the lusty yokels. That's really all there is to this, apart from some fairly average drawing by writer/artist Tayyar Ozkan, both of the countryside and of sex.~WW

BUTCHER

DC: *5 issues 1990*

Butcher than who, exactly? Oh well. This tale of an eco-terrorist occupies an odd position in DC's continuity, being set firmly in the DC Universe but still being creator-owned. It set a precedent for later series such as *Sovereign Seven*, for which no one thanks it, but has little intrinsic interest.~HS

BUTCHER KNIGHT

Image: *4 issues 2000-2001*

OK. Lancelot is turned into a super-gargoyle by Merlin for having an affair with Guinivere, and sent to a hell dimension. Next stop: present day, where we find Lancelot has sworn allegiance to some witch babe in return for his freedom and his help against Merlin, who is also still around. Dwayne Turner's art is very slick, but the plot and script are pure nonsense and begs the question: who is Charles Holland related to?~DB

BUTT BISCUIT

Fantagraphics: *3 issues 1992-1993*

File under "experimental to the point of nauseating". Dean Williams and Ted Couldron pool their talents to produce this series of stories about a cripple being mistreated. It's likely that many people will find this offensive for one reason or another, which doesn't mean you shouldn't try it.~FJ

BUTTERSCOTCH

Eros: *3 issue miniseries 1991**

Originally released in English as an NBM collection, Manara's *Butterscotch* short stories are uneasily voyeuristic pieces about an invisible man who is in love with another woman, who persecutes a young woman, stripping and arousing her in public, making her look like a whore. How the situation comes about is not explained, but there are flashes of Manara working towards the kind of meta-fictional relationship between reader and creator he explores at great length in his *Guiseppe Bergman* series of graphic novels.~FJ

BUZ SAWYER

Dragon Lady Press: *3 issues 1986-1987*
Pioneer: *5 issues 1988*

Over the decades almost all the most influential comic artists have received due recognition in the form of lavish reprintings of their best work. For some mystifying reason this acclaim has eluded Roy Crane, regarded among the top rank by his newspaper strip contemporaries and a major influence on a generation of cartoonists whose career began in the decade after World War II. Many consider Crane's *Captain Easy* Sunday strips from the 1930s to be his career peak, their mixture of bold design, and well-cartooned action sequences an obvious influence on Alex Toth to name but one. A brief sequence of this and a longer sequence of his *Wash Tubbs* daily strips are reprinted in *The Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics* (along with much other fine material). In 1943 Crane wanted to work on his own feature, and created Buz Sawyer, all action wartime pilot with an eye for the ladies. It debuted in November that year.

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* Available in a collected edition

The Dragon Lady Press magazines are the best reprinting of *Buz Sawyer* to date, with good reproduction on clean paper. Their *Classic Adventure Strips* 7 had run a Buz Sawyer sequence from 1944 to 1945, and the first issue picks the daily adventure strip up from August 1945, at first omitting its more humourous, and less successful, Sunday editions. The superb draughtsmanship and fine characterisation are still fresh after fifty years. Sadly, this short run only briefly extends into the post war years, and while the stories are well-plotted and exciting, particularly in 3, as proved by *Classic Adventure Strips* 4 reprinting a sequence from 1949, the best was yet to come. Some stories from the 1940s were also reprinted in 1948 and 1949 in three issues of a Standard Comics series.

The Pioneer comics are shoddy product, but the easiest way of obtaining much material from 1943 and 1944, starting a month into the strip. Unfortunately, the editors chose not to reprint the strips faithfully, but to re-work them by enlarging or stretching some panels, to a full page on occasion, and cutting others in order that the whole read more like a traditional comic. It's testament to Crane's genius that despite this butchering his storytelling and meticulous graphic realism shines through, although best displayed on the panels sized somewhere close to the original printed dimensions. The writing is less spectacular, although certainly matching contemporary standards, as Buz fights the Japanese occupying some small islands. In the absence of any decently produced reprints, any true lover of comic art should seek these comics out. Pioneer additionally butchered *Mandrake, Modesty Blaise, Prince Valiant, Rip Kirby and Secret Agent*, all of which have received better treatment elsewhere.~FP

Recommended: Dragon Lady Press 1-3

BUZZ

Kitchen Sink: *3 issues 1990-1991*

Twisted anthology of top-notch material, edited by Mark Landman, who contributes computer-generated strips of his own including the demented Fetal Elvis in issue 3. Although short-lived the title featured work by Richard Sala, Charles Burns, Daniel Clowes, Jim Woodring and Jeremy Eaton. Issue 2 reprints a Basil Wolverton story, 'Supersonic Sammy'. Highlights include Charles Burns' "Naked Snack" in 2-3 and Mack White's *The Mutant Book Of The Dead* in 3.~NF

The BUZZ

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 2000*

Spin-off from the alternate Marvel Universe of Spider-Girl where the grandson of J. Jonah Jameson steals/rescues a super-suit that gives him the powers of a human fly. As bad as it sounds.~WW

Aragonés BUZZ & BELL SPACE CADETS

Platinum Editions: *1 volume 1991*

Sergio Aragonés produces a European style album for global syndication, and as all the strips are silent there's nothing to lose by shipping a few copies to the USA. The theme is space exploration through the life of an astronaut and his chimp companion. Which is Buzz and which is Bell is up to you. Aragonés' cartooning is exemplary, and anyone who likes his work will be happy with this collection of one page gags.~WJ

BUZZ BUZZ Comics Magazine

Horse Press: *One-shot 1996*

This treasury-sized magazine contains a number of articles on comics (including appreciations of Moebius and Hugo Pratt) and music, interviews with publisher Paul Pope, Steve Bissette and Jeff Smith, as well as three strips by Pope and one by Moebius. The latter, 'Remembrances', in French, debuts here, while Pope's thirty-three page 'Smoke Navigator' is described as a work-in-progress, setting the scene for a longer story. Jay Stephens collaborates with Pope on 'Super Gag Comics' in which the two artists, with their characters Big Bang and H. R. Watson, compete in a wrestling match, and Pope's final strip, 'Pistachio', insists that three is a magic number. Essential reading for Pope fans, but others may want to wait for 'Smoke Navigator' to be completed.~NF

BUZZARD

Cat-Head Comics: *20 issues 1993-1998*

Eclectic, not to say erratic avant-garde cartoon magazine of humour and criticism from Steve Lafler and Stephen Beaupre. Contributors, although not always at their best, include R. L. Crabb, Lloyd Dangle, Julie Doucet, Mary Fleener, Phoebe Gloeckner, Mario Hernandez, James Kochalka, Mark Martin, and J. R. Williams. While many alternative features are given guest outings, such as Lafler's Bughouse (9) and Dog Boy (11), this is never more than an okay read.~WW

BUZZBOY

Sky Dog Press: *4 issue miniseries 1998-1999*

John Gallagher whips up a cool and impressive yarn set on a world where a Superman-like hero prevents World War II only to gradually become power crazed and take control of society. As the story starts Lord Ultra has declared martial law and his police are violently suppressing the populace when his long vanished sidekick Buzzboy returns after a fifteen year absence to make things right. All the iconic paraphernalia of Silver Age comics is there in abundance, wedded to a good story and a complete lack of grim melodramatics. Great Fun.~WW

Joe Lansdale's BY BIZARRE HANDS

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1994*

Adaptations of Joe Lansdale's short stories that, frankly, weren't all that good in the first place. Often disgusting and gross, seldom disturbing.~HS

BY THE TIME I GET TO WAGGA WAGGA

Harrier: *One-shot 1987*

Good on Harrier for recognising Eddie Campbell's talent and pumping out one-shots and series in the late 80s, despite sales figures rarely looking promising. By The Time...'s rationale is provided by a six-page Campbell/Trevs Phoenix strip contrasting travel now and in the future, a thin concept at best. Much better is the 'In The Days of The Ace Rock and Roll Club' reprint, some of Campbell's earliest work, where the crudeness of the drawing, especially of figures, is more than balanced by the astute observation, both of body language and of human behaviour.~FJ

CABLE

Marvel: *2 issue microseries ('Blood and Metal') 1992, 107 issues, 2 Annuals 1993-2002*

Cable, who first appeared in *New Mutants* 87, is the quintessential Rob Liefeld big-gun-toting character, who, despite having immense telekinetic powers, would rather shoot people. And yet it's not always as bad as it sounds. In amongst the ultra-violence, the convoluted *X-Men* continuity (Cable is the son of Cyclops and Madelyne Prior, sent to the future to become the ultimate warrior, then returned to the past to...never mind), blood and bullets there are some decent plots. Cable has a vulnerable side: he might have a destiny to save the world from Apocalypse, but that doesn't mean he has to like it. His entire life has been filled with suffering, pain and the death of anyone he let close to him. He's more violent than the X-Men but, along with his partner/lover Domino and his protégés X-Force, he also gets the job done – the job being making sure the Apocalyptic future he grew up in never occurs.

The original miniseries and 1-10 of the ongoing title are readable (provided you've acquired a taste for the big-guns genre), but the series really takes off with the arrival of Jeph Loeb as writer. Starting in 15, with a night-on-the-town date for Cable and Domino, Loeb strikes a good balance between soap, action and future-mythology that merges the mixed aspects of Cable's character, aided by lovely Ian Churchill art beginning in 20. The issues around this period play heavily on Cable's heritage, his awkward relationship with his father and how he fits into the X-Men's world. Such themes provide a fascinating read for those who enjoy the complicated and multilayered continuity involved, but can equally turn off anyone not steeped in the necessary background knowledge. This makes *Cable* an acquired taste, but well worth it if you're prepared to put in the effort. The introduction of Blaquesmith, a mentor from Cable's future and an important link to it; the building of relationships with his 'sister' Rachel and counterpart Nate 'X-Man' Grey; and explorations of his ties to the future cult of the Askani all make for an interesting exploration of Cable's uniqueness: his displacement in time and destiny to fulfil various prophecies. Loeb makes the most of this aspect of the character and pushes its potential to the limit.

Loeb and Churchill depart with 39, and the next issue of note is 44 with the arrival of writer James Robinson. He immediately finds his feet with a touching tale of Cable and his mother, Madelyne Prior, and especially with the addition of Jose Ladronn on pencils from 47 (plus 46 cover), inked by Juan Vlasco. Ladronn's art is a precocious combination of Jack Kirby and Moebius, and combines with Robinson's ability to see the potential in the most tired concepts to bring a vibrant new dynamism. Ladronn is never credited as having any story input, but a sudden shift to grandiose, Kirbyesque epics redolent of the Fourth World can hardly be coincidence, especially as they remain long after Robinson is replaced by Joe Casey. Tellingly, the numerous fill-in issues during this period by different artists but the regular writers are markedly inferior. Ladronn's issues of *Cable* are by far the best.

Rob Liefeld returns to his creation in 71. His issues are worth a look, but an inability to meet deadlines means that he only manages alternate issues, leaving poor co-plotter Joe Pruett to pick up the pieces, which he does competently until 78. Thereafter the previously covered themes are re-run. A new direction was needed, but David Tischman's approach from 97 would be laughable if its sheer ignorant stupidity didn't make it so offensive. Cable sets off on a world tour, solving problems such as the Shining Path and even the IRA by preaching philosophy and telling small children how to live together in peace. It was a sad end to what had been at times a refreshingly different and unique book, but its cancellation (to be restarted as Soldier X) can only be described as a mercy killing.

Cable was, from beginning to end, 100% a 1990s comic. The heir apparent of the big guns, gritty uber-violence and style-over-substance legacy Liefeld left the industry, it nonetheless survived its humble roots to be something better than it ought to be: rarely a run-of-the-mill superhero comic, never quite able to escape the overblown continuity that was its blessing and its curse. It was certainly never for those stuck in the safe simplicity of the 1960s. It was, undoubtedly, the best of its kind: a comic that defined a much maligned period of the genre but sadly wasn't able to outlive it. It doesn't deserve to be forgotten. Nathan Summers continued in *Solider X*.~JC

Recommended: 15, 20, 36, 60-62

CADILLACS AND DINOSAURS

Marvel/Epic: *6 issue miniseries 1990-1991*
Topps: *9 issues 1994*

The Epic miniseries reprints Mark Schultz' *Xenozoic Tales* stories in colour. As he was having difficulty putting out issues in the early 1990s he licensed the concept to Topps to produce new colour stories. They continue the adventures of 26th-century mechanic Jack Tenrec and his co-adventuress and love interest, the feisty Hannah Dundee. In a future where dinosaurs roam and small tribes of human survivors face a harsh fight for survival – although the way the pair romp around relishing their run-ins with sundry scaly monsters you'd be hard pressed to sympathise.

Roy Thomas writes a trio of three issue stories competently, bringing in plenty of new, commercial characters, but accompanying artwork is variable, and the colour harsh. Dick Giordano draws 1-3 in a bit of a hurry, in which someone seems to be trying to take control of the City In The Sea's governing council, with back-ups by Rich Buckler. Jean-Claude St Aubin handles the art on 4-6, and has obviously studied the same sources as Schultz (Wood, Wood again, and maybe a pinch of Williamson). The final tale, in which Jack encounters a rapacious motorbike girl, is disastrously drawn by Esteban Maroto, who tightens up his loose, open style but still looks extremely unsuited to the title. Overall, *Cadillacs and Dinosaurs* only serves to emphasise how reliant on the quality of Schultz' art the success of the concept is.~FJ

CAFFEINE

Slave Labor: *10 issues 1996-1999*

Anthology vehicle for the bizarre stories and exceptional drawing styles of cartoonist Jim Hall featuring such diverse luminaries as Fred Kincaid Alice, Carson, The Plaid Bastards, Checkered Chick-Force and even Satan and the Big Booty Demon Hoes. Hard to describe and a joy to read.~WW

Recommended: 3, 6

CAGE

Marvel: *20 issues 1992-1993*
Max: *5 issue miniseries 2002**

Power Man returns without Iron Fist (who turns up in 12) as Luke Cage moves to Chicago and becomes associated with a campaigning newspaper and Dakota North, private detective, star of her own failed series. Cage trusts no-one and is now merely out to earn a living supporting causes he approves of. When persuaded that Dakota knows something about his supposedly dead father he sticks around to help her against villains like The Untouchables (Kick-Back, Nitro and Tombstone, 2-4). Guests are used to help boost the title's profile from the start, Punisher in 3-4, West Coast Avengers in 5-8 and the Hulk in 9-10. The main storyline, however, up to 14, concerns Cage's past and his attempts to prove himself innocent of all the crimes he's been charged with over the years. A six-part crossover with *Silver Sable* and *Terror Inc.* (15-16) is followed by an *Infinity Crusade* tie-in before the final story creates Dark Cage. Written by Marc McLaurin throughout, it's all hard-nosed superheroics with no room for subtlety or anything beyond the bare minimum of characterisation. Dwayne Turner's artwork is dynamic, but ragged and unattractive (1-10). Scott Benefiel (from 15) has a more open, flowing style, but is stifled by the colouring.

The miniseries sees Cage adopting a hard-boiled investigator role, accepting the request of a mother to find out who killed her child during a drive-by shooting. This puts him in the middle of the rivalry between a street gang and the mob, with corrupt police officers thrown in for good measure. The would-be-tough script and macho-posturing in Brian Azzarello's writing are hardly convincing, and Cage might as well be a completely different character, but the smart artwork by Richard Corben offers some consolation.~NF

CAGES

Tundra: *10 issues 1991-1993**

Cages is the series by which you will judge whether Dave McKean is a gifted creator of comics or a painter who happens to have wandered into the world of the cartoon. Gone are all the scratchy overlays, multiple layers, photographs and collages, but Cages remains a work that examines the role of the artist and the function of art as a creative process. Just as many artists exhibit work in progress and preparatory material alongside their finished creations, so McKean begins the series with several pages called 'Scaffolding' in which he displays his initial thoughts and explains his purpose. He launches into accounts of ur-myths of creation and death which are a bit embarrassing in their simplicity. They're best skipped: after all, artists don't stand by their paintings telling you what they think they're doing on the canvas, do they? The unkind may decide that *Cages*, with its obsessions with art and jazz, is actually about McKean and his own creative process. However self-centred, though, the construction of the comic remains interesting.

Creation comes up again and again in the series of grey, thematically interlinked plotlines in which nothing much happens, but which contain a lot of thinking and saying. The protagonist arrives at a house, already inhabited by several artists, particularly Sabarsky, the painter looking for inspiration in solitude, and Angel, the jazz pianist. McKean gradually gathers them together, examining their lives, and reveals his greater purpose, although less patient readers will tire of the wait. The opening to the first chapter spends several pages observing a cat (beautifully, admittedly). It's pretty much the *Magnificent Ambersons* of comics story telling. His artwork is extraordinarily restrained at the start but soon degenerates into bursts of different styles, rather showily laid out for us, although along the way there are some wonderful, loose character studies.

The story in *Cages* becomes much more interesting when McKean turns away from the artistic inhabitants of the house, having delivered his messages about himself as creator, and puts the spotlight on more ordinary characters, such as Mrs Featherskill in 6. The whole issue, a careful unpeeling of the layers of her life, told via her ramblings and dreams, is McKean at his best.~FJ

Recommended: 1, 6

CAIN

Harris: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

Cyborg super-soldier gone renegade becomes involved with some iron curtain leftover troops, one of whom used to be his wife, and a confused telepath. A few workable ideas are largely buried in a confusing morass of superfluous commentary and increasingly rushed art.~WJ

A CALIBER CHRISTMAS

Caliber: *One-shot 1998*

A Christmas themed sampler of the features Caliber was publishing in 1998, plus *The Jam*, which had finally sunk at Caliber two years earlier. The sentimental episode of The Apparition tugs at the heartstrings, while *Lifequest* and *Saint Germaine* are also good. Beyond that, though, the likes of *Pakkins' Land*, *Kilroy*, and *Little White Mouse* fill the pages without spark.~WJ

CALIBER CORE

Caliber: *1 issue (0) 1998*

Source book with background information on the characters that make up the Caliber Core universe plus a St Germaine short strip.~WW

CALIBER PRESENTS

Caliber: *23 issues 1989-1992*

Caliber's original showcase title is the curious mélange of all such beasts, offering few delights, but numerous different perspectives and a very catholic editorial policy. For all that, there were few successful graduates, the best known being James O'Barr, whose *Crow* strip first appears in 1. Always more about mood than talent, it's basic stuff, as is Tim Vigil's appalling slash-and-sex alter ego strip in most issues to 8. If the size of the character and his weapon is inversely proportioned to the creator and his, Tim Vigil is a midget lacking a penis. More respectable in the early issues is 'Faerie Tails', a funny-animal fantasy by Dave McKinnon and James Dean Smith, drawn in Smith's appealing open style, but 5 is the best of the first flush. For starters there's no Vigil, with the overriding theme being maternal and tragic love, but there is a poignant tale of an old lady being robbed, and a decent prose piece from Mark Perry. Many issues contain illustrated prose, but it's largely mundane. Another early feature is previews of the more popular Caliber titles such as *Deadworld* (2, 9), *The Realm* (3), *Fringe* (8) and most effectively *Baker Street* in 4, with an original 'Baker Street' story in 9. That issue, the best overall, also features a *Jazz Age Chronicles* short, and two very different, well written stories from Rafael Nieves. The cover claims it introduces 'Street Shadows', which has to wait an issue, but it's a generally fine selection of stories concerning life in the city, with 20's 'The Caretakers', about garbage collectors, and 12's tale of a retiring diner-owner standouts.

Of other semi-regular strips, the meandering and tedious 'Orlak' was somehow popular enough to warrant two comics collecting his escapades, while the far superior 'Taken Under' was also collected. By Debra Rodia and Michael Lark, it's an odd and mood-driven story about a guy whose father ran a funeral parlour and sold his soul to the devil. 'Mack The Knife' is almost underground cartoony, while there are too many strips seemingly progressing without a conclusion in mind, 'The Fugitive' foremost among them. Originally a novel idea of a killer being chased through various TV dramas and comedies, the joke is stretched way too far. 'Eyes of the Hero' takes the innovative (for comics) idea of depicting exactly what the crimefighter is seeing for every panel, and departs with a decent conclusion after three instalments. Beyond the fact that there's a decent 'Silencers' short in the final issue and O'Barr returns in 5, there's little else worth noting. The missing ingredient ensuring greater popularity of the similarly conceived Negative Burn was the addition of more personal works by already highly regarded creators.~FP

Recommended: 9

CALIBRATIONS

Caliber: *One-shot 1992, 5 issues 1996*

Originally intended as a summer special, this featured short stories of Caliber's early hits including *Airwaves*, *Baker Street*, *Fringe* and *Deadworld*, and returning three years later as a loss-leader, published at a discount price to showcase some of their better titles. All new material included *War of the Worlds*, *Rust*, *Count Orlak*, *The Lost*, (the further adventures of Peter Pan characters set in contemporary New York) and held together by Warren Ellis and Ken Meyer Jr.'s 'Atmospherics' serial. Excellent.~WW

Recommended: One-shot

CALIFORNIA COMICS

Bob Sidebottom: *3 issues 1974-1977*

Largely trivial sex-and-trips material is occasionally redeemed by the appealing cartooning of Ed Watson, although Scott Shaw and Will Meugniot are also on display in the first issue. Of perhaps more lasting interest is the comprehensive A-Z listing of underground comix begun in 2, and sadly never finished.~FP

CALIFORNIA GIRLS

Eclipse: *8 issues 1987-1988*

Trina Robbins writes and draws the adventures of Max and Mo, twin sisters and teenage models. Light, fluffy, fun and with some surprising high-profile names among the 'guest fashion designers'.~HS

CALL ME PRINCESS

CPM: *6 issue miniseries 1999**

Gentle romance about schoolgirl Makoto's dream to be treated like a princess, based on her adulation of her elder sister's husband, whose younger brother, Ryu comes to stay with her family. Tomoko Taniguchi's strip has charm and a certain cuteness, but lacks depth.~NF

THE CALL OF DUTY

Marvel: *6 issue miniseries ('The Brotherhood') 2002-2003*, 5 issue miniseries ('The Precinct') 2002-2003, 4 issue miniseries ('The Wagon') 2002-2003*

In the wake of heightened public respect for the emergency services, Marvel issued these miniseries highlighting respectively firemen, police and paramedics. The opportunity was there to provide respectful tributes that might appeal to a wide audience, but Marvel blew it, although they start very well indeed. Featuring different creative teams, there's a unity to the stories provided by the lead character in each series having seen a mysterious young girl in danger providing warnings of disaster. Her first appearance to fireman Lt James MacDonald is quite chilling, but later revelations as to her identity and purpose are anomalous cheap manipulation in otherwise real-world comics. So are spontaneously combusting drug addicts, cementing these as Marvel comics with a constant reminder that Spider-Man could swing in and save the day. Further problems are that while 'The Precinct' by Bruce Jones and Tom Mandrake can be read in isolation, purchase of both the Chuck Austen written titles is required to follow the plot, and anyone not reading them in the order of publication is going to be thoroughly confused. That these are such major blocks is a shame, as there is much to enjoy, particularly the art of Dave Finch and Art Thibert on 'The Brotherhood', and the well researched real-life situations in all comics before fantasy predominates.~FP

CAMBION

Slave Labor: *2 issues 1995-1996*
Moonstone: *5 issues 1996-1998*

Eccentric tales of a rock musician who has a mental breakdown only to be comprehensively abused by the psychiatrist in whose care he is placed. When released he's unable to speak, except in snatches from other people's songs, and cursed with a kind of ambivalent precognition. He constantly envisages alternate outcomes to confrontational situations, yet is drawn to interfere in squabbles, usually couples arguing, and compelled to attack one or other with fatal results. He fascinates Brandy, who wants to help him, and his crimes obsess Jimmy the Cop, whose career suffers as Cambion's rampages continue. There's also his deadly pet rabbit and a bar-hopping penguin that plays pool to contend with. Joe Gentile writes a readable tale but spends too much time making it uncategorisable, and not enough dealing with the nuts and bolts of storytelling. The vague dissatisfaction is exacerbated by numerous and inconsistent artists.~WW

CAMELOT ETERNAL

Caliber: *8 issues 1990-1991*

Ponderous continuation of the Arthurian legend, although the illustration more resembles traditional biblical imagery.~WJ

CAMELOT 3000

DC: *12 issue limited series 1982-1985**

Brought back from centuries of slumber to fight evil alien invaders, King Arthur, Merlin and the rest of the Round Table make for an unlikely superhero team in Mike W. Barr and Brian Bolland's popular *Camelot 3000*. Writer Barr – 'continuing legends chronicled by Sir Thomas Malory', apparently – wastes no time in reviving the love triangle between Arthur, Queen Guinevere and Lancelot, reincarnates Sir Tristan as a woman, turns Sir Perceval into a monstrous 'Neo-Man' and has Arthur's wicked half-sister Morgan LeFay leading the baddies. Bolland's typically refined pencils occasionally suffer at the hands of inkers Bruce Patterson, Dick Giordano and even Terry Austin, but this remains a highly professional piece of enjoyable old tosh.~AL

CANCERMAN

Edge: *1 issue 1994*

Some excellent Kurtzmanesque cartooning on the part of the mysterious 'Sherm' provides value throughout. His first strip considers the real effects of radiation on the creation of superheroes as Irwin Meek, at first delighted with his new X-ray vision, develops a bloated, tumour-riddled body. A tame attempt at a newspaper gag strip precedes the preposterous Wotta Woman, whose breasts grow to massive proportions, stopping criminals in their tracks. There was lost promise here.~WJ

CANNIBAL PORN

Eros: *3 issue miniseries 1994-1995*

A decidedly odd beast, with the title, which is lived up to, and scratchy stylised art surely putting off regular Eros purchasers. There's plenty of sex, most of it quite sordid and dubiously violent, laced with a very black sense of humour (one hopes), in what is the first published work of Rich Tommaso. While not carrying the depth of his later material, in many ways it's a pointer as to what a sex comic should be. The sex isn't an excuse to excise all plot, and while the plot is daft there's a film noir feel about the whole. Not for all tastes, but not to be dismissed out of hand as your average stroke comic.~WJ

CANNIBAL ROMANCE

Last Gasp: *One-shot 1986*

A late underground anthology that celebrates all forms of flesh digestion, *Cannibal Romance* includes the work of Kristine Kryttre, Carol Lay, Paul Mavrides, Dori Seda and Japanese cartoonist 'Mr Tero'. The highlight is a deliciously obscene collaboration between Lydia Lunch and the late Mike Matthews entitled 'Portrait of an American Princess', featuring the finest head-up-an-arse moment in all comics history.~AL

CANNON

Wallace Wood: *4 issues 1979-1980**
Eros: *8 issue limited series 1994*

The original publications were lavish oversized black and white collections of Wally Wood's armed-forces newspaper strips. *Cannon* was a heady mix of brutal violence, cold war rhetoric and copious nudity that most right-thinking people will find enormously offensive. On the other hand, it was also a lot of fun, and Wood's art is always a pleasure to look at, even if saddled to some very dubious writing. The Eros series reprints the series in traditional comic size, but is faithful to the artwork by spreading each oversize page over two comic pages.~DAR

CANNON GOD EXAXXION

Dark Horse: *12 issues + 2001 to date*

Under guise of friendship, the Rifaldians infiltrate Earth society at all levels, passing out their superior technology as a gift over a decade, before assuming control of the planet. High school loner Hoichi's grandfather is the one person to have seen the Rifaldians for what they are, and has secretly developed a battlesuit for Hoichi to fight them. Crucially, as well as providing protection, secrecy and weapons, it uses no contemporary Rifaldian technology, so remains immune to their manipulation. He's aided by a large breasted android, also of his grandfather's devising, who can transform herself into an air bike for Hoichi, and eventually discovers that's just part of his resources, which include possibly the biggest battle robot ever seen in Japanese comics. Kenichi Sonada is an accomplished artist, and adept at creating sympathetic characters and scenarios, with Hoichi's appalling grandfather a triumph. 1-8 ('Stage 1') are little more than set-up, and in 9-12 Hoichi realises he's the world's hope. He must avoid revealing himself to the Rifaldians, who've prioritised capturing the battlesuit, and protect his friends. What makes this better than average, though, is Sonada presenting the broader picture, treating this as an ensemble story with some Rifaldian characters getting as much time as Hoichi. It's a very promising start that twists adeptly away from expectations.~FP

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* Available in a collected edition

CANVAS

Black Velvet Studios: *2 Issues 2000-2001*

Anthology of superhero, fantasy and science fiction strips including Eric Canete's 'Citizen' (1-2). Tim Divar's 'Planet Fighter' is a fight between giant robots that reads like manga, but has US style artwork, and 'Backspace' (1-2) by Axel Ortiz concerns the cyberspace adventures of message carrier, Delgado. It's cleanly drawn, but ends poorly. Overall this shows promise, but is of mixed quality.~NF

CAPE CITY

Dimension X: *3 issues 1993*

But for a quirk of evolution we'd all be lizards, and but for a quirk of fate Chuck Spratlin would be reaping the acclaim and rewards of *Powers*, because that's what *Cape City* is. There's the same scenario of human investigators in a city of superheroes, an equally engaging cast, and it's well written. The major difference is that Spratlin's art isn't the finished article. The attractive Wendy and precocious Stu work for a detective agency. They're funny and capable, and it helps that Stu is seemingly indestructible. In the published issues there are more than enough pointers towards plots to come, indicating a thoroughly conceived world. The entire set is still available via Coldcut Distribution and if you can't get enough Powers you could do far worse than have your dealer order these from them.~WJ

CAP'N QUICK & A FOOZLE

Eclipse: *3 issue miniseries 1984-1985*

Cap'n Quick is a super-fast kid in dungarees and a flying helmet. A foozle is a birdlike creature with huge green human feet in spats and a removable proboscis that's halfway between a nose and a bill. The weird, dreamlike adventures of the Cap'n and his shiny black pal Klonsbon are continued from the pages of *Eclipse Monthly*. Marshall Rogers' funny fantasy has great charm and is rich with visual jokes like the Bob Dobbs bartender in 1 and the parody Judge Dwedd in 2. The script is credited to Chris Goldberg but it's clearly Rogers' show. 3 is simply titled The Foozle.~SW

CAPSULE

Dreadfully Slick Developments: *1 issue 2000*

A would-be comedy with an annoying narrative voice. Jex, the Black Imp escapes from Hell and possesses Paulie, who promptly chops off the two peoples' heads. Elsewhere, an unnamed mortal has found a dimensional key and is told by a talking bird that they'll be coming for him. Iceberg Slick (Emmett Gates) produces simple drawings on mixed media backgrounds that are too dark to see clearly.~NF

CAPTAIN ACTION

DC: *5 issues 1968-1969*

DC beat Marvel by a decade in adapting an action-toy into a comic, when Captain Action briefly became embedded in the DC Universe. Archaeologist Prof. Clive Arno found ancient coins which, when held, gave the holder the power of the god portrayed on the coin. Arno became Captain Action, and his son, Action Boy. Creative talents included Jim Shooter, Wally Wood, and especially Gil Kane, who produced some of his best-ever material, story and art by his own reckoning. The only let-down was the awful costume. A peaked officer's hat and skintight costume made the good Captain a natural to sing with the Village People. Still, a well produced series that deserved a longer run.~HY

Recommended: 1-5

CAPTAIN AMERICA

Marvel: *Series one 355 issues (100- 454), 13 Annuals 1968-1996, 1 Giant-Size 1975, series two 13 issues 1996-1997, series three 50 issues, 3 Annuals 1998-2002, series four 5 issues+ 2002 to date*

Taking over the numbering of *Tales of Suspense* (shared with Iron Man since 59) *Captain America* kicks off with a recapped origin and the conclusion of his fight with a bogus Baron Zemo before thundering through a string of visually stunning but uninspired Lee/Kirby action-fests. Jim Steranko then illustrates one of the most inexplicably memorable epics in the character's career as Cap takes a new youthful partner and fakes his own death to regain the anonymity of a secret identity. This is in 110-111 and 113 (with Kirby returning in 112 to draw a capsule history of the supposedly deceased hero) as the Hulk and Madame Hydra nearly destroy New York. So confused was the outcome that eventual *Captain America* scripter Steve Englehart took it upon himself to clear it all up in *The Avengers* (106-108), explaining that everyone on earth was under the influence of alien hypnosis. It must be said, though, that Cap was never drawn so well as in those issues.

A procession of artists followed before Gene Colan signed on just in time to co-create the Falcon, a black social worker/sidekick who would eventually replace the boy heroes that had been Cap's previous assistants (117). Although artistic stability had been achieved, storywise Cap was floundering, vacillating between superspy, urban avenger, and in the increasingly dissident 1960s, symbol without a cause. Occasionally the mix would gel into an excellent issue such as 127, inked by Wally Wood, 128, wherein Steve Rogers embarks on his own Easy Rider style bike quest across America, or 135-136, inked by Tom Palmer and Bill Everett respectively, but generally the work is uninspired. It's almost timid, as if the creators were unsure of how to handle a patriotic icon selling to a youth market becoming increasingly intolerant of patriotic dogma.

Even after Lee relinquished scripting to young rebels Gary Friedrich and Gerry Conway, Cap meandered along, fighting spies, supervillains and aliens, in tales less than ever in tune with the character or the times. Then Roy Thomas brought in Steve Englehart to script over his plot for the return of the Captain America and Bucky from the Eisenhower era. In a rare blend of allegory and action Cap and Falcon defeat and supplant Republican Americanism and solidly reposition and redefine the Star Spangled Avenger for the worldly-wise youth oriented 1970s (153-156). With Sal Buscema providing simple, uncluttered art, Englehart began a run of adventures that played to the hero's strengths. Whether fighting arch-villains like the Yellow Claw, reassessing the role of covert agencies in a free society, or coming to terms with the legacy of Vietnam, Cap's intellect and heart worked in tandem with his fists. The high point was a sequence where he is framed for murder, and must deal with losing the faith of the American people. This tale paralleled and incorporated the Watergate crisis, culminating in Captain America rejecting his role as a symbol and becoming Nomad, the man without a country (169-176).

His inevitable return was in response to a slaughter spree by the Red Skull, genuinely impressive for the first time since the Simon and Kirby days of the 1940s, and chillingly depicted by veteran newspaper cartoonist Frank Robbins. Sadly, with Englehart's departure (186) the quality plummeted once again, and even the singular vision and thrill-a-minute pacing of Jack Kirby, who returned as writer and artist (193-214, Annuals 3-4) could not revive flagging interest. The parade of mediocrity shambled on until Roger Stern and John Byrne signed on with 247 to produce a string of superb action tales including Cap's 'campaign' to become President (250) and a retooling of the origin combined with a World War II adventure to celebrate his 40th Anniversary as their swansong (255).

In 259 Mike Zeck began a long run as artist, with J.M. DeMatteis joining in 261, to produce a consistent run of better than average stories concentrating on Steve Rogers, the man behind the mask, and a growing supporting cast of ordinary people, a resource sadly lacking throughout Cap's career. Although competent, the run is peculiarly unsatisfactory, with DeMatteis' inclination to lyricism and dark introspection at odds with the clean cut, square-jawed traditionalism of America's idealistic Sentinel of Liberty. In 281 Jack Monroe, the de-programmed, ex-racist Bucky from the 1950s returns, becoming the new Nomad in the next issue, and much of the focus shifts. Monroe has awoken decades after his own time, much like Cap himself twenty years previously, and this gives DeMatteis the chance to analyse the experience in the context of the 1980s. Nomad becomes his new partner. Paul Neary takes over the art for DeMatteis' overlong final tale (292-300) pitting the hero against his spiritual and ideological antithesis, The Red Skull. Neary continues as a shuffling of writers eventually results in Mark Gruenwald writing from 307.

As "Cap's greatest fan" he embarked on a personal crusade to elevate him to the top rank of Marvel's publications, resulting in some strong plots and some equally dire ones. Of note are Scourge, an assassin who murders supervillains (320), and a long running storyline (332-350) which sees Steve Rogers replaced as Captain America by order of the US government. Much of the material to avoid occurs after he reassumes the mantle, as Gruenwald seems to lose interest, or at least inspiration, after 350 and the stories take on an air of treading water, with gimmicks replacing plotting. The serum that turned Cap into the perfect human being is removed from his bloodstream as the Star Spangled Avenger adopts a "Just Say No" policy to all drugs, gets turned into a teenager (355), a woman (391), and a werewolf (405). Gruenwald's run ends with a long serial (425-443) that details the deterioration of the serum that created Cap, weakening, paralysing and eventually killing him. It's a last ditch attempt to revitalise a flagging title with all stops pulled out. At one stage the hero even dons Star Spangled Armour – a kind of combat iron lung, but it just doesn't work.

When Gruenwald relinquished control with 443, Mark Waid and Ron Garney created a pocket of excellence to close the first series. There's strong plotting, fast pacing and superb dialogue, with Cap brought back from the dead by his greatest foe to save the world in 'Operation Rebirth'. The exploration of his role as symbol and patriot when he is convicted of treason in 'Exile' made the end a high point, and only served to emphasise the travesty to follow.

Series two was part of Marvel's Heroes Reborn sub-franchise, wherein a number of the company's mainstays were hived off into a separate universe and retrofitted for the 1990s. Rob Liefeld was given custody to produce a catastrophic jumble of nonsense that has Cap as a government agent kept in storage, and decanted every time a crisis occurs, with his memories adjusted at the end of each mission. When the Red Skull returns, Cap throws off his Federal shackles and sorts it all out with the aid of Bucky – a hip teen chick, and the Falcon, before turning his attention to the Sons of the Serpent. Scripter Jeph Loeb and Liefeld are replaced but the damage is irreparable. Even James Robinson can inject little sense into the muddled tales as Nick Fury is first revealed to be the supremacist Supreme Serpent, then not Fury at all. As the Heroes Reborn titles gear up to return to the Marvel Universe all four titles link in crossover fever, teaming up to tackle Galactus, Dr Doom and the end of the world. Captain America is all but lost in the morass of confused spandex. Good riddance.

Series Three begins with another high point reuniting Mark Waid and Ron Garney (1-6) as Cap fights Japanese Isolationists seeking to remove American cultural influences, before embarking on a campaign to eradicate the evil Hydra organisation. The decline is gradual. Under Waid and artist Andy Kubert, Cap once again becomes a blend of crime-buster and superspy, with adventures in the savage land, against other super-soldiers, and the inevitable returning villains. They produce pretty, if facile stories until Dan Jurgens takes over (25), first scripting, and eventually drawing more glossy, unremarkable adventures with the symbol of Liberty reduced once again to just another guy in a mask. Fans will be happy, but the stories don't travel well outside their own arena. The series ended with a cliffhanger, followed by another, seemingly unrelated miniseries, whilst the contemporary Star-Spangled Avenger prepared for yet another reboot.

The fourth volume resumes with no reference to previous incarnations and concentrates fully on Cap's role as Defender of Liberty. Co-opting the horror of the World Trade Towers' destruction, John Ney Rieber and John Cassaday have Steve Rogers doggedly digging for survivors in the rubble before being assigned to capture the terrorists responsible, who are now threatening to murder an entire American town which they have taken hostage. Under the title 'Enemy' Ney Rieber examines the Sentinel of Liberty's place and efficacy in modern society. The histrionics, patriotism, fear and outrage following the bombing of Pearl Harbor are back in full force, and he has Captain America ask whether the thinking and responses of sixty years ago are relevant or even desirable in the post-millennial USA. Worth a look.~WW

Recommended: 127-128, 135-136, 153-156, 169-186, 247-255, 444-454, series three 1-3, series four 1-3

CAPTAIN AMERICA COMICS

Timely: *78 issues 1941-1950 (1-75), 1954 (76-78)*

Not the first patriotic hero, being predated by The Shield, but certainly the best. Steve Rogers, too puny to otherwise serve his country during wartime, volunteers for a dangerous experiment to become a prototype supersoldier. The experiment succeeds, but enemy saboteurs ensure Rogers is the first and last of his kind. Donning the star-spangled garb of Captain America, he sets out to embody the ideals of liberty, gaining a sidekick Bucky when his army camp's teen mascot discovers his identity and, well, blackmails Rogers into letting him tag along! Gee, that's not very American.

Created by the legendary team of Jack Kirby and Joe Simon, the superpatriot smashed through Nazis, home-front saboteurs and plain exotic villains with equal verve and gusto, in dynamic and atmospheric stories that redefined the limits of the comics page. They only produced 1-10*, but the momentum of their legacy, including Cap's nemesis the Red Skull, one of comics' most vivid villains, carried the title through the post-war years in less talented hands. Sales only began to drop in the late 1940s, when reader interest in superheroes was fading and the entire medium was coming under attack by various groups of concerned mothers. Bucky was replaced by the strip's Lois Lane-alike Betty Ross, who became Golden Girl in 66, and story focus moved to either true crime or human interest, then to an increasing emphasis on horror. These tactics failed to stem the tide of departing readers, and the series ended with the ignominiously titled Captain America's Weird Tales, a horror anthology in which Cap himself didn't appear. The 1954 revival was risibly subtitled 'Commie Smasher'. Although it featured some nice art, including work by a fledgling John Romita, the resulting simple-minded stories hooked no one and Cap and Bucky fell back into limbo until the 1960s.~HS

Recommended: 1-10

CAPTAIN AMERICA Miniseries and One-shots

Marvel: *One-shot ('Bicentennial Battles') 1976, 4 issue miniseries (The Adventures of Captain America: Sentinel of Liberty) 1991-1992, one-shot ('The Movie Special') 1992, one-shot ('The Medusa Effect') 1994, one-shot ('Marvels Comics: Captain America') 2000, one-shot ('The Otherworld War') 2001, 3 issue miniseries ('Dead Men Running') 2002, one-shot ('Red, White & Blue') 2002*

Malibu: *One-shot ('Prime') 1996*

'Bicentennial Battles' was published to celebrate the USA's bi-centenary, and features Jack Kirby's paean to the ideas that make America as Captain America is tricked by Mister

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* Available in a collected edition

Buda into a whirlwind trip through time and space, examining various aspects of American life as he goes. Big (it's a treasury-sized issue), bold and with a wealth of guest inkers, including Barry Windsor-Smith, this is occasionally frustrating, but a delight nonetheless.

'Sentinel of Liberty' is a terrific retelling of Captain America's origin and first adventure, including meeting Bucky and the Red Skull. It adds details about Steve Rogers' life before trying to enlist, during training and the secrets behind the super-soldier serum. It's written by Fabian Nicieza and largely drawn by Kevin Maguire. Stan Lee and Bob Hall have a stab at 'The Movie Special', in which Captain America's creation and hibernation are all part of his first adventure, as he stops an Italian Red Skull from destroying the White House. On his resurrection, Steve Rogers has trouble adjusting to modern life, while the Red Skull and his daughter plot his death and to control the mind of the President. This almost works as a spy thriller, action adventure, but the active participation of the President seems overtly propagandist.

Through the use of Nicholas Tesla and locations such as Madrid, 'The Medusa Effect' is an informative and thoughtful World War II story served up by Roy Thomas. Baron Zemo and Master Man, with Baroness Zemo and her son, Helmut, are the focus of a story as much about family as about the super weapons they're trying to use. With pencils by Rich Buckler and M. C. Wyman, it's unfortunately not that appealing visually. The 'Marvels Comics' one-shot is part of a series that pretends to be publishing the adventures of various characters from within the Marvel Universe. In this, Rick Jones travels back in time to play Bucky for a final battle with Baron Zemo and the Red Skull, but not even Peter David can rescue this senseless issue. 'The Otherworld War', by Peter Hogan and Leonardo Manco, teams Captain America with Sergeant Fury set in the unfamiliar territory of Dormammu's Dark Dimension. The action is predictable, but the scenes where they meet Clea are fun and it's well drawn, though too darkly coloured. Surprisingly, Darko Macan and Daniel Zezelj's 'Dead Men Running' is a taut thriller, that uses Captain America himself sparingly, concentrating on the group of soldiers that he arrives to help as they flee from members of a cocaine mafia with a number of children. All is not as it seems, however, allowing for some good, emotional scenes. Even Zezelj's blocky, unrealistic artwork is effective in this context.

'Red, White & Blue' is an excellent collection of new and reprinted material including a two-page career synopsis from Paul Dini and Alex Ross, Tony Salmons on the Red Skull, and Paul Pope with Nick Bertozzi on the Red Skull's teaching methods. Max Allen Collins and Vatche Mavlian tell a tale of 1950s McCarthyism, Yann Lepennetier and Philippe Berthet provide a very funny story of Captain America against the communist Red Bra, Karl Bollers and Dean Haspiel offer a blaxploitation version, while Paul Storrie and David Lloyd address racism. There are also strips from Bruce Jones with Richard Piers-Rayner, Darko Macan with Bruce Timm, Peter Kuper, Jeff Jensen with Frank Quitely, Jensen with Mike Deodato, and Evan Dorkin. The reprints include the origin of the Red Skull by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, alongside strips by Jim Steranko, Frank Miller, and John Cassaday (the last of which is the only bum note in this collection). 'Prime' has Captain America in the Ultraverse, where he teams up with Prime. Even drawn by regular Prime penciller, Norm Breyfogle, this is a real stinker.~NF

Recommended: The Adventures of Captain America 1-4, 'Bicentennial Battles', 'Red, White & Blue'

CAPTAIN AMERICA, Sentinel of Liberty

Marvel: *12 issues 1998-1999*

Conceived as a regular title depicting 'snapshots' from various points in the Captain's long career, this failed to catch the public imagination despite a reasonably high level of quality. Perhaps being so determinedly 'set aside' from the regular title's continuity, readers decided it was just as easy to set aside the whole thing and not bother about it. 1 was a contemporary story looking back at the Captain America/Sharon Carter relationship, by Mark Waid and Ron Garney, who had just relaunched Cap's ongoing series; Waid stayed aboard for most of the rest of the run, with rotating guest artists after Garney left with 6. Other interesting stories involved World War II and the Invaders, the best tale of the run (2-4), the Falcon and civil unrest (8, 9), and a spotlight on Bucky (the double-sized 12). Standout for worst issue is 10, by fill-in writer James Felder, where a hallucinogenic account set at the time of the Kennedy assassination completely misses the point both of the series and the character. Most issues, 10 excepted, weren't rubbish, but they were very far from essential reading.~HS

CAPTAIN ATOM

Charlton: *12 issues (78-89) 1965-1967*

The triumphant return of Charlton's space-age hero in his own title, after three issues of reprints in Strange Suspense Stories, from which the numbering continued, had signalled the demand for new material. US test pilot Captain Adam is trapped inside a test-detonated nuclear missile, but instead of dying manages to reintegrate his body by sheer force of will. Given a costume to inhibit the harmful radiation he now emits, he functions as the guardian of Earth and the enemy of Cold War communism. 78-83 feature the original Captain Atom in all his nuclear-powered splendour, then, in 84, his powers are drastically reduced and his costume altered in order that he more readily fit the Charlton 'Action Heroes' line. In the meantime a female sidekick, Nightshade, and an arch villain, the Ghost, joined flight engineer Gunner Goslin as the regular supporting cast. Dave Kaler's scripts have a bizarre mixture of camp inventiveness and inexperience that rarely totally satisfy. Art was from the inimitable Steve Ditko, who also handled the superb Blue Beetle back-up strip in 83-86. Nightshade had her own strip drawn by Jim Aparo in 87-89. A story remaining unpublished as the title was cancelled was eventually printed in the 1970s *Charlton Bullseye* 1 and 2.~SW

CAPTAIN ATOM

DC: *57 issues, 2 Annuals 1987-1991*

DC's modified version of Captain Atom was incorporated squarely within the mainstream of their universe, and was the longest running of their Charlton acquisitions. Long presumed dead after a nuclear explosion in 1968, Captain Nathaniel Adam re-emerges eighteen years later complete with incredible abilities. Covertly working for air force intelligence (under duress), he's heavily promoted to the public with a fabricated past, incorporating aspects of the Charlton series. Writer Cary Bates (1-50, with Greg Weisman co-plotting from 10 and gradually assuming the major portion of the work) weaves decent character driven plots. In General Wade Eiling he creates an appalling specimen of military pigheadedness who can justify every iniquitous piece of behaviour under the blanket of national security. The series as a whole is a decent superhero run, without ever having the essential extra spark. Representative early samples are 9 as Captain Atom investigates his framing for treason in 1968 and 14's Christmas story (followed up in 29), neither with a super-villain in sight. Adam's past is a constant background to the series. 26-28 reveal the secrets of the treason conspiracy, incorporating a fine ending, but repercussions and affiliated events provide plot devices that outlive their welcome.

Other supporting characters flow in and out of the series. Most prominent is Major Force, introduced in 12 and the first annual. He's the gung-ho result of an attempt to duplicate Captain Atom's creation, and he becomes an uncontrollable mirror image. Also present almost throughout are Adam's children from the 1960s, now adults and, in a nice twist, the step-children of Eiling, scientific genius Dr Megala, very much Dr Strangelove, and Martin Allard, an army officer who's tragically manipulated in 45. Later issues see the softening of former villain Plastique and old JLA readers may or may not welcome the return of the Red Tornado, a character whose appeal has always polarised the readership.

Fans of the 1990s *Sandman* cast might want to pick up 42 for Death's appearance, but it's hardly an engrossing read.

Artistically the series has few highlights, but remains adequate throughout. Pat Broderick and Bob Smith handle most of 1-28, and Rafael Kayanan and Romeo Tanghal are a marginal improvement to 51. Tanghal continues to ink Michael Adams, who'd been contributing fill-in issues, until the series ends. Post 50 Captain Atom sees a succession of writers on the way to his destiny in the Armageddon series and later Extreme Justice. He was to have been the villain of the former piece, but early leaks to the fan press forced a change of plan. By default the best issue of the run is a fill-in, 51's story by Kelly Puckett, Colleen Doran and Terry Austin depicting how Captain Atom's action in 50 inspires someone else.~FP

CAPTAIN CANUCK

CKR Productions: *14 issues, 1 Special 1975-1977 (1-3), 1979-1981 (4-14)*
Semple: *3 issues (0-2) ('Reborn') 1993-1994*

As the title suggests, Captain Canuck was conceived as a rejoinder to the nationalism of the major US superhero publishers. Fiercely Canadian in outlook, the series was innovative and even eccentric in the hands of writer and original artist, Richard Comely. Set in a then future 1990s, Captain Canuck is Tom Evans accidental recipient of super powers during an alien abduction. After initially fighting spies, terrorists and drug barons, there is a showdown (11-13) with the unnamed aliens who plan to use Earth as a breeding ground for a controllable race of warriors. During this story the Captain does some time travelling, leading to his being stranded in 1980 in the final issue, written solely by George Freeman. For 'Reborn', Comely starts with a new character, Darren Oak, inspired by *Captain Canuck* comics to put on a similar costume in hopes of protecting his identity while he tries to expose a political conspiracy against the Canadian government.

There are decent ideas here that could have supported a few more issues, but the quality of the artwork, by Comely himself, doesn't match the scripting. The highlight of this series is the attractive artwork of Freeman (reminiscent of Joe Staton as inked by P. Craig Russell) who began inking 3 before pencilling 4 and becoming regular artist from 7. In addition to the lead story, most issues contain backup strips: 'Jonn' (science fiction in 1-3, 7, 8), 'Catman' (superhero in 4, 6), 'Chaos Corps' (parody in 5) and 'Beyond' (sword and sorcery in 9-12, 14). The latter, written by Comely and drawn by Jean-Claude St. Aubin, is the most accomplished. For completists Gene Day and Dave Sim produce the 'Beavers' strip in 4.~NF

CAPTAIN CARROT and his Amazing Zoo Crew

DC: *20 issues 1982-1983*

The Zoo Crew was a funny animal superteam written by Roy Thomas, with excellent cartooning from Scott Shaw. Led by a rabbit powered up from eating a radioactive carrot, and returning old DC funny animal character Peter Porkchops in the guise of Pig Iron, it's amusing in places, though Thomas concentrates too much on lampooning contemporary comics and films for this to have much to offer readers in the 1990s. Those wanting a complete collection shouldn't miss the début in *New Teen Titans* 16, or Changeling from the Titans dropping by in 20 to close the series out. Captain Carrot and friends later returned for the surreal *Oz-Wonderland War*.~FP

CAPTAIN CONFEDERACY

Steeldragon: *12 issues 1986-1987*
Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1991-1992*

With the first twelve self-published issues writer Will Shetterley set up a carefully crafted alternate universe in which the Confederacy seceded and the USA never came to pass. Although one of the changes he envisions is that the South would have more readily renounced slavery of their own choice, the Confederate States of America is a nation where the races are far from equal.

Jeremy Gray, a superserum-enhanced WASP actor of little talent and intellect to match, is Captain Confederacy, the star of propaganda films presented to the public as reality in which he fights Blacksnake, a black villain. According to his superiors this sets a good example as the Captain is a role model for whites while it teaches black kids that crime doesn't pay. When the black actors question their roles the authorities kill them. The remainder of the series presents a complex and engaging political plot as Gray becomes a valuable pawn to all parties, and has to make his own decisions about whether to keep quiet, go public or fight the system from the inside. By the end of the series Gray's wife Kate has taken over the mantle.

Unfortunately the miniseries forgoes much of the politics in favour of a more colourful, but less intelligent international superhero conference, with the world's powers plotting how best to manipulate the North American nations. Although more polished, the Epic issues lack the edge of the originals, and are noteworthy mainly for Kate spending the entire run eight months pregnant. Like the original run, the series has long and engaging letters pages in which fans swap their ideas of what an alternate world should be like, and detailed biographies of Confederate alternate-world characters.~JC

CAPTAIN DINGLEBERRY

Underhanded Comics: *4 issues 1998*
Slave Labor: *2 issues (5-6) 1999*

Whatever else you might say about *Captain Dingleberry* – namely, that it's an awesomely unfunny superhero parody which outstays its welcome by at least 5 issues – it at least lives up (or down) to the spirit of its toilet gag title. Artist and co-writer Rick Remender obviously thinks that an endless succession of puns on the word 'anus', and characters with names like 'The Four Cornsmen of the Apocashits', are the very height of good humour. He forgets, however, that if you wallow in shit for long enough it does tend to stick.~AL

CAPTAIN ELECTRON

BCSI: *1 issue 1986*

A distinct oddity that has 1940s/1950s artist Jay Disbrow lured out of retirement to extol the virtues of computer technology. The publication date indicates the level of said technology, so Disbrow's art isn't the only archaic factor. A brief explanatory strip charts the progress of computers, then Captain Electron has to rescue the director of The Brick Science Institute, who published this, from a gang of villains who plan to use his expertise for their own evil ends! It's all very silly apart from the chilling human computer Disbrow's created: a face on the screen, arms extending from it, legs beneath it, and with bow tie, top hat and cane as accoutrements. It probably scared a generation away from computers.~FP

CAPTAIN GRAVITY

Penny-Farthing Press: *4 issue miniseries 1998-1999, one-shot ('One True Hero') 1999*

The miniseries is basically an Indiana Jones story with Indy replaced by costumed adventurer Captain Gravity as a Hollywood film crew in South America cross paths with Nazis in search of a mystical secret. The one-shot sees the costumed character owned by a rival film studio turn up in misguided fashion. In the manner of the films it emulates, *Captain Gravity* is an enjoyable well produced romp, but no more.~WJ

CAPTAIN HARLOCK

Eternity: *13 issues 1989-1990, 6 issue miniseries ('Deathshadow Rising') 1991, 4 issue miniseries ('Fall of the Empire') 1992, One-shot ('Christmas Special') 1992, 4 issue miniseries ('The Machine People') 1993*

Captain Harlock is an American interpretation of Leiji Matsumoto's classic anime hero. Harlock is an ex-starship commander who refuses to lay down his arms when Earth surrenders to an alien invasion fleet. The first series concerns Harlock's past associations and current attempts to liberate

Earth from the Illumidas occupation force, and re-instil a sense of worth in the physically and spiritually defeated human population. Although working under licence from the Japanese creators, writer Robert Gibson and artist Ben Dunn are not successful in attempting to retrofit the concept for the more action-oriented US market, but it maintains the flavour of sentimentality and the philosophy of the original creation. A major theme resonating through the entirety of the canon is that as long as the Tree of Freedom has strong roots, no matter how far they spread, liberty will bloom again. The supporting cast includes Emeraldas the pirate Queen, who becomes embroiled in the war against the Illumidas, Baron Darghund, Harlock's boyhood friend and rival, and Alexander Nevich, finishing construction of the Deathshadow, a ship that will obliterate Harlock's Arcadia. Both the latter are collaborating with the invaders, but have their own agendas.

Gibson and new artist Tim Eldred then produced, in rapid-fire succession, a better than average run of good old-fashioned space opera stories beginning with 'Deathshadow Rising'. It's particularly disturbing for its portrayal of father-son relationships as Nevich's five year old son is bullied and groomed for his future role as King of Earth. The Christmas Special is a fairly standard seasonal aside, whilst in 'Fall of the Empire' the Illumidas are driven from Earth, but at great and unsuspected cost. In The Machine People cyborgs from Earth's unconquered colonies insinuate themselves into Earth's Reconstruction government, with bloody consequences. The series end rather abruptly as the Japanese owners, despite the successful sales, chose to withdraw the licence, which is a pity as competent work was starting to lift Harlock from the mire of US manga knock-offs. Devotees should see also the *Emeraldas The Pirate Queen* miniseries.~WW

Jughead as CAPTAIN HERO

Archie: *7 issues 1966-1967*

At the same time as they were producing their cluelessly camp superheroes for the Mighty Comics imprint, the company creators were turning out the same kind of story for this and Archie's *Pureheart* title. The result is hardly stunning, but as Jughead material is intended as comedy the approach works a little better.~WJ

The Adventures of CAPTAIN JACK

Fantagraphics: *12 issues 1986-1989, 1 Special 1991*

Mike Kazaleh attempts to marry the slapstick storylines of a Tom & Jerry cartoon with outer-space romance. Captain Jack, his crew Adam the Android and Herman Feldman (and Herman's unruly personal devil, Beelzebub), try to earn a living shipping freight from one star system to another but end up penniless after each trip. 5 introduces Herman's girlfriend Janet, and their developing relationship is the backdrop for the rest of the story. Captain Jack quickly outgrew its funny animal, science-fiction setting and showed potential to reach the emotional sophistication of *Omaha The Cat Dancer*. The A*K*Q*J special retold Herman and Janet's romance in the form of a fairy story, and the cast reappear in *Critters* 42.~NF

CAPTAIN JOHNER & THE ALIENS

Gold Key: *One-shot 1967*

Valiant: *1 issue 1995*

Created by Russ Manning as a series of four-page strips to back-up his *Magnus Robot Fighter* stories, these ran in 1-28 of that title. The Valiant issue collects the first seven episodes while the earlier Gold Key reprint omits the second and fifth chapters, but includes episodes eight, nine and ten. It matters little, as a sample is all you really need. An Earth spaceship encounters an alien vessel. Each unable to outmatch the other, it's agreed both will return home carrying fifty percent of the other's crew. Incidents along the way slow their returns. Manning's art is, as always, impeccable, while his plots are thoughtful and intelligent, presenting a generally optimistic view of the future.~FP

CAPTAIN JUSTICE

Marvel: *2 issues 1988*

The popularity of comic hero Captain Justice is fading. Luckily, blessed with extra-dimensional awareness, he realises it's due to lack of inspiration on the part of his creator, and travels to the real world to resolve the situation. Along the way he turns a lad from a life of crime and Philip Marlowe comes along to save the kid's mother from a lifetime of local-newspaper drudgery. Adapting the TV pilot *Once A Hero*, this is sentimental tosh, but deftly handled sentimental tosh can push the right buttons, and this does so.~FP

CAPTAIN MARVEL

MF Enterprises: *4 issues 1966, 2 issues (Captain Marvel Presents The Terrible 5) 1966-1967*

A little-known camp classic. The copyright on the instantly recognisable name of a once popular comics character had lapsed, so in stepped MF with a humanoid robot whose bodily parts flew in all directions when he shouted 'Split'. The series is every bit as ludicrous as the premise. Apparent success prompted a companion title *Captain Marvel Presents The Terrible 5*, which differs little from the parent (the Terrible 5 referring to the number of daft villains in the comics) and lasted two issues. Quoting the villain in one story as he returns to Earth conveys the prevailing quality far better than any review: "Wahoo! Am I happy I failed to destroy [Earth]. Now I've a place to rest, even though I can't see too well inside the Earth's atmosphere without my glasses." Quite.~FP

CAPTAIN MARVEL

Marvel: *62 issues, 1 Giant-Size 1968-1979, Graphic Novel 1982, 3 issue miniseries ('Untold Legend of Captain Marvel') 1997*

Captain Marvel's first two appearances in *Marvel Super-Heroes* 12-13 swiftly led to his own title. Early issues saw this Kree alien-with-a-conscience concoct unconvincing ruses to disobey his superiors' orders to perform lethal experiments on us earthlings. A better-designed red and blue costume was introduced in 17, and writer Roy Thomas couldn't resist a homage to the original 1940s Captain Marvel (see *Shazam!*) by merging his Kree successor with the company's all-purpose teenager Rick Jones. Henceforth the Kree Captain Mar-Vell hung about in limbo until summoned by Jones clashing his 'Nega-bands' together. After two brief cancellations, a shaky restart was swept aside by the glorious 'Thanos War' in 25-33*, all plotted and drawn by Jim Starlin. This run defined 'cosmic' and displayed considerably more mood and awe than his later regurgitations of the same concept. It was later reprinted as a series called *The Life of Captain Marvel*. Steve Englehart and Al Milgrom maintained a high standard in succeeding issues. Notably, 36-39 portrayed the Watcher's trial by his own race for interference in affairs on Earth and the oft-times hallucinogenic 41-46 revealed the Kree Supreme Intelligence's long-dormant scheme against our planet. This latter story-line explained some of the inconsistencies and contradictions of earlier issues. A new direction spluttered from 47 until Doug Moench and Pat Broderick provided a pickup with their Titan plot-lines in 58-62. This story concluded in Marvel Spotlight (second series) 1 and 2.

After sporadic guest appearances following his *Marvel Spotlight* run, Jim Starlin finally closed the book on the Kree warrior's adventures in the first Marvel graphic novel, *The Death of Captain Marvel*. There is no death at the hands of some arch-enemy for Mar-Vell. He succumbs to cancer caused by the toxic nerve gas to which he was exposed in 34. There are no battles of any consequence in this book, aside from the efforts to cure his affliction. The serenity of his passing conveys a staggering emotional impact as the story deftly treads the fine line between the trivial and the over-dramatised. Expressive pencils and inks by Starlin at his peak contribute to one of the finest superhero comics ever produced.

More 1990s retro-fitting surfaces in the miniseries with a tale set immediately prior to Mar-Vell's first mission on

Earth. No holds are barred as the Skrulls, Shi'ar and Brood all wade in and supporting characters from the first eighteen issues of the regular title feature prominently. Although not outstanding, the story refreshingly complements rather than tinkers with ancient history.~APS
Recommended: 25-33, Graphic Novel

CAPTAIN MARVEL

Marvel: *One-shot 1989, one-shot ('Speaking Without Concern') 1994*

These star Monica Rambeau, the second Captain Marvel at Marvel. She was popular during her tenure in *The Avengers*, and potentially one of Marvel's most powerful characters, possessing the ability to transform into any form of energy, limited only by her understanding and imagination. Needless to say, the House of Sexist Ideas couldn't handle that. The first inept, barely articulate one-shot was seemingly created solely to reduce and downgrade her powers to a more manageable level. Bet they don't do that to the Silver Surfer. The second one-shot has the black Captain Marvel speaking out about prejudice in a heavy-handed but well-intentioned story. Unfortunately one of Marvel's more likeable creations has been shoved aside in favour of Captain Mar-Vell Jnr. Sigh.~HS

CAPTAIN MARVEL

Marvel: *6 issue miniseries 1995-1996, series one 35 issues 2000-2002, series two 2 issues + 2002 to date*

The miniseries revealed the Kree version of Captain Marvel had fathered a son, Genis, now a cosmic powered teenager. He stomps about the universe alternately mouthing off or wringing his hands in despair. Of course, he was tricked into activating a bomb that killed 2000 people. In 4 he deals with the manipulator (and guess what, it's the son of his father's greatest enemy!), and matters improve, but it's too late. Some might suggest the trademark on the title was up for renewal, and God forbid it should return to DC and the first and most famous character to bear the name.

The ongoing series stars a reworking of the character spun off from *Avengers Forever*, where he merged with Rick Jones in the manner of his father. It possesses the considerable twin benefits of slick dialogue from Peter David and slick pencilling from Chriscross. David treats the title as ensemble piece, populating it with assorted characters who play well off the leads: the arrogant Moondragon, the retarded Destroyer, Jones' ex-wife the glamourous Marla and the ghost that haunts her, and numerous guest stars besides. It eventually reaches the point where you start to forget whose name is on the cover. Unless you really care, though, this entertains, with David injecting more humour than is customary for a Marvel superhero comic. Try 20 in which Genis has a revelation, a prematurely aged Rick Jones is miserable, Moondragon is her charmless best and there's a good joke about comic fans at the end. Not aimed at you, naturally.

Fans of the 1970s *Captain Marvel* should look out for 11, 17 and 18 for the art team of Jim Starlin and Al Milgrom, with David including characters associated with the Starlin titles of the 1970s, another of whom turns up in 33. The assorted elements combine most successfully in 27-30, largely set in 2099, and featuring characters from two other series David has written. An attempt to boost sales saw the title cancelled and relaunched with considerable publicity. This time it concentrates on Captain Marvel, who begins to understand the curse of cosmic awareness, with harsh personal consequences leading him to seek out The Punisher in 2 to learn discipline. To mark the occasion Chriscross' pencils are painted by Chris Sotomayor for a more polished look.~WJ
Recommended: 27-30

CAPTAIN MARVEL Adventures

Fawcett: *150 issues 1941-1953*

Orphaned newsboy Billy Batson, peddling papers one evening, is approached by a shadowy figure who lures him down an abandoned subway tunnel to a mysterious underground chamber, where, amongst statues representing the Seven Deadly Sins, the enigmatic man reveals himself as the ancient wizard Shazam. In search of a champion pure in heart, he has selected Billy Batson to receive great powers, and fight for justice in the world. All Billy has to do is speak his name. With that one magic word, 'Shazam!' Billy magically transforms into Captain Marvel, a mighty red & gold clad figure with the powers of Solomon, Hercules, Atlas, Zeus, Achilles and Mercury, and a heroic legend began.

Beginning as the lead feature in *Whiz Comics* during 1940, Captain Marvel single-handedly turned around Fawcett's fortunes, despite a protracted lawsuit from DC, who claimed that he was a direct imitation of Superman. Although certainly inspired by Superman – which super-heroes weren't? – the Captain's adventures took place on a different plane from the grim, confrontational style favoured by the Man of Steel. The first issue of Cap's own series was drawn by the legendary Jack Kirby, but the open, benign art style of C.C. Beck, co-creator and primary artist on the series, invited the readers into adventures in which the early-teens Billy Batson, not his superpowered alter ego, was the protagonist. The Captain himself was used sparingly, and thus to greater effect.

Each issue carried featured at least three stories (four or more being the standard up until 1945) with a diversity of theme. Cap would battle Nazis, fight his arch-nemesis Dr. Sivana, discover a ghost, build a robot, etc. with a carefully calculated mixture of levels of appeal. This range ensured a broad-based popularity, from little kids to young adults, which prompts one to think that the claimed circulation figures of 1,000,000+ copies per issue during the peak years weren't just hyperbole. Unlike the aloof and unapproachable early Superman, Captain Marvel was the Everyman of the comics world, capable, despite his vast powers and wisdom, of being hoodwinked because of his trusting nature and good-willed naivete. Stories frequently focussed on his friends and supporting cast at Mrs. Wagner's boarding house, creating a Rockwellesque picture of America that is unashamedly sentimental, but quite charming. Captain Marvel was as frequently seen in mundane or even embarrassing situations on the comic's covers as he was in the traditional heroic poses. Driving a buggy, filling out paperwork, or acting as a dog catcher gave greater identification to the young reader, intriguing them and inviting them to pick up the issue. A cunning ploy on the part of the publishers was to send Cap to real-life towns on a mission. By bannering the locale and including actual local personalities in the story, they could be guaranteed great publicity and a big sales spike.

Although generally regarded as a lightweight series compared to *Superman*, the Captain certainly had his grimmer, heroic side, brought forward in the Monster Society of Evil storyline, a protracted serial in issues 22-46*, gathering some of his vilest villains together in a mammoth conspiracy to conquer the world. This serial introduced Mr. Mind, possibly Cap's greatest enemy, who was... a worm. Not even a giant worm, mind you. But Mr. Mind's formidable and Machiavellian intellect was nearly the undoing of the World's Mightiest Mortal on several occasions. In 18, a third member of the Marvel Family (Captain Marvel Jr. had already been introduced in *Master Comics*) made her debut. Mary Batson Bromfield, Cap's long-lost sister, was discovered, kidnapped, rescued, and revealed to possess the power of a pantheon of goddesses herself, all in the space of 13 pages! Mary also appeared in 19 before spinning off into a lead position in *Wow Comics*, and, eventually, her own series.

Although Fawcett eventually won the lawsuit initiated by DC, the protracted, decade-long struggle, and the diminishing readership in the face of the 'Comics cause juvenile delinquency' movement, caused them to cease publishing in 1953. And what menace did the Big Red Cheese, as he was affectionately nicknamed, face in his final issue? No, it wasn't Mr. Mind, Dr. Sivana, or the Monster Society of Evil that did him in. On the cover of the final issue, our hero faced the ultimate horror: 'Captain Marvel's Wedding!'

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* Available in a collected edition

After his demise, Cap remained a fondly remembered legend amongst comics fans, often talked about, but a revival generally being regarded as impossible. However, in 1972, DC announced the publication of *Shazam!* (Marvel having inconveniently shoplifted the 'Captain Marvel' name in 1968), and he, Mary and Junior have, for better or worse, been firmly established in the DC heroic pantheon ever since. ~HS

Recommended: 18, 19, 22-46, 84, 105, 133, 150

CAPTAIN NICE

Gold Key: *1 issue 1967*

Alleged superhero parody based on the short-run TV show. The worst of four uncredited stories features a villain called The Rooster, cursed with a compulsion to crow about his crimes as the sun rose, and captured when a spotlight is shone on him in darkness.~FP

CAPTAIN OBLIVION

Harrier: *1 issue 1987*

Odd mixture of hokey old science fiction (giant ants in the moon) and a superhero with a waning relationship. All very enjoyable if you're not expecting straight superhero action from Glenn Dakin. Captain Oblivion, or at least Abe Rat, his civilian counterpart, was also a regular in *Gag*.~WJ

CAPTAIN PARAGON

AC: *4 issues 1983-1984*

Returned to life after 30 years in suspended animation, an old hero searches for information about his past and meaning in his present. It's all a bit predictable and run-of-the-mill, though.~HS

CAPTAIN PLANET

Marvel: *12 issues 1991-1992*

Uninspired adaptation of the briefly faddy TV cartoon about an environmentally friendly superhero and his kid sidekicks.~HS

CAPTAIN RESCUE

Pigeon Press: *One-shot 1993*

Extremely attractive cartoony art, strongly reminiscent of *'Mazing Man*, doesn't stop these would-be charming stories of a vigilante crimestopper being banal and pedestrian. Sorry. These are the further adventures of a character introduced in another Pigeon Press one-shot, 1992's magazine sized *Rescue Comics*, which defied common sense by achieving a second printing in comic format. Nothing further has been heard of the Captain or his team of rivals, the Sudden Disaster Stoppers, and there's many a dry eye as a result.~HS

CAPTAIN SATAN

Millennium: *2 issue microseries 1994*

This very ordinary Punisher clone won't count among the highlights of Steven Seagle's writing career. He's first framed for a crime he didn't commit, then transformed into gruesome avenger who brands his prey. Don't bother.~FP

CAPTAIN SAVAGE & HIS LEATHERNECK RAIDERS

Marvel: *19 issues 1968-1971*

Captain Simon Savage commands a unit of U.S. Marines (Yakkety Yates, Frenchy LaRoque, Jay Little Bear, Lee Baker and Blarney Stone) on missions and manouevres that are interchangeable with those of Sgt Fury, whose success this was an attempt at repeating. The wartime origins of H.Y.D.R.A., the evil spy network featured in Marvel's present-day S.H.I.E.L.D. strip, are revealed in 2-4, while Ben Grimm, later of The Fantastic Four features as a wartime airman in 7, guaranteed to make any continuity buff want to sweep it under the carpet! The perjorative "Leatherneck" in the title is replaced with 'Battlefield' from 9 onwards, just in time for Savage to shave off his distinctive beard. The death of Pvt Baker in 11 confirms further efforts to make the contents resemble *Sgt Fury*. The main penciller is Dick Ayers before 13-16 benefit from a brief stay by scripter Arnold Drake and penciller Don Heck, including a rare teaming with inker John Severin in 16. 1-8 and 13-15 effect a grimy consistency due to Syd Shores' finishes before *Fury* inker Severin is installed. Archie Goodwin's writing on 7 and Drake's issues are eminently readable whilst Gary Friedrich's scripts remain pedestrian at best throughout although many plot elements, including Savage's wife leaving him in 18, are impressive.~SW

Bernie Wrightson's CAPTAIN STERNN Running Out of Time

Kitchen Sink: *5 issue miniseries 1993-1994*

Captain Sternn is Wrightson's large, square-jawed rogue, and the series begins with him escaping from jail for crimes committed when last seen in *Heavy Metal*. He's soon back on the track of a vast amount of money he stole from Fillmore Coffers, head of Cosmic Coola Industries. It's been taken back into pre-history by his partner Hanover Fist, conveniently able to transform into a giant brute of a man to deal with the indigenous saurian life. Back in the present, or Sternn's future, to be precise, the population are gradually transforming into shambling zombies for some reason. Wrightson's reputation is as a fine illustrator of horror material, but this denies an obvious talent for comedy. While not as detailed or shadowy as his more familiar style, this appears to be one of the few projects he's cared about since the 1970s. He deftly manipulates his comedic cast, provides plenty of twists to his plot, and throws in some excellent jokes. All in all very satisfactory.~WJ

Recommended: 1-5

CAPTAIN STORM

DC: *18 issues 1964-1967*

"Skipper, your leg's being blasted", cries out one of the marines on the cover of the first issue. "It's only wood", replies the title's namesake; "I'll get another". Real teeth-clenched action characterises Captain Storm, a PT-boat skipper with a wooden leg! Average war stories, based in the Pacific fighting the Japanese. Captain Storm eventually turned up with The Losers (in *Our Fighting Forces*), once the rot set in and his title was cancelled.~HY

CAPTAIN THUNDER and BLUE BOLT

Hero: *10 issues 1987-1988*

The eponymous Captain and his son perform heroic deeds with an electrical bias. One of the few Hero titles that didn't strongly emphasise the tits-and-ass angle, having no recurring female characters, and consequently one of the shortest-lived of that line. After all, nobody bought Hero books for the story.~HS

CAPTAIN VICTORY and the Galactic Rangers

Pacific: *14 issues 1981-1984*

Written and pencilled by Jack Kirby. They patrol the galaxy, saving us from the Insectons and Paranex the Fighting Fetus, and uttering lines such as "He's reacting to monumental surges of anti-death!" and "Finarkin kills with a devious brain!!" Utterly stupid and a barrel of laughs, but sampling an issue or two at random is probably quite enough for most of us. That is unless you're a Kirby completist, since later issues drop hints as to how Kirby would have concluded New Gods had he been allowed to let it run a natural course.~FC

CAR WARRIORS

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1991*

Adapting a role-playing game to comics was never likely to stimulate the creative juices, and the resulting mess merges *Wacky Races* with *Mad Max*. Scripting by Chuck Dixon on autopilot is only occasionally redeemed by the unusual art team of Steve Dillon and Phil Winslade.~FP

CARAVAN KIDD

Dark Horse: *Series one 10 issues 1992-1993*, series two 10 issues 1993-1994*, series three 8 issues 1994**

Science-fiction comedy epic from Johji Manabe, translated from the Japanese by Dana Lewis and Toren Smith. Mian Toris has a mission to single-handedly destroy the expansionist ambitions of the Helgebard Empire. She is accompanied by two black marketeers, the dim but lovable Wataru and the venal Babo. Babo is of the Akogi race, whose only interest is profit. Wataru provides the romantic interest for Mian though they spend most of the series fighting each other as well as the Empire. However, nothing is what it seems in Manabe's clever script, which pulls the rug out from under the reader with each new revelation about Mian's origins and the history of the 'Empire' against which she's supposed to be rebelling. Manabe's artwork is extremely well-paced, particularly suited to telling a story combining humour with adventure, but it's the twists and turns of plot and character that will keep you reading the series.~NF

CARDCAPTOR SAKURA

Tokyopop: *30 issues 1998-2002**

Cute little Sakura Kinomoto finds a magic book in her father's library. It's a kind of Infernal Stickerbook, empty of course, and a demon imprisoned in the book reveals to her that unless all the cards are returned to the book they will come to life and wreak havoc. Kerberos, the Demon of the Seal makes the little girl a Cardcaptor and together they, and her school chums set about a series of woefully predictable adventures. Tedious and insipid cash-in on the Pokemon phenomenon aimed at the shojo, or young girl market, from a studio wisely using the pseudonym 'Clamp'. There's an ongoing series of collections as well.~WW

CAREER GIRL ROMANCES

Charlton: *55 issues (24-78) 1964-1973*

Previously the much missed *Three Nurses*, hence the numbering, this was a typical Charlton romance title except that, surprise surprise, our heroines all had jobs (as air hostesses or models usually). As a rule those picking up 1960s issues are likely to be confronted by vast quantities of Vince Colletta artwork, while the 1970s issues are largely drawn by Charle Nicholas and Vince Alascia, the bywords in comics for bland and uninteresting, or South Americans. The anonymous, though probably by Jack Gill, stories are by and large poor, although there's much fun to be had with the odd period piece like 'Nobody Loves A Go-Go Girl' (in 35, almost worth getting for its gorgeous Dick Giordano cover alone). Art enthusiasts should try for 71, which features an early appearance by José Luis Garcia-Lopez that is absolutely lovely.~DAR

Where In The World Is CARMEN SANDIEGO?

DC: *5 issues 1996-1997*

Carmen Sandiego is the master criminal in a computer game, where the object is to trap her. The same scenario is transferred to comics with a games champion being brought in to do the job. Aimed squarely at the younger end of the market with appealing cartoony artwork, and wacky scripts echoing the game, it entertains and informs.~WJ

CARNAGE

Marvel: *One-shot ('Mind Bomb') 1996, one-shot ('It's A Wonderful Life') 1996*

There's a decent, if unpleasant, story in 'Mind Bomb', with writer Warren Ellis taking a pointed jibe at the slim nature of previous Carnage appearances. Safely jailed, Carnage is visited by a ghastly egocentric psychiatrist for a revelations session. Kyle Hotz conveys the claustrophobic and gloomy surroundings of the containment facility excellently, having obviously studied his Berni Wrightson, most likely via Kelley Jones. He's back for the dismal second one-shot. Here writer David Quinn passes off a surreal trip into Carnage's mind as a plot, keeping the punters happy with a gore overdose. It's crap.~WJ

CARNOSAUR CARNAGE

Atomeka: *One-shot 1993*

Anthology with dinosaurs as a theme. The best of a good bunch is lead strip 'Skin Of The Hadrosaurs', gorgeously painted by Kev Walker, and also worth noting is 'Gomra', in which a Godzilla-like monster has to renegotiate his film contract. Both are written by Dan Abnett, and there's also a wacky cavemen vs dinosaurs strip by Nick Abadzis and John McCrea.~FP

Larry Gonick's CARTOON HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSE

Rip-Off: *13 issues 1978-1994**

Everyone thinks it's a joke title. The cartoon history of the universe? Who would want it, and how would you go about doing it? The answer to the latter question is "Exactly like any editor would if asked to write a single-volume history of anything, even such a big topic as this, by carefully paring down facts and then working out how to present them in a clear and appealing fashion". As to who would want it: anyone with a sense of humour, of course. Underground veteran Gonick, whose approach to factual comics with a sense of humour is reminiscent of Hunt Emerson, creates a work that is inventive and informative, witty and wryly observed throughout. He's also responsible for a similar-quality one-off 380-page volume detailing *The Cartoon History of the United States*, published by Doubleday.~FJ

Recommended: 1-13

CARTOON NETWORK

DC: *Series one 24 issues (Cartoon Network Presents…), 1 Special 1997-1999, series two 18 issues (Cartoon Network Starring…) 1999-2001, series three (Cartoon Cartoons) 14 issues 2001-2002*

DC's anthology *Cartoon Network* publication aimed specifically at the younger end of the comics market and possibly due to its permanently changing cast list, it fails to live up to the quality of its companion titles. Usually consisting of a lead story and a short backup, there is little room to develop a storyline and the gags are simplistic even for kids. Older readers may find themselves nostalgic with the appearances of Space Ghost, The Herculoids and Birdman, and there are always the staid kiddie favourites such as Top Cat and Yogi Bear. The on screen energy and brash vitality of contemporary successes such as Cow and Chicken, Dial M for Monkey or Dexter's Laboratory are tellingly missed in the comic versions. The Special is a promotional giveaway reprinting one story from *The Flintstones and the Jetsons, Scooby Doo* and this comic.

The retooled anthology started with the Powerpuff Girls, who immediately graduated to their own title, before settling again into a round-robin routine, concentrating this time on short tales featuring the newer characters then winning audience share on the airwaves. Johnny Bravo debuted in 2, reappearing in 8, 11, 14 and 17 with Space Ghost Coast-to-Coast in 12, 15, and 18. Other issues include starring appearances for other contemporary headliners such as Cow and Chicken and IM Weasel, but parents will find their own childhood faves conspicuously absent this time. There's also a notable drop in story quality that feels suspiciously like dumbing down. Generally disappointing apart from the first issue.

Cartoon Cartoons continues the anthology format of showcasing contemporary Warner Brothers TV shows, but now with three or more stars per issue in complete stories. The line-up includes Ed, Edd 'n' Eddy, IM Weasel, Johnny Bravo, Courage the Cowardly Dog, Sheep in the Big City and Cow and Chicken, but the tales seem muddled and are poorly executed. Every third issue is a feature length Space Ghost Coast-to-Coast special and the most recent, in 13, almost makes up for the previous weak showing with its sprightly story of the Cosmic Phantom's lucky penny. 14 premiers Grim & Evil and Evil Con Carne, and also features a preview section for Kids Next Door, a Cartoon Network Show that hadn't screened yet at the time of publication, surely a healthy indication that TV producers still consider comics a valuable part of their overall output and not simply a slowly dying weak sister. Sadly though in all other aspects this comic series is pretty impenetrable to anybody over seven years old.~WW

THE CARTOONIST

Dog Star Press: *1 issue 1997*

This collects cartoons very gently ridiculing comics characters of the mid to late 1980s, and originally appeared in fan magazine *Amazing Heroes*. Time and lack of relevance has diminished the little charm they had, and Teri Wood produced better work elsewhere.~WJ

CARVERS

Image/Flypaper Press: *2 issues 1998-1999*

Pleasant drivel about bitchy champion snowboarders disappearing through a dimensional portal in the mountains leading to more mountains where they must battle invasion-bent Yetis. It's chiefly notable for scripter Robert Loren Fleming's startling and unprecedentedly heavy use of the words "wank", "wanker" and, a new one on me, "wankzilla".~GK

CASANOVA

Aircel: *10 issues 1991*

Translated from the French, artist Ricard produces a perfunctory re-telling of Casanova's alleged exploits, concentrating on his sexual encounters. The original forty-six page stories are split over two issues apiece. It's nicely drawn, but there's no substance. Each issue comes under an extra cover bearing the message "censored for display purposes", possibly to suggest more than the relatively tame content, or possibly to permit Aircel to get away with only changing the cover beneath every second issue.~FP

CASEY JONES

Mirage: *2 issue microseries 1994*

The street vigilante from the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* is given a solo outing to encounter some lobstermen from Neptune, who, oddly seem very Charles Burns designed. Kevin Eastman (plot and inks) and Rick Veitch (script and pencils) have some fun producing a B-movie in comics, but there's nothing of consequence. A widely advertised Casey Jones and Raphael miniseries was never published as such, being reworked into *Body Count*.~FP

THE CASTAWAYS

Absence of Ink: *One-shot 2002*

It's always a joy to discover a comic from previously unknown creators carrying through a unique vision. Set in the 1920s, Tucker Freeman's family move into their father's sister's home when his father doesn't return from one of his trips. A harsh woman, she ejects Tucker aged 13, claiming she can no longer afford to feed him, and Tucker is fortunate to hook up with kindly hobo Elijah. Rob Vollmar's story about coming of age has more than a few similarities with *Kings in Disguise*, but offers a greater warmth and faith in basic human decency as it draws on the memories of his family. Artist Pablo G. Callejo isn't yet the finished article, having a few problems with proportion and perspective, but his style and storytelling are already very accomplished. The choice of illustrating in greytones with grey pages and word balloons adds to a well-created atmosphere. Anyone interested in a good story well told should look this out.~WJ
Recommended

CASTLE WAITING

Olio: *7 issues 1997-1999*
Cartoon Books: *4 issues (Vol.2 1-4) 2000-2001*
Olio: *4 issues + (12-15) 2002 to date*

On a dark night, Lady Jain flees her home and wanders in search of the legendary refuge, Castle Waiting, where she encounters a variety of sprites, goblins, and figures from nursery rhymes and folklore. There, among these strange friends, she gives birth to her child (the father of whom was the victim of an evil spell) and discovers a sense of family and community that she believed lost to her. Linda Medley, artist and writer, has invested *Castle Waiting* with a warmth and humour rare in contemporary comics. Despite the fantasy characters, there are no quests in evidence other than Jain's quest for sanctuary, handily resolved by the second issue. Neither are there sword fighting, nor sorcery, and there's a blessed dearth of mighty-thewed warriors and brass-bra'd bimbos. Okay, there's one mighty-thewed warrior, but he has a horse's head and doesn't sport a loincloth, so we'll let him live. The art is meticulously detailed and fascinating, with acknowledged influences including Arthur Rackham and Heath Robinson, but more than a suspicion of Roger Langridge in there as well. A slow building saga, it may take a few issues of *Castle Waiting* for the average reader to get into the series, but it rewards persistence. After 7, the series was suspended, but an unnumbered "hiatus" issue of sketches and character notes was pushed out in the interval. At the behest of a new publisher, the series was relaunched with a new first issue and a new storyline, as Jain is told by Sister Peace about her younger days in the Sisters of St. Wilgeforte, the order of bearded nuns. After four issues, however, Medley resumed self-publishing and reverted to the original numbering (so just view the Cartoon Books issues as the 'real' 8-11) and brought the account back to the present, continuing her interrupted laconic, delightful narrative.~HS
Recommended: 1-15

CASUAL HEROES

Image: *1 issue 1996*

Intended to be the first of a continued series, only one issue of *Casual Heroes* saw the light of day. Behind a beautiful Steve Rude cover, the comic, about a group of slightly off beat hedonistic young superheroes, has a naïve charm, looking more like a glossy colour fanzine than an Image comic. Writer/artist Kevin McCarthy has an unpolished skill which, while far from being mainstream professional, promises much for the future. It would be a shame if this is all we ever see.~JC

Claws of the CAT

Marvel: *4 issues 1972-1973*

Young widow Greer Nelson becomes the research assistant of Dr Tumolo, who uses her knowledge to raise Greer's physical and psychic abilities to their fullest potential. Linda Fite's script combines a solid, traditional Marvel origin with simple but sound feminist ideas in a sincere attempt to put a new spin on superheroics. The first issue also had glorious Marie Severin and Wally Wood art. Unfortunately, Marvel's 1970s women's comics line wasn't given much creative support or time to prove itself, and the strip became an ordinary superhero series with the very next issue. Increasingly lame matches against Marvel villains coupled with slapdash and inappropriate art killed the comic very swiftly. Shame. One can't help but feel that Marvel had something, but pissed it away. The character mutated into Tigra the Were-Woman and forged a third-banana career in various *Avengers* titles.~HS
Recommended: 1

CAT AND MOUSE

Aircel: *18 issues 1990-1991*

A well-conceived series that established the writing skills of Roland Mann. Artist Mitch Byrd was considerably better by the end of the run, but retains a consistent look throughout, despite having a different inker on practically every issue. The story concerns a policeman who puts on a mask to become Cat, an ex-con who becomes his partner, Mouse, and a vet called Keith who happens to be a dog-like demon. Fortunately there's not much by the way of supernatural happenings (apart from a sub-plot about an evil cult); instead the plot centres on the gangland battle for control of the city between the Yakuza and the Mafia. While Cat and Mouse struggle to clear themselves of a murder charge the Yakuza send their own costumed fighters to kill policemen who're on the Mafia payroll. A sub-plot featuring the romance between Mouse and Keith rounds out a decent adventure thriller. 1-4 are collected.~NF

CAT CLAW

Eternity: *9 issues 1990-1991*

Translated from the Serbo-Croat, Bane Kerac's sexy superheroine fights monsters, mad scientists and supervillains with names like The Caterminator. The series is mostly played for laughs, with lots of knowing references to other strips and movies. Cat Claw usually manages to lose what is already a very skimpy costume in the course of each adventure. Very much an 'adult', European take on superheroes, similar to *XXX-Women*, *Cat Claw* is undemanding fun if not exactly politically correct.~NF

CATALAN Graphic Novels

Catalan Communications specialised in translating European graphic novels, primarily from France and Italy, for the American market and as such their list revolved around the work of several accessible illustrators like Milo Manara, Vittorio Giardino and Enki Bilal, and around lighthearted erotica. When Catalan ceased trading in 1993 NBM picked up many of their sex titles and a handful of other books, and more are now returning to print via Humanoids. Anything that ran to three or more books is dealt with in a separate entry.

Generally the work reprinted wasn't particularly challenging, although a number of individual volumes are intellectually stimulating. *The Magician's Wife* (1988), by American crime writer Jerome Charyn and French artist François Boucq, is a complex fabulation about the obsessive relationship between a young girl and her ageing mother's lover, a magician, who is the eldest son in the creepy, fantasy-filled house where her mother works as a maid. They run away and gradually the girl supplants her mother both as his assistant in a magic act and in his bed. *Billy Budd, KGB* (1991), by Charyn and Boucq, is about a loner who's recruited by the KGB and sent to the USA as a spy. Charyn examines the idea of belonging through Budd, who feels out of place in his native Ukraine from the start, using a film noir plot to continue the sense of alienation. Of less interest is *Pioneers of the Human Adventure* (1989), a collection of solo stories by Boucq centred around peculiar juxtapositions and out-of-place objects, where the art runs away with the story. Boucq's complex, layered style, full of shifting outlines and soft, pastel lines, is particularly suited to depicting fantastic elements in everyday settings.

Lorenzo Mattotti's *Fires* (1989) is a richly painted fable relying heavily on the art to tell the story. *Hurricane* (*Stella Norris* vol 1, 1991), by Canossa and Baldazzini, is also dominated by its striking art, reminiscent of a stiff Charles Burns. It tells the story of a group of people, all with something to hide, stranded in a small-town hotel in America by an impending hurricane. As the winds get more violent so does the mood inside, in a story reminiscent of a Douglas Sirk melodrama. Catalan published two volumes by Philippe Paringaux and Jacques de Loustal: *Love Shots*, a collection of pointed shorts, and *Hearts of Sand*, a carefully constructed examination of the dynamics of relationships that unites French Legionnaires and mysterious women in North Africa in the 1920s. Loustal illustrates with curiously flat but effective, haunting images of people who are all trying to hide something. If these appeal, you'll also like Max Cabanes' *Heartthrobs*, an award-winning series of stories about the pangs of growing up, drawn in a broad, pastel style that shows the influence of both Loustal and Prado. Fleetway's Expresso list issued this as their only UK graphic novel. Also important is the first part of François Bourgeon's *Companions of the Dusk* series set in Medieval France. *In the Spell of the Misty Forest* magic mixes with history as two children are led into a sinister forest by a faceless knight and are taken over by goblins. Bourgeon's strange fantasy is not only immaculately researched, it's beautifully drawn in the detailed but flowing style peculiar to European history comics.

Finally, some quality oddments that don't really fit in. To prove Guido Crepax draws something other than S&M and Gothic horror, *The Man From Harlem* (1987) is an aching evocation of the post-World War II jazz scene, strangely coloured as though the pages are bruised. Less successful is his *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1988), a dull version of the Stevenson classic with extraneous dirty bits added, which do nothing to illuminate the original. Another oddity was *Joe's Bar* by Muñoz and Sampayo, which features many of the characters from their *Sinner* series. A series of connected short stories, about the regulars at a run-down New York bar, it's beautifully drawn in Muñoz' trademark heavy black style, the tales effortlessly dovetailed together by Sampayo. Also by Sampayo, this time with artist F. Solano Lopez, better known for his period erotica, is the corruption thriller *Deep City*. Lopez's art is a little heavy-handed, but looks effectively threatening. And finally in the oddments section, *Goodbye and Other Stories* by Yoshihiro Tatsuni. It's a pity it didn't sell well, as it could have popularised some of the different approaches found in Japanese comics with US audiences at a time when action/adventure Manga were only just getting a grip on the market. Goodbye is a series of gekiga ('realistic stories') about the loneliness and isolation of life in post-war Japan. They centre on troubled relationships and social pressures and visually are a far cry from the slickly-drawn, wide-eyed image we have of Japanese comics. Quite where the work of Mattioli fits into all this is anyone's guess. He draws like a Disney animator on crack, creating vicious parodies of famous cartoon characters in *Superwest* (1987).

One of Catalan's earliest graphic novels, Nazario's *Anarcoma* (1983), is an ugly but sharply observed story about a streetwise transvestite detective reprinted from *El Vibora*. The over-detailed but naïve art has a very underground feel, with packed pages that don't worry much about the conventions of storytelling. Better known for *Torpedo* (see elsewhere) Jordi Bernet and Sanchez Abuli's *Dark Tales* is a series of murderous but sexy stories. Later Catalan also published Bernet's collaboration with Trillo, *Light and Bold*, a peculiar love story between a woman conditioned to feel no pain and a huge thug who keeps accidentally hurting her. There's something not quite right about the way violence towards women is excused in the story but it's very attractively drawn by Bernet in his Bettie Page style.

Catalan achieved early success with *Click!* by Milo Manara (see separate entry), which was quickly followed by his other sexy romps such as *Butterscotch* (1987), about an invisible man who chases a young woman, *Hidden Camera* (1990), about a film crew trying to persuade women to show their pussies in public who film something they shouldn't and decide to investigate, and *Shorts* (1989), a series of light, voyeuristic meditations. Catalan also translated the first three volumes of Manara's more heavyweight series about Güiseppe Bergman and his mentor, HP. Based on Manara and his old friend Hugo Pratt, *The Great Adventure* (1988), *An Author in Search of Six Characters* (1989) and *Dies Irae* (1990) are meandering adventure stories in which symbol and reality blend. This continually plays with expectations, with characters addressing the readers and haranguing them about what should happen next. In a similar vein is *Trip To Tulum*, Manara's collaboration with Italian cinematic auteur Federico Fellini, the cement on a late friendship that began when Manara created a series of drawings based around Fellini's most famous films. Although many considered Fellini a spent creative force by this stage in his career, the collaboration is of interest.

Other Manara translations are his comedy Western, *The Paper Man* (1986), and a reprint of the *Heavy Metal* translation of *The Ape*, written by Silverio Pisu, a version of Wu Ch'en Eng's 'Monkey' legends adapted to become a political satire about Communism. There's also *The Snow Man*, written by Castelli, about an explorer who discovers a race of transcendent monks, and is probably the only Manara not to feature a naked woman of some sort, although he gets a couple of naked men in there. However, the best work by Manara that Catalan brought us was *Indian Summer*, written by Hugo Pratt, a huge, sumptuous reworking of *The Scarlet Letter*. It's a masterpiece that paints a complex portrait of the relationship between the Pilgrim Fathers and local Indians. Immaculately researched and beautifully drawn, it's only slightly marred by the translation, which, in common with that of much of Manara's oeuvre, erred on the casual side. Indian Summer is now in print from NBM.

Another impressive creator whose back catalogue Catalan raided was Enki Bilal. They published his solo series about strange, animal-headed 'gods' returning to a near-future earth and the impact their return has on everyone from governments to the individuals they choose to use as their agents (*Gods in Chaos* 1988, *The Woman Trap* 1989). Beautifully drawn and coloured in almost iridescent fashion, they are complicated and playful science fiction. Rather more challenging is the Modern Legends series that Bilal produced from Pierre Christin's scripts. Catalan published two of the four books, the urban fantasy *The Town That Didn't Exist* (1989) and *Ranks of the Black Order* (1989), an excellent examination of how people mature in the form of a mystery surrounding a phalanx of freedom fighters who, in old age, find their past is coming back to haunt them. Frank Wynne's translation of a conceptual and wordy work must be commended. A pity he didn't get his hands on the final Christin/Bilal collaboration, *The Hunting Party* (1990), although Elizabeth Bell does a dependable job. Set in 1983, it has a similar theme and structure to *Ranks*. High-ranking Communist officials are taking a hunting trip together, during which they will remember many moments, acts and betrayals that shaped not only their own lives but the history of their country. Christin mixes a taut thriller plot with a haunting sense of nostalgia. Catalan also published another Bilal collaboration, Exterminator 17, a futuristic adventure written by Jean Paul Dionnet, better known as an artist in his own right (1988). There were British editions of most Bilal volumes available from Titan Books, and they've since been reissued by Humanoids.

The other creator who proved popular with Catalan's audiences was Vittorio Giardino, who draws in a very measured style using even lines and putting in lots of detail. Again, easily accessible art and story formats characterised the earliest translations, two substantial but sophisticated detective stories set in the 1930s, *Hungarian Rhapsody* (1986) and *Orient Gateway* (1987), both featuring his calm and collected detective Max Friedman. They were followed by the harder-edged *Sam Pezzo PI* (1987), a more violent, noirish story. Then there were two volumes of erotica, the whimsical but not very horny *Little Ego* (1989), a Windsor McCay parody, and *Deadly Dalliance* (1991), a series of linked tales in which couples seeking thrills via holiday affairs often find they end up looking down the barrel of a gun. Nicely done, but again, not very sexy. More thrilling, in every sense of the word, was Alex Varenne's *Erma Jaguar* (2 vols). Varenne is one of the classiest pornographers Europe has to offer, creating clever, referential tableaux with succinct lines. Erma Jaguar has an unusually coherent story about a rapacious sexual adventuress on the road, who sucks passers-by into her highly charged world. *Black Squares On White Pieces* is more typical, a collection of stories featuring dream women in a variety of situations. Varenne's work has a distinct fifties feel about it, even going back to great femme fatale artists like Milt Caniff. Similarly referential, although much more European in look, is Daniel Torres' work. His *Rocco Vargas* series – *Triton*, 1986 (reprinting the Heavy Metal translation), *The Whisper Mystery*, 1990, and Saxon, 1991 – feature a slick interplanetary investigator up against a galaxy-wide drug network.

There's a lot of prettily drawn, mild erotica, about the best of which is Silvio Cadelo's *The Romantic Flower*. It's a piece of nonsense about a gardener who gives his pubescent daughter a mysterious seed for her birthday, which turns out to be a nymphomaniac plant from outer space. Two-tendrilled action all the way. Also by Cadelo is *Mark of the Dog*, a rather more ambitious collection of four stories about a mysterious masked man who drifts through a futuristic Paris uncovering murders, which is reminiscent of the atmosphere of early Christin and Bilal collaborations. *The Love Machine*, drawn in soft detail by Altuna to Trillo's uninspired script, is one of those erotic what-ifs: what if the 'women' in a video machine came to life? At least it's attractively drawn, which is more than you can say for *Dorm Girls*, by Galiano, Marta and Pons, a piece of fluff that has no redeeming features. Paul Gillon is a straightforward artist and storyteller working in great detailed softly pencilled, with lots of pencil hatching and rounded forms. His *Survivor* series (2 vols) concerns a pretty young woman who survives a nuclear apocalypse that had wiped out mankind by getting stuck in a cave while deep-sea diving. Making her way to Paris she finds the robotic remains of civilisation as much a hindrance as a help in finding other survivors, and that the few remaining officials who sheltered in nuclear bunkers have turned into flesh-eating zombies.

They also printed erotic work by Guido Crepax, much of it taken over by NBM when Catalan ceased trading (see NBM listing for full details). *Venus in Furs*, Crepax' adaptation of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's groundbreaking masochistic novel about Severin, a man who becomes obsessed with the beautiful but uncaring Wanda, is easily the classiest and most interesting piece of erotica they reprinted. Crepax, unusually, adds little to the plot, drawing in a large-panelled, open way with body shapes and page layouts echoing the movement of a whip. They also finally got around to releasing his version of *Justine* (1 vol), by de Sade. Again there's little addition. In fact Crepax goes through the original text like a scythe, pruning out a lot of interesting discourse, but keeping the heart of the book's argument, as well as the plot. His by now fine-lined, scratchy style fits the mood of de Sade's satirical reflection of the moralistic novels of his day. Readers looking for sexy stuff should be warned that Crepax's *Justine* is just as unerotic as the novel it's based on. Just because it's about sex doesn't mean it's sexy. Magnus' *Specialist* series, about a hitman, didn't go down so well, and only one volume (*Full Moon in Dendera*) was published. Much more surprising, though, is Peter Pank, a punk re-working of the J.M. Barrie kids' story drawn in a highly stylised manner by Spanish cartoonist Max. The sex is rough but funny and the line work beautifully executed. Equally stylised, although reminiscent of woodcuts and Russian workers' art, is Igort's *Dulled Feelings*.

Straightforward adventure books are rare in the Catalan line-up. Ortiz and Segura's *Burton and Cyb* is the exception; a futuristic shoot-'em-up that's well drawn in a style reminiscent of a more traditional Liberatore (they published his collection of colour shorts, *Video Clips*, but it's nowhere near as exciting as *RanXerox* or its sequel). Fantasy was represented by two volumes of Frank Thorne's wide-eyed barbarienne *Ghita of Alizarr*, and by Fernando Fernandez' dire *Zora and the Hibernauts* is an over-coloured adventure with plenty of cheesy t&a and little else. And speaking of t&a, there's plenty in Richard Corben's *The Bodyssey*, yet another interplanetary romance story full of rippling muscles. Rod Kierkegaard Jr's *Shooting Stars* features stiff but accurate drawings of famous popsters (some, like Madonna, still enduring, others, like Boy George, largely forgotten). It's poor, but not as tedious as John Findley's *Tex Arcana*, or Paul Kirchner's Realms, both whimsy at its worst. Notably all of these rather dull offerings are culled from the pages of *Heavy Metal*.

Humour is equally lightly represented. Ralf Konig's *The Killer Condom*, subtitled "Just when you thought it was safe to have sex", is a madcap and rather bloody murder comedy which looks like it's been drawn by *Wicked Willy* creator Gray Joliff. Baciliero's *The Talking Head*, even more predictably, is about the (mis)adventures of a man who, to his horror, finds his dick talking back to him one day.~FJ

Recommended: *The Great Adventure, Gods in Chaos, Goodbye and Other Stories, Heartthrobs, The Hunting Party, Indian Summer, Joe's Bar, The Magician's Wife, The Man From Harlem, Peter Pank, The Ranks of the Black Order, The Spell of the Misty Forest, Super West*

CATALYST: Agents of Change

Dark Horse: *7 issues 1994-1995*

Introduced in *Comics Greatest World*, Catalyst is the band of superheroes controlled by Amazing Grace, benign autocratic ruler of Golden City. Events stemming from her decision to secede from the USA occupy 1-3, and the aftermath of *Will to Power* takes up the final two issues. 5 is giant gorilla story, leaving 4 as the best of a slightly above average bunch as Grace has to take on Titan, the most powerful member of her team. Plots continue in *Agents of Law*.~WJ

CATFIGHT

Dog Soup: *1 issue 1995*

A collection of the 'Zero Hour' strips by Patty Leidy (often seen in Action Girl) from the Atlanta, Georgia newspaper, Highpoint. The central characters are P.J. and her roommate Ant (Antoinette), two girls with not enough time and way too many obsessions. Agreeable stuff, occasionally surprisingly edgy, but the reproduction, presumably reduced from their original size, and hurried lettering make a hard read. The four page new story, in which Leidy tells of her own dealings with DC when they issued their *Zero Hour* miniseries, is the funniest item.~HS

Deity II CATSEYE

Hyperwerks: *4 issue miniseries 1999*

The supporting cast from *Deity* return sheltering II, who is one of many people searching for the catseye, the object that empowered the machinery of creation. As you'd assume, that means plenty of women with perfect globes for breasts running around with guns. Well drawn within its limitations, this is fast-moving, hollow nonsense.~FP

CATWOMAN

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1989*, series one 95 issues (0-94), 4 Annuals, 1 Graphic Novel, 2 issue microseries ('Guardian of Gotham') 1993-2001, series two 12 issues +, 1 Graphic Novel, 1 Secret Files, 2002 to date*

Mindy Newell and J.J. Birch's miniseries chronicles Catwoman's origin, a dark, bitter affair of her sister nun, her pimp and her early life as a prostitute. Her motivations for donning the cat costume are all too self-evident and the Stygian artwork complements the mood perfectly. The story intertwines shrewdly with Frank Miller's 'Batman Year One' tale in *Batman* 404-407.

Over fifty years after her first appearance, Batman's femme fatale finally earned her own ongoing series after scattered outings in her *Action Comics* (when weekly) miniseries, the *Catwoman Defiant* graphic novel and *Showcase* '93. Villains have frequently fared poorly in their own titles but Mary Jo Duffy gave Catwoman a flying start by defining her supporting characters, morals and life outside her skin. However, to load readers on board, a plague of Bat crossovers (6, 7, 12, 13) cursed the first year and sadly stunted her development. 14 is a delightful, carefree *Zero Hour* tie-in which laughs at the concept's pomposity. Chuck Dixon assumed plotting from 15 and whilst main storylines are adequate, he threw away Selina Kyle's personal life, continuing supporting cast and sub-plots, much to the title's loss. 15-19 are collected as *Catfight*. Not until 28-30 did some desperately needed character interaction finally surface. An infestation of multi-title crossovers (26, 27, 31-36) weakened the series' stature – needlessly so since this villainess has now proved quite capable of landing on her own four feet.

Issues 0 (childhood), Annual 2 ('Year One') and 38-40 ('Year Two') catalogue a reworked origin of Catwoman inconsistent with Newell's vision. Arguments as to the merits of these versions have raged through the letters pages, but despite the bleak, sordid nature of the earlier tale, there is little doubt that it lends a far more powerful and convincing motivation for Selina assuming the mantle of the cat than Doug Moench and Jordan Gorfinkel's watered-down retake. Subsequent Moench issues are more action-oriented, sometimes portraying Catwoman as a renegade James Bond complete with her own crooked version of 'M'. The romantic interest, Moreland McShane, is a welcome contrast but the resolution of this subplot in Moench's final issues (52, 53) is far too convenient. Devin Grayson writes from 54, mixing lightweight and well constructed stories, albeit with few drum rolls. Her best offering is 66-71 in which Selina Kyle runs for mayor of New York City, a sequence providing some relief from the repetition of over used burglary stories. John Ostrander writes one story ('No Man's Land' in 72-77) in his six issue stint. Jim Balent departs with him after 77 issues of top-notch artistic consistency.

The Great Catwoman Breast Debate has reached the fan press, letters pages and Internet as the preposterous pair of massive mammaries receives silicon injections by the issue. This submission to the Bad Girl art fad lends little credibility to her acrobatic exploits and unfortunately detracts from the series' most superlative feature: the artwork. Jim Balent draws every issue to 77 bar Annuals 1 and 3, both imaginary stories. No little credit should go to colourist Buzz Setzer who bows out with 57. A temporary blip in quality occurred for a few issues from 21, when DC switched to slicker paper stock before coming to terms with the artistic techniques it demanded. Many issues are worth the admission price for Balent's covers alone (10, 15, 18, 29, 36), and his clean lines, attention to detail, facial expressions (e.g. issue 20 page 13) and good humour (dig the squirrel in the oxygen mask in 30) produced a near faultless first 40. Ensuing issues show signs of complacency and John Stanisci's harsh inking from 51 does not assist. Bronwyn Carlton and Staz Johnson's stint from 78 requires no warm-up as Catwoman is captured, unmasked and sent to jail inside their first two issues. The change in tempo is abrupt and Catwoman's personality change is unsettling. The confused storyline loses direction as the first series meanders aimlessly to its finale.

Before the launch of the second series incumbent writer Ed Brubaker delivered a prequel in *Detective Comics* 759-762*. Selina undergoes soul searching and character reformation whilst rotating pencillers supply the new retro look, and possibly the first practical costume Catwoman has ever worn. The emphasis leans heavily toward detective fiction with 6-9 the pick. No superheroes. Minimal fight scenes. What are mainstream comics coming to?

Darwyn Cooke uses the length of the 85 story pages in the 2002 graphic novel 'Selina's Big Score' to excellent effect in a fine thriller made difficult to follow by his muddy, unfinished-looking artwork. Secret Files & Origins is a rather ineffectual one-shot recapping Catwoman's new outlook on life as depicted in series two.~APS

Recommended: Miniseries 1-4, series one 1-4, 14, 28-30, series two 6-9

CATWOMAN AND VAMPIRELLA: The Furies

DC/Harris: *One-shot 1997*

Pitifully hackneyed team-up story as Vampirella, on her mission to wipe out all supernatural monsters, arrives in Gotham City as a mysterious catlike creature is making headlines assaulting art collectors and stealing their cat-themed art treasures. After the obligatory mistaken identity misunderstanding provides yet another catfight, they join forces to track down the real culprit. Pantha, a shape-changing private detective bimbo, is working to recover the art treasures for the original owners, whilst the Penguin is taking advantage of her abilities for his own ends. Total rubbish from Chuck Dixon, Jim Balent and Ray McCarthy.~WW

CATWOMAN/WILDCAT

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1998*

The feline femme fatale and the Justice Society of America's premier pugilist are brought together in Las Vegas for an uninspired match against the mob. A subplot attempts to generate romantic heat between the characters, but writers Chuck Dixon and Beau Smith don't seem convinced, so how can we be? Sergio Cariello's lumpy and unappetizing art gives two characters who should be lithe and athletic all the grace and agility of a bag of spanners.~HS.

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* Available in a collected edition

CAULDRON

Real Comics: *1 issue 1995*

Ambitious if unoriginal fantasy tale from Steven Patrick Brown telling of the last desperate struggle by a bunch of magic-users to save their world by opening a portal to another world. This just happens to be New York in the vicinity of a misunderstood comic artist. Competent but incomplete.~WW

CAVE BANG

Eros: *One-shot 1996*

As the title suggests, this is a caveman fantasy, and artist Tayyar Ozkan is very much in European mode. Hints of Manara, Moebius and Crepax are all present in a decently drawn comic, which alone places it near the top of the Eros offerings.~WJ

CAVEWOMAN

Basement Comics: *6 issues 1994-1996**

Caliber: *8 issue limited series ('Rain') 1996-1997*, one-shot ('Odyssey') 1999*

Basement Comics: *One-shot (Cavewoman Meets Explorers) 1997, 4 issue miniseries ('Missing Link') 1997-1998*, one-shot (Jungle Tales Of Cavewoman) 1998, 5 issue miniseries (0-4 – 'Pangean Sea') 2001-2002*

Through events explained in 3 of the first series, Meriem grows to adulthood seventy million years in the past, having gained the strength to cope among dinosaurs via increased molecular density during her journey back in time. Eleven years later her whole town makes the trip back for the b-movie gorefest that is the first series. Civilisation seriously deteriorates during the rainy season in 'Rain', which has a very similar scenario to the first series, but creator Budd Root's art has improved. By *Jungle Tales* an Art Adams influence is very apparent, and this day in the life story makes for the best sample. 'Missing Link' has Meriem's giant gorilla interacting with a female sasquatch, and while over-long at four issues, is a different approach from writer Bradley Walton and artist Jim Schumaker. *The Explorers* creators join with Root to good effect, with the story dropping hints as to Cavewoman's entire predicament, while 'Pangean Sea' transfers Cavewoman to New York. Beyond the basic premise there's little imagination, and while the diverse influences on Root's art have fused into a nice naturalistic style, it's still far too sloppy in places.~FP

CECIL KUNKLE

Renegade: *One-shot 1986, 2 issues, 1 Special 1987-1988*

Continuation of a comic strip that ran interminably and to no purpose in *The Comics Buyer's Guide*, a feeble domestic comedy with occasional comics references, execrably drawn. Why this was given four issues, let alone one, is inexplicable.~HS

CELESTIAL MECHANIC

Innovation: *3 issue miniseries 1990-1991*

Wilhelmina Jones decides to go into the space exploration business and compete against the all powerful Halplex corporation. There's an appealing light science fiction touch, and some creative plot twists that paste over the sometimes amateur art.~WJ

CELESTINE

Image/Extreme: *2 issues 1996*

Continuing the story of the angel Celestine from the pages of *Violator/Badrock*, in which she had her heart torn out, died and went to Hell. Chronologically this story takes place before the *Angela/Glory* series as a scientist tries to resurrect her, hindered by a demon and some angels who don't want her back. Blackly amusing tale by Warren Ellis (the Devil is a woman, Celestine is a murderer), drawn with some panache by Patrick Lee (though the inking on 2 is poor). As entertaining as Liefeld's obsession with angels and demons is likely to get.~NF

CELL

Antarctic: *3 issues 1996-1997*

A very promising debut from Derek Kirk concerning a bleak future in which engineer Annie stops thugs from beating a naked man clutching a mysterious device. Then there's a sinister corporation, a jealous boyfriend, some excellent dialogue, and a bizarre clown. Kirk is an instinctive storyteller, and his fine-lined art, while perfectly acceptable here, should evolve into something wonderful. 1-3 are more than just promising, though, and it's very unfortunate that Kirk decided that *Cell* "was like a premature baby, not ready to come out yet" and stopped the series. Also of note are the confessional back-up strips by Kirk's brother Brent. While far more light hearted and at first drawn functionally rather than elegantly, they all entertain, and his art evolves throughout, eventually attaining a Joe Matt-like fluidity.~WJ

Recommended: 1-3

CENTRIFUGAL BUMBLEPUPPY

Fantagraphics: *8 issues 1987-1988*

Why did Fantagraphics follow the not particularly successful *Honk!* with an even more obtuse humour anthology? Joe Sacco edits, but doesn't induce the best from contributors, many of whose names will be familiar. J.R. Williams delivers, and the Callahan strip that kicks off issue 2 is worth seeking out, but by and large the standard is disappointing. Several name artists, including Beto Hernandez, tread water, and too many strips suffer from amateur execution or lack of pacing. Still others suffer from humour so obscure it's virtually non-existent.~FJ

CENTURIONS

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1987*

Boy, did the DC licensing execs see these folk coming. If you had a TV cartoon series and toy line to promote would you demand to have Bob Rozakis and Don Heck producing your comic? Perhaps by that stage this cartoon-by-numbers was already beyond redemption.~FP

CENTURY Distant Sons

Marvel: *One-shot 1996*

Origin for the mysterious alien from *Force Works*. Sadly, Century's mystery is his only real attraction and this comic neither enhances our understanding of his abilities and personality, nor tells a particularly interesting story. It's nicely pencilled by J. Calafiore, but that's not really enough.~NF

THE CEREAL KILLINGS

Fantagraphics: *8 issue limited series 1992-1995*

From a good pun, James Sturm weaves a haunting mystery about the disappearance of former cereal box icons. The narrative switches between their heyday, when the frog, rabbit, elephant and chimp all had long contracts and endorsements aplenty for sugary cereals, and the present, when they're washed up, and often bitter. Carbunkle, their agent, is experiencing apparitions involving dead colleagues, but has plans to launch a new cereal based on a short-run 1950s product represented by a scarecrow. Attempts to contact him lead to recollections of his behaviour questioning the ethics of what he represented, and revelations about the past of the other cereal celebrities. Giving reality to cheery cartoon icons has a disturbing effect, but the seemingly rushed and wishy-washy conclusion is a disappointment. 8 is cover blurbed "Chapter nine" (which indeed it is).~FP

CEREBUS The Aardvark

Aardvark-Vanaheim: *285 issues + 1977 to date*

When writer/artist Dave Sim began *Cerebus* in 1977 his was one of only a handful of titles whose creators had rejected (or been rejected by) mainstream publishing, but felt confident enough in their creations to publish them themselves. *First Kingdom* and *Elfquest* are other examples from the period. *Cerebus* started out as a parody of *Conan the Barbarian*, down to Sim's appropriation of Barry Windsor-Smith's art style and his Howardesque definition of Cerebus' world, both geographically (it wasn't long before a map became a staple of the text page) and politically. The latter was the far more wide-reaching element of the stories. It would be a couple of years before Sim announced that he had Cerebus' story mapped out to issue 300. No longer a simple monthly fix, the title now demanded a staying power never before attempted by a North American comic creator, nor demanded from an audience.

Cerebus initially and temperamentally is a barbarian, albeit one of only three aardvarks in this world, wandering around using his sword to get what he wants. At the heart of the series is the humour, and Sim's parodies are an important aspect of his storytelling. He hurls them at the reader in the early issues, but they're built upon throughout, or new targets are found. The level of humour depends on the target, from homage (The Marx Brothers) to cruel (Margaret Thatcher, Hemingway). The subjects are taken from many sources: other comics (Red Sonia, the various guises of The Roach, Neil Gaiman's Sandman); literature (Moorcock, F. Scott Fitzgerald); film (Woody Allen, The Three Stooges); music (Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, the Beatles) or politics (Mrs Thatcher).

The humour drives and predominates throughout 1-25, but with the introduction of Lord Julius in 'The Walls of Palnu' there's a real sense that Sim has a plan for the characters and that rather than just one-off parodies, we are actually reading a story that just happens to have had a funny start. Lord Julius is Groucho Marx, mad bureaucrat and arch-politician, whose ministers are given completely misleading titles in an effort to keep everyone off balance. These twenty-five issues introduce almost all the major characters who will be the stars of the next 125 including Sophia, Elrod, Julius, Jaka (6, Cerebus' true love) and Weisshaupt, master-conspirator. The Roach is variously the Cockroach, Captain Cockroach and, in later issues, Moon-Roach and WolveRoach amongst others. Bran Mak Muffin (5) is leader of the Pigts, who worship a statue that looks remarkably like Cerebus, the explanation for which would come almost 200 issues later. A parody of the film *The Beguiled*, leading into a meeting between Woman-Thing and Sump-Thing (parodies of Marvel and DC's swamp characters), concludes the first phase of the narrative.

'High Society' begins in 26 and marks a milestone. Cerebus arrives in the city of Iest, puts up at the Regency Hotel and finds himself an important guest due to his past employment by Lord Julius. The latter's ex-wife, Astoria, shows up with the Moon-Roach and manages Cerebus' candidacy for the post of Prime Minister, a title he wins. He promptly tries to enrich himself by invading his neighbours. It all goes terribly wrong, however, when the Eastern and Western Churches unite to force him out of office and out of Iest. In 'High Society', almost every character from the previous issues is revealed as part of the bigger picture, though their true roles may not be explained for a long time. His social and intellectual superiors manipulate Cerebus, but ultimately they can't control him as he lacks an understanding of anything but personal gain.

52 starts 'Church and State', to date the longest story, running to 111 and concentrating thematically on the effects of faith and power. Weisshaupt engineers Cerebus' return to Iest as Prime Minister (having tricked him into marriage with Sophia), but his political and religious enemies undermine his control over Cerebus by electing him Pope. Unfortunately for everyone, Cerebus decides that, as Pope, he can do anything he wants, and demands all true believers hand over all their money. The plotting behind his back comes to naught when it is Cerebus who ascends to what he expects to be godhood, but which instead turns out to be a history lesson on the Moon. Sim here intimates, as did R.E. Howard, that this fictional world is merely Earth's distant past. He returns to Earth to find that the religious leader Cirin (also an aardvark) has conquered Iest and taken all his wealth. 'Jaka's Story' in 114-136 is the best and most well rounded part of the continuing novel so far. Oscar Wilde writes a book about Jaka's childhood as told to him by her husband, Rick. Jaka is earning the household's money by dancing in a local tavern whose owner, Pud, is in love/lust with her. Cerebus is given refuge by Jaka and Rick, and is convinced she can be persuaded to leave with him. Jaka's story itself is told in illustrated prose alongside the contemporary narrative. To the Cirinists, women are the most important people and amongst them the mothers have the greatest respect, but men are second class citizens, tolerated purely for their part in the childbearing process. Whilst this is a love story, it's also about the nature of art, whether it be dancing or writing, both of which are done for their own sake, both of which are illegal in Cirinist society.

In 'Melmoth' (139-150), Cerebus is even more of a bystander. He's in shock after the arrest of Jaka, incapable of speech as he sits outside a bar holding a child's rag-doll while a waitress serves him and talks at him. The real story here is Sim's depiction of the death of Oscar Wilde. Seemingly out of place within the narrative framework, it pursues the themes of liberty, death and art as displayed in the life of the great outsider/artist/criminal, finally ground down by society. These themes are integral to the process by which Cerebus' personality is expanded and are picked up again in 'Reads'.

'Mother and Daughters' begins with the battle between Cirin and Astoria and their different philosophies. It comes down to which of them is strong enough to ascend to godhood, if Cerebus doesn't beat them to it. It draws many of the long-standing plot threads together and paves the way for a new direction in 201. Along the way Sim himself becomes more intrusive into the story, particularly in the chapters collected as 'Reads' (175-186), in which artists speak out against publishers and the nature of editorial decisions. More controversially, there's also an extended diatribe on the nature of the relationship between men and women in which feminism takes a battering – woman is the Void, opposite of Light. 'Guys' (201-219) is something of a return to the humour of the first issues with plenty of drinking and male bonding as Cerebus tries to find oblivion after the revelations at the conclusion of 'Mother and Daughters'. There are new characters (including one based on Marty Feldman) and even guest appearances by other self-publishers and their characters.

'Rick's Story' (220-231) returns the focus to Cerebus' relationship with Jaka, albeit, initially, through the reappearance of Rick, examining the effect on his psyche of the break-up of his marriage. With 'Going Home' (232-250), Sim introduced a commentary, explaining his references and expanding on the ideas presented. In it, Jaka and Cerebus are travelling together, eventually boarding a Southbound ship, where they meet Sim's latest literary character, F. Stop Kennedy (F. Scott Fitzgerald), whose latest writings, 'Pleasure's Simple Life', become part of the book's narrative. This is followed, during the couple's continuing travels towards Cerebus' birthplace, by the introduction and dismissal of Ham Ernestway, during the intense 'Form and Void' (251-265). The Three Wise Fellows, bearing an uncanny resemblance to the Three Stooges, pop in for the final storyline, 'Latter Days'. After being imprisoned briefly, Cerebus breaks his leg, dresses up as demon-king Spore to judge the righteousness or otherwise of women, and then meets Konigsberg, who's based on Woody Allen.

Artistically, from the primitive, but witty, Windsor-Smith copies, Sim developed quickly with a highly individual style that retained a lot of Windsor-Smith's attention to detail, but added a smoother, more rounded finish. Throughout the series he's continued to experiment with his storytelling techniques via printing sideways, including prose sections, or writing himself into the story. His use of language and literary pretensions has grown as the scope of the series has grown. Since early issues of 'Church and State' he's been more than ably assisted by Gerhard, responsible for the backgrounds, often elaborate and always entirely in keeping with Sim's own contributions. Sim has continued to champion the cause of the self-publisher both by providing space in Cerebus for previews of other titles and by offering to print "single-pages" in the Bi-Weekly reprint series. His work has been compromised in some eyes because of his views (on women in particular), but Cerebus is an evolving (and involving) series that defies instant judgement. With only fifteen issues still to come, it's clearly a significant achievement, though its scope, ambition and complexity make sampling difficult. It's designed as a massive novel, and although it's at an early stage, readers wanting to sample are best advised to begin with one of the later *Swords of Cerebus* collections.

The Cerebus Bi-Weekly (followed by 'High Society' and 'Church and State') series reprinted issues in order from 1 with additional (non-*Cerebus*-related) material in the form of single pages by a wide variety of creators. *Swords of Cerebus* reprinted the series in four-issue batches with new short stories by the likes of Marshall Rogers and Barry Windsor-Smith. These shorts were themselves collected in *Cerebus World Tour Book '95*. *Cerebus Zero* (1993) reprints the issues between books that are missing from the collections, which include up to 265.~NF

Recommended: Cerebus 5, 6, 26-138, 251-265

CEREBUS JAM

Aardvark-Vanaheim: *One-shot 1985*

Cerebus Jam was the result of Dave Sim's search for back-up strips for his first reprint series, *Swords of Cerebus*. An excellent cover by Bill Sienkiewicz precedes four stories by the usual team of Sim and Gerhard, with contributions of varying degrees from Scott and Bo Hampton, Murphy Anderson, Terry Austin and Will Eisner, who variously pencil and ink different parts. The strips themselves are designed to fit into Cerebus' continuity as part of Sim's 'Young Cerebus' series. Perhaps too much of a novelty to be really indispensable, but each strip is interesting, especially Terry Austin's Popeye homage and Eisner's Spirit tale.~NF

CERES CELESTIAL LEGEND

Viz: *6 issue miniseries ('Part 1') 2001*, 6 issue miniseries (Part 2) 2001-2002, 4 issue miniseries (Part 3) 2001-2002, 3 issues (Part 4) 2002*

Cute and feisty Aya Mikage and her twin brother Aki are not the typical teenagers they appear. On their sixteenth birthday they're summoned before their grandfather and the assembled family for a test. When shown a mummified hand Aya feels a strange energy within her and Aki's body erupts in a welter of bleeding wounds. The grandfather declares that the boy should be taken into protective custody, but Aya must be killed. She escapes, and survives a number of attempts on her life by her family, thanks to the hunky but mysterious Tôya. She discovers that she is the direct physical descendant of Ceres, the Celestial Maiden – a powerful figure from mythology – and finds allies in the form of other indirect descendants. As her life spirals out of control, her father murdered and her mother drugged and brainwashed into trying to kill her, Aya transforms into an enraged Goddess before being pacified and regressed by her friend and self appointed guardian Yuhi with a kiss. When Aki finally escapes and is reunited with Aya she transforms again, accusing him of being the one who shamed her and stole her Celestial robes, threatening to destroy all the Mikages. Once again Yuhi kisses her, banishing the Celestial threat. Now they must all work to solve the mystery of the Robes, defeat her murderous family, and placate Ceres before tragedy destroys them all. Convoluted but entertaining Shoujo (girl's story) tale from Yû Watase.~WW

CERTIFIED COOL

Moordam Comics/Slap Happy Comics: *One-shot 2000*

This is a precursor to Comic Library International, featuring many of the creators and some of the characters that would become the mainstay of that series. George Broderick Jr has Courageous Man and his sidekick, Spunky the Effervescent Prepubescent meet Flamenco Hombre in what was originally intended as 4 in his own series. Similarly, 'Magic Inkwell Comic Strip Theatre', Cayetano Garza's Krazy Kat homage, should have been 2 and the Craybaby episode by Art Baltazar, Levi Krause and Chris Yambar was due to be World's Funnest 2 and 3. Other CLI regulars include Chris Yambar (Mr. Beat, The Fire Breathing Pope), Mike Bocianowski (Chuck the Ugly *American*), and Jamie Cosley (Boy and Dog). Of the others, Kevin Thomas' The Spy Girls duel with Dr Vertigo, and Scott Roberts offers a strip about the cartoon show in Patty Cake, Birdy as well as an episode of his Miep and Patches in 'Comic Book Defenders'. These are all enjoyable enough, in a light-hearted, undemanding way.~NF

CHA CHA Graphic Novels

The Cha Cha graphic novel line differs from other lists of sex books in concentrating exclusively on period erotica. The period may be the future, as in Pourbet's portrait of a jaded porn film stud, *Sam Marlowe*, the least successful of the line, but is generally the past, even the relatively recent past of Communist Eastern Europe. Hugdebert's *Love, Eastern European Style* is three stories with a tad more subtlety than the title, featuring trademark detailed art. Nordhal's *The Damned of Mallande* concerns a peasant witnessing a ritual murder among the aristocracy leading to plenty full-frontal hammer horror. It's decently worked, as is Morale Stramaglia's *The Divine*, wherein a libidinous World War I spy and her assistant work their way across Europe to Turkey, which is delicately drawn with a grey wash.

The best work offered by Cha Cha is by Rotundo, although there's very much a detached quality to his cold narrative. Two volumes of *Ex Libris Eroticis* detail every form of sexual activity most could want to see, all rendered in a fine line that deliberately approximates Beardsley's stark black and white contrasts. A third volume was published by NBM. There are also two collaborations between Georges Levis and Francois Leroi, *Coco* dealing with a teenage girl growing up in a bordello in occupied Paris during World War II, and *Pearls of Love*, set in British occupied India. Levis' work is lovingly rendered without a line out of place, but curiously old-fashioned, and both stories suffer from jumps in the narrative.

There's a very traditional editorial outlook to the Cha Cha line, demanding a story incorporating the sex scenes rather than nothing but. In this manner it reflects the attitude of the European porn film as opposed to its American counterpart. Almost every book meets the target criteria, so you can shop with confidence.~WJ

CHAIN GANG WAR

DC: *12 issues 1993-1994*

One of the oddest ideas to have hit mainstream comics, and one can imagine writer John Wagner chuckling all the way through. Starting with the viewpoint that wealth enables too many criminals to evade justice, those criminals are abducted to be kept in dungeons for an indefinite period. The perpetrators come to be known as the Chain Gang. Action is prioritised, and the tension in the title comes from their abductions, the threat of discovery, holding a DC celebrity from 5, the ill-advised escape attempt and Batman dropping by (11). Occasionally the eccentric elements intrude too far into what's been established as a gritty title – the street gang that talks in rhyme – but overall it's a better than average read.~FP

Rex Miller CHAINGANG

Northstar: *2 issues 1990*

In 2 horror writer Rex Miller has a lot of famous novelists providing gushing praise for issue 1. He's either a forger on a grand scale, or possesses an impressive set of blackmail negatives. This is poorly plotted and paced material about a five hundred pound serial killer, given an extra dimension of offensiveness by virtue of the sloppy, but explicitly violent, art of Joe and Tim Vigil.~WJ

CHAINS OF CHAOS

Harris: *3 issue miniseries 1994-1995*

Extremely amateur effort at creating a unified universe for Harris' assorted characters. The Rook and Vampirella are the major players as chaos is personified to enslave a possible future Earth. It's badly drawn, poorly written and not worth anyone's time.~FP

CHAINSAW VIGILANTE

NEC: *3 issues 1994**

Spinning off from The Tick, the hero is a young man who has defeated all the other superheroes and forced them to retire, just as an overwhelming giant threat called the Tumour, quite literally, hits town. Stylish and a lot of fun but the series folded before any real momentum could be gained.~WW

CHALLENGERS OF THE UNKNOWN

DC: *Series one 87 issues 1958-1971 (1-77), 1973 (78-80), 1977-1978 (81-87), 8 issue limited series 1991, series two 18 issues 1997-1998*

After four tryouts in *Showcase* (6, 7, 11, 12), Jack Kirby's first 1950s group were promoted into their own title. The Challengers were four men: 'Ace' Morgan, pilot and astronaut, 'Prof.' Haley, a playboy scientist, 'Red' Ryan, adventurer and acrobat, and 'Rocky' Davis, an ex-Olympic wrestler. All had survived terrible accidents and saw themselves as living on borrowed time, so banded together to fight injustice in whatever guise it appeared.

This was Kirby's last major series before co-creating the *Fantastic Four*, and with the wonderful Wally Wood inking his pencils you can see Kirby's Marvel style emerging. Aliens ('Prisoners of Robot Planet' in 8), sorcery ('The Sorcerers of Forbidden Valley!' in 6), time-travel ('The Wizard of Time!' in 4) and the like were all strongly featured in 1-8. Kirby really was in his element here, as the concept gave his prodigious imagination full scope with a wide range of genres in which to set his stories, but alas, his destiny lay elsewhere. The artist most associated with the Challengers was his replacement, the much underrated Bob Brown, who drew skilful, action-packed stories. The writing was by Arnold Drake and Ed 'France' Herron, and later Bill Finger, all of whom forgot the adventure origins and tried to have the Challengers compete with superhero titles. The 1960s were the heyday of the Challengers. They were given new, brighter costumes, a supporting cast (including Cosmo, their space-pet!) and a bunch of recurring villains. It was these silly looking villains that anchored the series in its second-rate position. There was Multi-Man, a pint-sized adversary with pointed ears and an enlarged head; his creation Multi-Woman, a giant female robot; Kra, an alien robot; and Volcano Man, a tower of living lava. Yes, well, definitely different. These and others comprised the League of Challenger-Haters, and were usually imprisoned in the Challengers' own jail, with the team making supply trips once a month! So much for human rights! Given the superhero direction, the success of such series largely depends on imaginative adversaries (where would the *Batman* TV series be without those colourful characters?), and unbelievably the Challengers foes became ever more feeble. Along came Villo, Brainex and the Sponge-Man, all among the worst DC had to offer. Sadly, they all fitted well within the context of the stories. Of a poor bunch Drake wrote the best of the post-Kirby adventures, particularly 48's crossover with the *Doom Patrol* 102.

Towards the end of the 1960s mystery comics were slowly increasing in popularity, and with falling sales the Challengers were quick to change tack: from 70 they dealt mainly with the occult. The most notable issue is a Neal Adams drawn Deadman guest appearance in 74. The final three issues reprinted Jack Kirby material, as did the 1973 revival. Seek these out as they're much cheaper than the originals.

A successful revival in *Super-Team Family* 8-10 returned the Challengers to their title. The Challengers went back to their roots, with Steve Skeates and Gerry Conway producing interesting plots. There was nice artwork too, from Mike Nasser and Joe Rubinstein (reminiscent of Neal Adams' stint on the title), later replaced by the young Keith Giffen. This short run managed to squeeze in guest appearances from Swamp Thing (82-87), Deadman (84-87), and even Rip Hunter, Time Master (86), tying up lots of loose ends. You can't keep a good idea down, however, and the 1991 miniseries was very impressive. It took the angle that Challengers folklore was now a money-spinning venture. The Challengers lived in their headquarters in Challengers Mountain (introduced in the early 1960s) and a whole town, Challengerville, had been built nearby as a tourist attraction. Their quiet lives are shattered by one of Prof's experiments apparently gone disastrously wrong, exploding the mountain, killing Prof and his companion of many years, June Robbins, and half the town with them. The surviving Challengers go their separate ways. Ace becomes a mystical guru and journeys to the Amazon to seek a forgotten tribe; Red develops a blood thirst, becoming a vigilante and then a mercenary; while Rocky becomes a movie star and an alcoholic to boot. Their lives are still intricately connected, though, and the catalysts for their reuniting are a reporter, Harold Moffet, and a supernatural presence unleashing itself into the world, causing horrific acts. The cause of the latter disappoints, but otherwise writer Jeph Loeb triumphs with his characterisation. While the cast always had distinctive personalities, Loeb makes them very human and believable, which was no mean feat. Artist Tim Sale is also to be credited for giving each of the Challengers an individual look, whereas previously they all resembled musclebound heroes. A follow-up to this series from the same creative team was promised, but never materialised.

Nevertheless, the 1997 series was another good effort. Written by Steven Grant and Len Kaminski, the more prominent pencillers included John Paul Leon, George Freeman, and Mike Zeck. A new, more diverse, team of Challengers is introduced: Marlon Corbett a pilot, Clay Brody a race car driver, Brenda Ruskin a theoretical physicist (we're definitely in the modern era here) and Kenn Kawa a computer software designer (yep). There's an obvious *X-Files* influence, as the balance of nature is changing with lots of bizarre phenomena occurring, and mind monsters and zombies turning up, although it's not as clichéd as you would think. An origin is presented in 4, and 5 heralds the return of the original Challenger Rocky Davis, who becomes a regular supporting character, while the rest of the old gang return for 'Last Days' in 7-9. They also star in decent retro story in 16. With a few exceptions the moody colouring captured the right feel, but the series didn't fit well with the mainstream DC universe (despite Batman appearing in 11-12). Perhaps harsher storylines under a Vertigo label may have offered more success. Nevertheless this is an intelligent series, which did well to last 18 issues.~HY

Recommended: 1-8, 48, 74, Limited series 1-8

CHAMBER

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 2002*

Generation X-er and X-Man Chamber takes leave of his genetically enhanced compatriots to join a normal university, only to become embroiled in a seeming hate crime when a campus pro-Mutant tolerance group is fire-bombed. Tolerable mystery yarn that is a little different from the usual X-fare.~WW

CHAMBER OF CHILLS

Marvel: *25 issues 1972-1976*

Beginning with originated material, most notably 'Brak the Barbarian', by 8 this had become yet another home for 1950s reprint shorts well past their sell-by date.~FP

CHAMBER OF DARKNESS

Marvel: *8 issues, 1 Annual 1969-1970*

Instead of shunting out their 1950s reprints, Marvel commissioned new stories in the same style from their then current freelancers, with often interesting results. Roy Thomas and Barry Smith's 'Sword and Sorcerers' in 4 was the first Marvel Conan strip in all but name, and you'll find Neal Adams writing for Marie Severin in 2. Reprints started creeping in with 6, and 8 only contained one new story. The title switched to *Monsters on the Prowl* with 9.~WJ

CHAMPION SPORTS

DC: *3 issues 1973-1974*

An obvious attempt to make a fast buck out of the sporty holiday seasons. Was it really worth the effort? A waste of Joe Simon and Jerry Grandenetti's abilities. Read *Prez* instead.~HY

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* Available in a collected edition

CHAMPIONS

Marvel: *17 issues 1975-1978*

The somewhat unlikely union of Angel, Iceman, Ghost Rider, Hercules and Black Widow was formed after they foiled one of Pluto's more obscure schemes, attacking the University of California in Los Angeles to capture Venus and Hercules. Marvel's first West Coast supergroup was established, in theory, as 'The super-team to help the common man'. In practice this rarely transpired. Tony Isabella's insipid seven-issue stint was overturned by Bill Mantlo on the scripting reins from 8 and John Byrne on pencils from 11. Their solid superhero fare was rudely interrupted by cancellation with 17. The dissolution of the Champions was tidied up in *Spectacular Spider-Man* 17-18.~APS

CHAMPIONS

Eclipse: *6 issues 1986-1987*

Taken from the role-playing game of the same name, this simple-minded superhero adventure is more interesting for two ancillary points than for anything actually contained in the story. Firstly it introduced the work of Carol Lay to a mainstream audience, and secondly Marvel initiated a lawsuit against the publishers for use of the term 'Champions', which they eventually lost.~HS

CHANGE COMMANDER GOKU

Antarctic: *5 issue miniseries 1993, 4 issue miniseries 1996-1997*

This is the tale of Gokuru, a teenage orphan whose parents died in a suspicious plane crash. When his girlfriend is attacked by mysterious dark warriors the collar he's worn around his neck since the accident takes control and drags him to his father's secret lab where he finds a super powered battlesuit that transforms him into Commander Goku. In the second miniseries all pretence of a story devolves into meaningless, if mercifully brief fights, and cheesy humour: he hooks up the battlesuit to a microwave to give it time-travel capacity, there are "accidental" nude peaks of Goku's sister Hani in the shower, and silly gags about cyborgs and Japanese fandom. Mediocre manga action from Ippongi Bang.~WW

CHANNEL ZERO

Image: *5 issues 1997-1998*, one-shot ('Dupe') 1999*

Brian Wood's unrelenting exploration of a US society enslaved by its media. Jennie 2.5's pirate TV station seeks to inflame and reinform the people of a totalitarian, Christian, right-wing state, where apathy is the greatest enemy. Can video anarchy succeed in a struggle where the very act of fighting the system makes you a part of the system, and where anti-status quo broadcasts have the highest viewing figures and therefore are those most sought after by the commercial infrastructure for their ad spots? Genuinely challenging and intriguing, with an inspired use of typography to augment the multi-media theme of the story. Although paced slowly, and with a tendency towards pomposity, it's still very readable. 4, originally intended as a special, is seen through the eyes of a Cleaner, one of the State morality police, and 5 tells of Jennie 2.5's world travels after the surprise ending of the first story-arc. 'Dupe' is a collection of short pieces about some of the not-so-ordinary people that inhabit the underclass of the New America. Clever stuff. AIT/Planet Lar publish the collection along with a 'design book' titled *Public Domain*.~WW

THE CHAOS EFFECT

Valiant: *4 issue miniseries 1994-1995*

A peculiar numbering system provides issues signified by alpha and omega symbols, which are the bookends to this Valiant Universe crossover. It begins when Solar starts to fade away and only Dr Mirage can restore his power before villains Master Darque or Caldone and Noir can take it for themselves. The two issues designated Epilogue 1 and 2 concern a Magnus lost in time attempting to find his mother, who's in hiding from the Harbinger foundation. Appalling drivel.~NF

CHAOS! Quarterly

Chaos!: *One-shot (Chaos! Bible) 1995, 3 issues 1995-1996, one-shot (Chaos! Chronicles) 2000*

The *Chaos! Quarterly* anthology provided space for new or minor Chaos! characters and told stories that filled-in gaps or acted as preludes to upcoming series. Cremator is the only character in all three issues, others include Lady Death (1), Purgatori (1), Lady Demon (2) and Crippler (3). Most of the strips are written by Brian Pulido, with artwork from Steven Hughes (1, 2), Paul Pelletier (1, 3), Leonardo Jimenez (2, 3), Mike Okamoto (2) and Steven Butler (3) amongst others. There's a fun tale of two demons ending up at the wrong debutante ball and causing a massacre amongst the mob attendees in 2, but overall this is a title for already dedicated fans of the Chaos! universe. A Chaos Bible has character biographies, a checklist and two short strips featuring Evil Ernie and Lucifer, whilst *Chaos Chronicles* contains a particularly useful history of the Chaos! universe explaining the links between different Chaos! titles and checklists of series and appearances.~NF

CHAPEL

Image/Extreme: *2 issue microseries 1995, 7 issues 1995-1996*
Awesome: *1 issue 1997*

Those expecting a pious Presbyterian character are liable to be disappointed by this big brute, as are those expecting any attempt at a plot. A rambunctious type, Chapel has been returned from the dead to bash heads, and does so incessantly. The microseries relates how Chapel was the first Spawn, but don't be fooled, both that and Spawn's guest appearances in 5-6 are dreadful. The Awesome issue is no better.~WJ

CHARLEMAGNE

Defiant: *5 issues 1994*

In 1973, 13-year-old Charlie Smith hitch-hikes to Vietnam to search for his older brother, who is missing in action. Two years later, against all odds, he finds him, but as a tragic after-effect of their meeting, Charlie spends eighteen years in a coma, and awakens in 1993 with strength beyond that of mortal men. Ignoring the silly origin and the religious overtones, there's little to commend this series beyond some early Adam Pollina artwork.~HS

CHARLEY'S WAR

Titan: *2 Volumes 1983, 1986*

Given the brief of creating a World War I strip for British adventure comic *Battle*, Pat Mills wanted it reality-based, but without relying on officers' accounts, feeling they were too distanced from the horrors experienced by the ordinary soldier. Researching the idea he only found four memoirs written by troops who'd survived the trenches, and based *Charley's War* on these. In doing so he created the most evocative anti-war strip ever seen in British comics, more used to over-the-top Jerry-bashers. Artist Joe Colquhoun was very much from the old school, providing clear, detailed, expressive and well researched art in three-page segments. Charley begins as a naïve teenager arriving on the Somme, and Mills' chosen method of narration is the trivialities of his cheery correspondence to and from home – hoping the garden fence will be fixed – contrasted with illustrations of his day-to-day existence. It's a horrific coupling as the genial Charley gradually becomes aware of the realities of trench warfare, yet disguises the ghastly events he witnesses from his parents. In the hands of lesser creators this could all be very worthy but dull, but Mills writes involving stories, and Charley's personality is very engaging. It's a shame the remainder of the strip, with an older and wiser Charley experiencing World War II, is uncollected, as subversive history lessons have rarely been so well produced.~FP
Recommended: 1, 2

The Legion of CHARLIES

Last Gasp: *One-shot 1971*

One of the most demented comics of all time, Tom Veitch and Greg Irons' powerful mix of the My Lai massacre and

* Available in a collected edition

the Manson Family killings was extreme, even by underground standards. The spirit of Charles Manson takes over the minds of Vietnam vets, who become cannibals and eventually take over the world, digesting the likes of Spiro Agnew, Chairman Mao, The Pope and George Harrison along the way. Any comic that ends with Richard Nixon trying to eat the head Charlie deserves a place in any collection, although it should go without saying that some may be offended.~DAR
Recommended

CHARLTON BULLSEYE

Charlton: *Series one 5 issues 1975-1976, series two 10 issues 1981-1982*

The first incarnation of *Charlton Bullseye* was a black and white house magazine, which featured news and articles about Charlton's comics, as well as unpublished strips from their archives. Other than an average kung-fu strip in 3 there were terrific Captain Atom stories by Steve Ditko in 1 and 2, a Jeff Jones short in 1, John Byrne's 'Doomsday + 1' in 4 and 5, E-Man in 4, and, best of all, The Question by Alex Toth in 5.

The second series was a catch-all anthology title that ran everything from superheroes (1) and funny animals (2, 6) to horror and sword-and-sorcery. The twist was that these were by and large drawn by fans for no money, so the quality was enormously variable. Of the run, the fantasy / science fiction-themed 3 is the best, its highlight being a strip by the largely unknown Ian Carr. The only features to move on to greater success were *Neil the Horse* (2) and *Thunderbunny* (6, 10).~DAR
Recommended: Series one 1, 2, 4, 5

CHARLTON PREMIERE

Charlton: *1 issue (19) 1967, 4 issues 1967-1968*

Charlton were without a doubt the most conservative comic publishing company of the 1950s and 1960s, chugging along on their identikit romance, war, mystery and hot-rod titles. Oddly, though, their concepts for a try-out title were far more imaginative than anything from other companies, except in 4, whose 'Unlikely Tales' could have slotted into any of the Charlton mystery comics. 1 introduces two new heroes and a very ordinary kid gang, the Tyro Team. Far better was The Shape by Grass Green, off-the-wall humour capturing the spirit of the original Plastic Man more convincingly than DC's 1960s series. The issue is rounded out with Pat Boyette's Spookman, in which a moonstone transforms archaeologist Aaron Piper into a vengeful puritan time-traveller. It's mad. 3's Sinestro, Boy Fiend is even nuttier, a satanic child who battles Charlton headliners Blue Beetle and the Peacemaker. The standout issue, though, is 2's 'Children of Doom'. Through circumstances detailed in the letters page Denny O'Neil (as Sergius O'Shaughnessy) wrote the story on an extremely short deadline, and came up with an inventive tale of a doomsday device constructed to trigger and destroy Earth on detecting atomic power. It's intended to hold the planet to ransom and deliver a new age of peace, but conventional warfare instead devastates the planet, transforming humanity. Pat Boyette is the artist, using a startlingly effective mixture of toned black and white art and colour for some sequences, again a process determined by the short deadline. Disjointed and rushed, it's nonetheless a fascinating story with a point to make, which holds up after thirty-five years. The preceding single issue 19 continued the numbering and content of Marine War Heroes, but was re-titled for reasons best known to Charlton.~FP
Recommended: 2

CHARM SCHOOL

Slave Labor: *8 issues + 2000 to date*

On the edges of everyday life lies the twilight town of Little Salem, where Bunny Baker, a teenage witch of great potential power, resides. The attempts of Bunny's well-meaning aunts to set her up with a nice young warlock are derailed when she meets Dean, a vampire lesbian drag-king biker, and falls deeply in love for the first time in her life. Dean and Bunny seem set to ride off into the moonset for a happy-ever-after, when along sashays Fairer Than, a girl who stands out from the crowd even in Little Salem; half-faerie, half-dragon, and, it would appear, almost totally irresistible. Is it love, or enchantment, that draws Bunny to Fairer Than? If the latter, will her own powers be strong enough to resist the lure? And what is Dean going to do about it? Elizabeth Watasin has created a delightful series. Emphatically not an 'Adults Only' book, it's a sweet romantic triangle with a wry twist that most readers – assuming they don't have issues with same-sex flirtation – will enjoy. Little substance, but bags of style.~HS
Recommended: 1-8

CHASE

DC: *10 issues (1-9 + 1,000,000) 1998*

A first reaction is, "oh, the old government agent working on cases involving costumed heroes plot". Not so, though. The special agent is Cameron Chase, who has no time for heroes in tights, yet she herself seems to be developing powers. Chase isn't a sympathetic character; cool, calculating and doesn't give a damn. The series works despite this because D. Curtis Johnson's plots are novel and intriguing, and the moody artwork by J. H. Williams III and Mick Gray captures exactly the right tone. Extra points of enjoyment for regular DC readers are many references to and appearances by characters both major (Batman in 7-8) and minor (Suicide Squad in 2-3). It's a shame DC weren't prepared to recognise quality over initially slow sales for a series that had all the ingredients to make it a fan-favourite with a little push.~HY
Recommended: 1-3

CHASSIS

Millennium: *2 issues 1996-1997*
Hurricane: *Series one 1 issue 1998, series two 4 issues (1-3, 0) 1998-1999*
Image: *5 issues 1999-2000*

Artist William O'Neil has endured a stop/start career with this look at the life of rocket-car racer Chassis in an advanced alternate 1940s. There's a strong cast of characters involved in behind the scenes machinations in what amounts to glamourous soap opera, albeit drawn in an appealing cartoon style. Joshua Dysart writing from the start of the second Hurricane series ups the quality and brings a diversity to the storytelling and some imaginative ideas – Adolf Hitler as comic artist anyone? He also realises the difficulty of conveying the excitement of car races in comics, so his stories are more character driven. Issue 0 is a who's who with a story set before the regular run, and the first Hurricane issue concludes the story begun at Millennium.~WJ
Recommended: Image 1-4

THE CHECKERED DEMON

Last Gasp: *3 issues 1977-1979*

S. Clay Wilson saw out the 1970s the same way he started them, continuing his apparent crusade to offend anyone who came into contact with his comics. Insulting racist caricatures abound, and for Wilson sex seems inextricably linked with degradation or violence beyond a point where it can feasibly be defended as ironic. For some this will be of no concern, and for them the pint-sized Checkered Demon fights and fucks slavers, bikers and aliens. Oddly, 1 and 3 are printed in landscape fashion, while 2 is the traditional comic format.~FP

CHECKMATE

DC: *33 issues 1988-1991*

Begun as a feature in *Action Comics* during 1987, this is sister to the long underwear agency Suicide Squad, and there are also links with Vigilante where we first met Harry Stein and the mysterious woman known as Black Thorn. Stein and his assistant Harvey Bullock are ex Gotham cops running an agency under review after the failure and excesses of Adrian Chase and Christopher Smith, better known as Vigilante and

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* Available in a collected edition

Peacemaker. The agents are organised in ranks corresponding to chess pieces: bishops like Bullock are executives, rooks run missions, knights are active operatives whilst pawns provide support. The distinctive knights' uniforms tend to erase the personalities of the individual knights making the suit the star. Adversaries include a Ninja cult called The Blackadders, a rogue battle-suited Bishop, Andre Mazarin and Victor Cypher. Several other established characters make regular appearances including Sarge Steel and Valentina Vostock. 'The Janus Directive' occupies 15-19 and runs though numbered chapters of *Suicide Squad* and *Manhunter*, with all working together against the threat of world domination by Kobra. Later continued stories are 21-22, which features Black Thorn's long-awaited application to join Checkmate, 'Peaceful Knights' guest-starring Peacemaker in 23-24 and the swansong 'Patriotic Knights' in 31-33.

If Paul Kupperberg's plot-constipated scripts aren't enough to put you off, the crowded pages are drawn by Steve Erwin with inker Al Vey, for most of the run. There's a motley roster of fill-in artists among which the short pieces by Don Heck in 4, James Fry in 5 plus Tod Smith, Paris Cullins and Eduardo Barreto in 14 are luxuries. Most of 1-20 feature fine covers by Gil Kane, but the insides belong in the bottom of a birdcage.~SW

The Complete CHEECH WIZARD

Rip-Off: *4 issues 1986-1987*

To some people Vaughn Bodé was the misunderstood genius of the underground comics scene, using gentle humour to point out the evils of the world. To others he was that spaced-out cartoonist most notable for auto-asphyxiating himself while pulling on his pork. If you like his squat, truncated anatomy and doe-eyed women you'll probably want to get your hands on these druggy collections reprinting the original *National Lampoon* strips and collecting various underground newspaper appearances and colour strips, plus some new material. Cheech Wizard looks like a mage's hat on legs who, assisted by his bumbling and easily tricked toad apprentice, dedicates his life to doing nothing much. If you don't find his cutesy characters appealing you may be less enthusiastic.~FJ

CHEERLEADERS FROM HELL

Caliber: *One-shot 1989*

There's innovation in the production of this B-movie pastiche by preceding it with cinema posters advertising other Caliber titles and including an intermission for the full cinematic experience. Then there are ninjas, demons, and plenty of buxom beauties. To be read with a bucket of popcorn by your side and bucket of coke (either variety) on your lap, but not to be taken seriously.~WJ

THE CHEQUE, MATE

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1992*

Collection of out-and-out funny stuff from Eddie Campbell, drawn in a wonderfully loose way, with thick lines and bold scribbles. Highlights include Professor Bean's attempts to demonstrate the principles of comedy to a loutish audience and the 'Great Wasters From History Not Counting Dave Sim' series of one-pagers.~FJ

Recommended

CHERRY

Last Gasp: *22 issues + 1987 to date*

Titled *Cherry Poptart* for its first two issues until an injunction from Kelloggs dissuaded writer/artist Larry Welz, this title is deliberately drawn in a style imitating the innocuous *Archie* comics line. Don't be fooled. Cherry is a very different kettle of flesh altogether. Eternally 'just 18', her voracious sexual appetites – and those of her divorcee mother and various nubile friends – are explicitly depicted in numerous encounters from the mildly salacious to the outright bizarre. An isolated issue of *Cherry* is fun; it is, after all, kind of a head-trip to see what appears to be the squeaky-clean *Archie* gang having it off in various ways. After a while, though, its perky bone-headedness becomes irritating, and reading multiple issues will make your brains dribble out of your ears. There are four issues of a companion title, *Cherry's Jubilee*, launched in the late 1980s. It's very much more of the same, except largely by creators other than Welz.~HS

CHERYL BLOSSOM

Archie: *3 issue miniseries 1995, 3 issue miniseries 1996, 1 Special ('Goes Hollywood') 1996, 3 issue miniseries 1996-1997), 37 issues (1997-2001)*

Flame-haired Cheryl and her twin brother Jason were created by Dan DeCarlo to stir up trouble in the *Archie* comics in 1981, as time and familiarity had mellowed the series' resident "bad kids" – Reggie and Veronica – to the point where they weren't generating enough conflict. What with trying to persuade Archie to drink, or, in Cheryl's case, an attempt at topless sunbathing, the Blossom kids certainly did create a stir, and after a dozen or so appearances, were withdrawn from the stories following complaints from parents.

However, when Betty and Veronica were deemed to need a third rival for Archie's affections in 1993's 'Love Showdown' storyline, Cheryl was returned, and this time she caught on. Maybe times had changed, or maybe the parents were all looking the other way. Following three miniseries featuring Cheryl's thespian aspirations, she was rewarded with her own title, brother Jason in tow. Things went swimmingly until Dan DeCarlo took legal action claiming ownership of certain characters, Cheryl and Jason among them, whom he claimed to never have received proper credit or payment for. The other bones of contention, Sabrina and Josie, were longer-established, and the subjects of high profile media deals at the time, but Cheryl could be – and was – easily excised from the Archie 'universe'. Her comic was cancelled, she was depicted "leaving Riverdale forever", and as the final insult, her solo stories were rewritten and redrawn, in the digest reprints, to star somebody called "Ginger Lopez" instead, just, it seems, to prevent the now deceased DeCarlo's estate having any further claim on the royalties. Which is a pity, because Cheryl's self-obsession, vanity and peevishness were a pleasantly tart counterpoint to the lovey-dovey Archie ambience.~HS

CHESTY SANCHEZ

Antarctic: *2 issues 1995-1996, one-shot ('96 Page Super Special') 1999*

A kitsch adventure starring fictitious Mexican wrestling legend Maria 'Chesty' Sanchez. She is talked into coming out of retirement to do good deeds in the name of her sponsor The Frijoles Del Oro Company and teams with Pedro 'Torpedo' Alvarez who's learned to use flatulence as a weapon. The incomplete story was concluded in the 1999 special. An expert on masked wrestling in Mexico, Steve Ross's scripts aren't great on pacing but the jokes and plot work well within the bounds of the comic's mondo style. The initial artwork by Scott Michaud is close to underground standard, and the finishing by Jayne Wu improves page by page, although the final chapter looks rushed by comparison.~SW

CHEVAL NOIR

Dark Horse: *50 issues 1989-1994*

Long-running black and white anthology that was instrumental in introducing several important European creators to an English-speaking audience. *Cheval Noir* mixed familiar names such as Moebius ('Man From Ciguri' 26-37*) with unknown stylists like Didier Comes ('Tree Heart', a symbolic folk-tale-like narrative illustrated in a cursive style relying on heavy blacks and decorative mark-making, 24-31). The stories were run in chapters, with up to seven different narratives in the early issues, although later on the book switched to larger chunks of three or even two. *Cheval Noir* travelled far from *Heavy Metal*'s science-fiction and adventure remit, and included detective, fantasy and, for want of a better term, mainstream stories.

Important creators who received exposure include: Matthias Schuiten (on his own for Fever in 'Urbicand' in 1-6 and with long-time collaborator Peeters on the extraordinary, visionary architectural tale 'The Tower' in 9-14); Jacques Tardi, with his blunt-lined detective tales staring the single-minded Adele Blanc-Sec ('Adele and the Beast' 1-4, 'Demon of the Eiffel Tower' 5-8, 'The Mad Scientist' 14-18, 'Mummies On Parade' 19-23 and 'Adieu Brindavoine' 24-27), plus his superb evocation of New York, 'The Roach Killer' (10-12); and Cosey, whose complex 'Voyage To Italy' appeared in 13-27, followed by 'In Search of Peter Pan' in 31-39. Phil Elliott's mildly humourous 'Post-Apocalypse' strips (most issues from 12) about two soldiers wandering the wasteland after a war were later reprinted as a Slave Labor one-shot. Although compromised by the quality of the paper and the squashing and stretching necessary to reproduce the artwork on comic-book-sized pages, *Cheval Noir* features much fine work.~FJ

Recommended: 1, 10-12, 24-31

Star Wars CHEWBACCA

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 2000**

Two or three well-drawn eulogistic anecdotes about the brave Wookiee per issue, framed as interviews with his intimates by 'droids Threepio and Artoo. Could've been fun if it had been mostly grunting roaring and whimpering, but unfortunately, much is "translated from Shyriiwook". Pompous sentimental muck well worthy of George Lucas himself. For Warsies only.~GK

CHEYENNE KID

Charlton: *92 issues (8-99) 1957-1973*

The first seven issues went under the title *Wild Frontier*, and despite the Al Williamson art in some very early issues and John Severin (at his most unimaginative), this was a wholly undistinguished title. The one notable feature was the 'Wander' back-up strip in 66-87. It featured a galactic merchant from Sirius 5 stranded in Earth's Wild West. It was written by Denny 'Sergius O'Shaughnessy' O'Neil and drawn by Jim Aparo, who both had their tongues firmly planted in their cheeks. It's the best Western satire this side of *Bat Lash*.~SW

CHIAROSCURO

DC/Vertigo: *10 issue limited series 1995-1996*

A beautiful but duplicitous artist's model, Salai, vamps his way through Renaissance Italy ruining the lives of Leonardo DaVinci, Isabella D'Este and sundry others. Tawdry but readable series reduces the life of one of the greatest artists to the level of a made-for-TV movie, but it's the guys who have the pouty lips and big hair.~HS

CHIAROSCURO

Meanwhile Studios: *4 issues 2001-2002*

It might be imagined that anyone motivated enough to publish their own comic has something to say. Wrong. If anything this is about lack of motivation, but even the decent cartooning can't support almost zero plot.~FP

CHICAGO

Viz: *1 volume ('Book of Self') + 2002 to date*

In a futuristic Tokyo, the bay has been landfilled to create more living room. During the biggest earthquake for more than a century, the new terrain liquefies and the emergency services go in. When Rei and Uozumi's rescue squad discovers a deadly secret in the ruins, it leads to the whole unit's destruction and the two survivors on the run and desperate to fight back, but the only clue and hope they have is the South-Shinjuku bar called Chicago. Collected from Amimerica Extra, Shojo (Girls comics) creator Yumi Tamura's tale of deadly conspiracy is an above average thriller that shows great potential.~WW

A CHILD'S LIFE

Frog, Ltd: *1 volume 1998*

This collects the comic strips of Phoebe Gloeckner seen in various anthologies from the mid-1970s, together with a large quantity of new material. When the reprinted strips are removed from isolation and placed into context, they form a horrifying document of an abused childhood leading to later problems. With Gloeckner's cherubic people and easy on the eye illustrations, this seems an easy read, but it's very much the sugar-coated pill. Horrors lurk on most pages and any rational reader will wish they could reach back into the past to batter some of the people whose abuse is detailed. There are moments of poignancy and humour, but few are the occasions when a smile isn't followed by shock. From a purely artistic point of view, it's interesting to see Gloeckner's art develop to the point where there are strips lacking flourishes, and fleshed out via tones. The book also includes poster illustrations, and amusing medical cutaways of sexual situations. Some people will be offended by the high sexual content, but they'd be better focussing their anger on the atrocities. Don't be put off by the back-cover copy, which makes an eminently readable book sound a pretentious indulgence.

If you've read *A Child's Life*, much of the same ground is covered less effectively, but in greater detail in the illustrated novel *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*. The approach of combining text, illustrations and comic strips is a successful experiment, and while incorporating some of her earliest work, the new strips, and particularly illustrations, produced for this volume are very good indeed. To avoid repetition, though, read one or the other.~WJ

Recommended

CHILD'S PLAY

Innovation: *3 issue miniseries 1990*, 3 issue miniseries (Child's Play II) 1991*, 3 issue miniseries (Child's Play III) 1991*, 5 issue miniseries (Child's Play: The Series) 1991-1992*

Uninventive and inattentive adaptations of the controversial movies starring Chuckie, everyone's favourite killer doll. The fourth series is original (using the term pretty damn loosely) horror tales. Gore galore, but little imagination.~HS

CHILDHOOD'S END

Image: *1 issue 1997*

Planned as five issues, only one appeared chronicling an hour in a playground, and its lack of focus in isolation means it's not worth picking up now. Unless, that is, you want to see some fine, if occasionally stiff, naturalistic art from J. Calafiore.~WJ

CHILDREN OF FIRE

Fantagor: *3 issue miniseries 1988*

An odd science-fiction tale from Richard Corben tying in to his Den universe eventually but which is not representative of Corben at his best. For completists only.~NF

CHILDREN WITH GLUE

Blackbird: *1 volume 1991*

A ninety-eight page black and white paperback collection of Shannon Wheeler's allegedly "nationally acclaimed" strip 'Tooth And Justice' and single panel 'Calaboose' gags from *The Daily Californian* newspaper, and a few longer strips in the back. There are several hundred in all, and all presumably meant to be funny. About four are. Unless perhaps one has never been or met a student, or taken drugs (or too much coffee) or met people who do, or been in an unsuccessful relationship, and cannot tell bad drawing that never gets any better from good. Despite what it says on the back, this is one of the least weird, profound, and humourous works ever published.~GK

The CHILDREN'S CRUSADE

DC/Vertigo: *2 issues 1993*

The children of the village of Flaxdown have gone missing, and Rowland and Paine, dead schoolboy detectives, are hired by the sister of one of the missing children. Writer Neil Gaiman weaves in the historical Children's Crusade, the legends of the Pied Piper, and an intriguing potpourri of myths, legends and nursery rhymes to lead us into Vertigo's first and only Annual crossover. Succeeding chapters take place in *Black Orchid* Annual 1, *Animal Man* Annual 1, *Swamp Thing* Annual 7, *Doom Patrol* Annual 2, and *Arcana* Annual 1, featuring the young heroes or supporting characters of those titles, as they discover the Free Country, where children rule, before concluding in *Children's Crusade* 2. Chris Bachalo and Mike Barreiro provide lavish detailed opening-chapter artwork, and the opening scenes in Flaxdown convey a fine sense of unease. Unfortunately, the inferior quality of some of the in-between chapters means the whole crossover cannot be recommended.~HS

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* Available in a collected edition

CHILI

Marvel: *26 issues, 1 Annual 1969-1973*

Millie The Model's redhead rival gets her own title, which looks eerily like Millie's – not surprisingly, since the stories were pulled from the same inventory. Early issues show off Ms Storm at her motor-mouthed bitchy best and are quite fun, but the comic rapidly becomes all reprint from 12.~HS

CHILLER

Marvel/Epic: *2 issue microseries 1993**

Brian Marx is a practitioner of chaos magic using everyday objects like coins, biros and playing cards to activate spells. He's hired by a consortium to capture an escaped demon Xcron, but soon begins to question his employers' motives. Enter TV anchor-woman Tracy King who finds herself reluctantly assisting Marx. Her personality regresses back to evil 18th century magician Aldo Roth, the man who originally imprisoned Xcron. It all proves to be a game with Marx playing the many untrustworthy players against each other. Author James Hudnall's idea of characters in street clothes fighting evil with a keyring is about as exciting as waiting for an overdue bus, and Roth's disgust at finding himself in a black woman's body is tasteless to say the least. John Ridgway applies his usual articulate linework to the tale but the colour is flat and fittingly unimaginative. After 122 pages that bus still hasn't come. Marx was later incorporated into Hudnall's *Espers*.~SW

Giant-Size CHILLERS

Marvel: *One-shot 1974, 3 issues 1975*

The first series was retitled *Giant-Size Dracula* from 2 onwards. This second series mainly reprints 1950s horror shorts. 3 has more recent reprints with art by Barry Smith and Berni Wrightson.~APS

Disney's CHIP 'N' DALE Rescue Rangers

Disney: *19 issues 1990-1991*

Chip 'n' Dale are chipmunks created in 1943 as a foil for Mickey Mouse's dog, Pluto and came to trouble Donald Duck as well. To tie-in with a TV series they renounced their mischievous ways and decided to make the world a better place for other animals. 1-2 adapt the TV special explaining how the Rescue Rangers came to be, as Chip 'n' Dale try to help detective Drake and his dog framed for a theft by Aldrin Klordane and Fat Cat (a cat). Along the way, they team up with Monterey Jack (a cheese hunter and mouse), Zipper (a housefly) and Gadget (an inventive female mouse), who remain their companions for the rest of the series. 3-6 have Pi-Rats, shipwrecks, a mysterious island and the return of Fat Cat, who's the subject of two of the three short stories in 7. In 8-12 they attempt to return home, having adventures in Florida, Hollywood and the Pacific Northwest on the way.

To this point, most stories have been written by Scott Saavedra (except 7) and drawn, except 9, by Argentinian artist Hector Saavedra (no relation). New writers, Tom and Mary Bierbaum, provide torrential rains and kidnapped cats and dogs for 13 and a trip to the Swiss Alps to meet Jacques de Brie, Continental Mouse of Mystery in 17, both drawn by Saavedra. Both Saavedras are back for the introduction of three new crime-fighting groups in 15-16, while 18-19 is set in a haunted Scottish castle, concealing funds stolen from an orphanage. 14 stands alone as it features three strips reprinted from *Le Journal de Mickey*, by Francois Corteggiani and Maximino. This is a fun, if unexceptional, series, with a sense of continuity and some hints of romance to offset the comedy antics.~NF

CHIRALITY

CPM: *18 issues 1997-1998**

In the near future, mankind has been ravaged by a parasite that turns humans into machines. A group of survivors attempt to restore Earth's Gaia mainframe, which can destroy the mechanical virus. Ostensibly a straightforward science fiction adventure, Satoshi Urushihara's storytelling is suffused with elements of Shojo manga, making this as much a romance as anything else. In this respect it suffers from the overused symbolism supplanting characterisation, but the two attractively drawn female leads (often naked, it must be said), help make for an enjoyable romp.~NF

C.H.I.X.

Image: *One-shot 1998, one-shot ('That Time Forgot') 1998*

When Good Girl's pet Piguana is apparently kidnapped she sets out to save him by retrieving four pieces of a device (the bomb) that he's been attached to, even though it turns out that's she's actually building the bomb as she goes along. The second issue has her accidentally rounding up superheroines from the past when her aged mentor sends her back in time, supposedly to prevent the bomb going off. This is a sort of 'round robin' comic with chapters written and illustrated separately by Terry Dodson, Matt Haley, Aaron Lopresti, Ron Randall and Adam Warren amongst others. It's little more than an excuse to draw superheroines in a good-girl style although it has a modicum of panache and wit. Though at least a third issue was expected, this joins the long list of incomplete Image titles.~NF

CHLOE

Chrome Fetus: *1 Graphic Novel 2002*

Seventeen year old Chloe is an introverted loner, shunned by her classmates, largely incommunicative, yet with precocious eccentricities such as a love of cigars. When her dog goes missing she stumbles into circumstances that she doesn't understand, but that lead to her transformation and fulfillment. Hans Rickheit's story is profoundly disturbing, dragging the reader into areas they'd probably rather not visit, and containing extremely unsettling sexual imagery. It has the dreamlike quality of Jim Woodring's comics, but with little of the comfort, and stands apart as something almost unique and very memorable. Rickheit's previous minicomics work is also disquieting, and can be found at www.chromefetus.com.~FP

Recommended

CHOICES

Angry Isis: *One-shot 1990*

Pro-choice benefit book intended to combat anti-abortion legislation in the USA. Over fifty contributors, including Howard Cruse, Roberta Gregory, Ramona Fradon, Reed Waller and Kate Worley. Considering the stories are largely one or two pages there are very few misfires and a high number of powerful, intelligent tales.~HS

Recommended

The New Adventures of CHOLLY AND FLYTRAP

Marvel/Epic: *3 issue miniseries 1990-1991*

Cholly is a humanoid of indistinct persuasion behind his airman goggles and jacket, and Flytrap is a giant, mute, obese albino of enormous strength. They roam a rough fantasy world and do what they must to survive. This series has the pair caught between two warring mobs, one of whom has captured Flytrap for training as a boxer. Arthur Suydam's art has progressed since the *Epic Illustrated* shorts that introduced the pair (and which are collected in graphic novel form). Sadly it isn't good enough to recommend what is basically one long shaggy dog story with inventive visual asides.~WJ

CHOPPER Earth, Wind & Fire

Fleetway/Quality: *2 issue microseries 1991*

The skysurfer Chopper was popular enough in Judge Dredd tales to spin off into a solo series, presented here by Dredd

(and Chopper) creator John Wagner and artist John McCrea. Now living in Australia, Chopper's peaceful existence is threatened by large-company shenanigans. Wagner has some fun parodying the laid-back Australian attitude to life, and McCrea's painted art is a far cry from his Hitman style, although equally good. It all adds up to a diverting read, with the benefit of sharp reproduction.~FP
Recommended: 1-2

THE CHOSEN ONE: Legend of the Raven
Troma: *One-shot 1997*

Troma were infamous for churning out a string of no budget cult movies in the 1980s and 1990s, but whereas the studio's trashy films were occasionally enlivened by the odd flash of wit, this abysmal spin-off strip is entirely without redeeming features. It's derived from a mystical conspiracy movie and features lots of poorly drawn tits and ass from artist Michael Duggan, an amateurish script credited to four different authors, and a two-line introduction from Stan Lee, who is apparently a close personal friend of Troma chief Lloyd Kaufman.~AL

The Adventures of CHRISSIE CLAUS
Hero: *One-shot 1991*

Targetted at the usual Hero market of hormone-popping adolescent boys by cover featuring Flare, refunds were surely in order when the contents were seemingly written for five year olds. There's nice Tim Burgard art on the second story of Santa's daughter, but not nice enough to make this worth searching out now.~WJ

CHRISTIAN
Maximum Press: *1 issue 1996*

Christian is your standard warrior-bimbo, on a lucrative assignment as bodyguard to Jelly Baxter (a leaden parody of Michael Jackson). Thanks to Robert Loren Fleming, some of the dialogue is quite snappy, and the ending has a certain style, but that parody is so clumsy and relentless, you'll come away feeling you've been bludgeoned.~FC

Walt Disney's CHRISTMAS PARADE
Gladstone: *2 issues 1988-1989*

Dell commissioned Christmas stories for a series of specials starring Disney characters published annually between 1949 and 1958, with Gold Key continuing the tradition in the 1960s with slimmer or reprint volumes. When Gladstone acquired the Disney licence they revived the Christmas specials, populating these 100-pagers with the best from previous volumes and other stories with a Yuletide theme (*Uncle Scrooge* 47 in 2). Both contain meaty chunks of Carl Barks material, but there's plenty to recommend them beyond that, with Al Hubbard's *Three Little Kittens* in 1 and Paul Murry's strips in 2 particularly delightful.~FP
Recommended: 1, 2

CHRISTMAS WITH THE SUPER-HEROES
DC: *2 issues, 1988-1989*

The first issue reprints a selection of special Christmas-themed stories from years ago. It proved such a hit that the following year DC issued all new stories, with an all-star line-up of creators and characters. There's Batman by Dave Gibbons and Gray Morrow, Superman by Paul Chadwick, Wonder Woman by Eric Shanower, Enemy Ace (he's a superhero?) by John Byrne, the 1960s Flash and Green Lantern teamed up by Bill Loebs and Colleen Doran, and Deadman by Alan Brennert and Dick Giordano. An Olympic-class medley of festive sentimentality, with not a turkey in the lot!~HS
Recommended: 2

CHROME
Hot: *3 issues 1986-1987*

This is a tantalisingly solid start to an unfinished series, written by Peter Gillis and pencilled by Kelley Jones. Two astronauts, one American and one Russian, are the guinea-pigs for a new technology intended to replace bulky spacesuits. They were completely covered in a flexible metal coating that blocked off their normal senses but conducted electrical signals so they could 'see' via video cameras, etc. Their shuttle crashed on re-entry, and there was only one survivor – but the coating won't come off, and no one's sure which man it is, and each side is insisting on their claim to him. It's original, intriguing and intelligent, as you'd expect from Gillis. Any chance of an ending?~FC
Recommended: 1-3

CHRONOS
DC: *11 issues 1998-1999*

Walker Gabriel develops the means to travel through time based on notes provided by DC's old villain, Chronos. With the technology he has a career in industrial theft, but discovers there are rules and setbacks to travelling through time. John Francis Moore creates a fallible, likeable and vulnerable hero, haunted by the death of his mother, and has the imagination to use the possibilities of time-travel without ever confusing. Paul Guinan and Steve Leialoha provide the art, proving equal to any time zone. That this intelligent comic never found a market when published shouldn't dissuade people from picking up the back issues.~FP
Recommended: 1-3, 5, 6, 9

CHRONOWAR
Dark Horse: *9 issue limited series 1996-1997*

When a communications satellite falls on a Tokyo apartment block, the lives of three people are transformed by what appear to be alien life forms. They attach themselves to a housewife, detective and murder suspect, who all begin to move a hundred thousand times faster than normal. An extended battle between the three, both physical and psychological, then takes place with the future of Earth at stake. Creator Kazumasa Takayama makes this interesting if not compelling. His artwork's reminiscent of Otomo's but his blending of flesh and machine is heading into Giger territory.~NF

CHUCK The Ugly American
Comic Library International: *3 Volumes (0-2) 2000-2002*

1 covers Chuck's adventures in Hell, where he meets Betty, Satan's wife. She falls in love with him and helps him escape, then sends him her pet, whose path of destruction has to be faced by his Townburg neighbours. Chuck, essentially, is big, ugly and hates everything. After killing Satan in the garden of Eden, however, he's also immortal. In 2, Redhat Industries hires Chuck and his mates to bring back toads from Peru to breed for their hallucinogenic properties. Local Incas try to sacrifice them, Betty, and mercenary Lana. Chuck mostly just complains until a neighbour, Lynda, is threatened at the end. 0 is a collection of stories from various anthologies, including a couple with Mr. Beat, one against a fly and in another, he's shrunken. Mike Bocianowski's stories are amusing, with occasional serious undertones, but essentially they're just slapstick fun.~NF

CHYNA
Chaos!: *One-shot 2000, one-shot ('II') 2001*

Stephen Grant and Mike Deodato produce competent action-adventures as the WWF fight queen embarks on a new career as a bodyguard for hire. Tolerable eye-candy.~WW

CINDER AND ASHE
DC: *4 issue miniseries 1988*

A superior action page-turner by Gerry Conway and José Luis Garcia-Lopez, rather lost in the shuffle when originally published. Certainly out of step with the contemporary DC line, there was no Vertigo imprint to see it reached the audience it deserves. Ashe is a Cajun vet complete with irritating accent, and Cinder is the result of a mixed marriage in Vietnam. They're now partners in a New Orleans problem-solving agency. Garcia-Lopez, rarely less than excellent, is at his peak for *Cinder and Ashe*. The art is warm and meticulous, and his flawless storytelling, flow and anatomy are a joy to see when distorted figures and pin-up pages are considered state of the art. The transitions between past and present are masterful and no matter what he's called on to illustrate, he does so in convincing fashion. Conway's also on top form, presenting intriguing characters and proceeding to fill them out and reveal their pasts during an investigation into pressure being placed on a local farmer. Lurking in the background there's the deadly and manipulative presence of a man believed dead for over a decade, and with a grudge against Cinder and Ashe. Excellent.~WJ

Recommended: 1-4

Caliber Presents CINDERELLA ON FIRE

Caliber: *One-shot 1994*

A young man's life is re-examined as he relates the journey from rejection to acceptance as a part of the gay scene. There's the obligatory queer-bashing Christians, although these are skinheaded, swastika'd Bible-misquoting Christians, and the equally obligatory "I Found My People"scenes, as Paris (our hero) exclaims "God, it's good to be young, black and queer in America!" On the whole it's jumbled and muddled and the spelling is so poor that the writer actually manages to twist the entire meaning of the story by declaiming that his spiritual home is an EXcepting rather than ACcepting place. It's all very worthy but has been done many times before and much, much better.~WW

CITIES OF THE FANTASTIC

NBM: *5 Volumes (The Great Walls of Samaris, Fever In Urbicand, The Tower, Brusel, The Invisible Frontier Volume 1) 1983-2002*

Francois Schuiten and Benoit Peeters produce fantasies unlike any other comic strips. They centre on the world of architecture, examine the notions of structure, how man reflects elements of himself in the buildings he erects. Pattern, diagram and symbolism play very important parts in the stories, which all feature fantastic cities or bizarre structures. Far more than in most strips, the pictures tell the story – in some senses they are the story, and many of the narratives are designed to explore both the landscape and concepts, rather than have a plot. The best entry point is probably *The Tower*, in which a man who looks after one section of a gigantic structure known only as The Tower decides to leave his appointed sector and explore the rest of his vertical world. There's something very medieval both about the thought processes and the worldview presented here, but others in the series, such as *Brusel*, are futuristic. Dense, multi-layered and crammed with detail, the Cities series repays serious study and repels casual readers.~FJ

Recommended: *The Tower, Brusel*

CITIZEN V and the V Battalion

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 2000, 4 issue miniseries ('The Everlasting') 2002*

Fabian Nicieza stakes his claim as the new Jerry Ordway as he spins *Thunderbolts'* Golden Age supporting characters off into their own series. Citizen V, the grandson of the original, and his octogenarian cohorts spend most of their time acting like any other pensioners – moaning about how the world's not as good as it used to be (they fought in the war for us, you know!) and how better things would be if they were in charge. Considering they have the technology to achieve that end, moral dilemmas a-go-go abound as Nicieza weaves more of the grey area ethics and conspiracy intrigue that has won him many fans on *Thunderbolts*. The first series deals with V and co mopping up the mind-controlling nanites from their parent title, the second sees them further sticking their noses into other people's business around the world.~JC

Paul Auster's CITY OF GLASS

Avon Books: *1 Volume 1994*

Daniel Quinn writes detective novels about Max Work, under the penname William Wilson. One night he's contacted by someone who calls him Paul Auster and asks for his help. Intrigued, and already losing himself in his three current identities, he agrees to see Peter Stillman, nine years of whose childhood was spent locked in a darkened apartment as his father, also Peter, sought to prove his theories about the biblical fall of mankind and language. Now his father is due to be released from an asylum and Peter and his wife are afraid that he means them harm. Quinn/Auster stakes out Stillman when he arrives, trailing him around New York, as his walks form patterns that Quinn believes are linked to his theories. Then Stillman disappears and Quinn turns to the 'real' Paul Auster, in the belief that he's the detective that the Stillmans meant to hire instead of him.

Perhaps rather deceitfully labelled crime fiction, this is more an examination of language and identity, drawing on the literary games of Cervantes, with a tone taken from Chandler, Hammett and Cain, but no real aspirations towards a resolution of good versus evil. There are only broken characters revealed here on the lonely streets. Auster's tale, however, adapted by Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli, is stunningly realised by Mazzucchelli, in a style between his work on Batman and the increasingly abstract *Rubber Blanket*. Ultimately too calculated and detached, this is still impressive comics. Intended as the first of a series under the Neon Lit banner, only Barry Gifford's Perdita Durango followed.~NF

CITY OF SILENCE

Image: *3 issues 2000*

Every cyberpunk cliché is present and correct in this painfully 'hip' piece of futuristic tosh from writer Warren Ellis and artist Gary Erskine. The series is set in Stealth, a dystopian city "that survives on silence", where a trio of kinky, semi-naked bisex goth babes get called in to solve a case of "Satanic computer abuse". There's plenty of cynical dialogue, wearisome pop culture references and a bit of the old ultraviolence for those that like such things, but the comic's desperate need to appear cutting edge already makes it seem well past its sell-by-date.~AL

CLAN APIS

Active Synapse: *5 issue miniseries 1999**

Biologist Jay Hosler uses the familiar shorthand of comedy and adventure comics to provide an educational miniseries detailing the life cycle, anatomy, social structure and existence of a bee from birth to death. All bee life is here, rendered in an entertaining and accessible fashion, but if you have no inherent interest in learning about bees the charm of the comic will remain elusive. The collection also includes a short story about Hosler being stung by a bee for the first time (after completing the comic), and realising he was allergic to bee stings.~FP

CLANDESTINE

Marvel: *12 issues 1994-1995, 2 issue microseries (Clandestine Vs The X-Men) 1996*

A sadly truncated superhero epic created, written and pencilled by Alan Davis, ClanDestine tells the story of the Destine family, a centuries-old clan of superbeings who are forced to emerge from hiding after a number of their members are mysteriously murdered. Despite some occasionally clunky dialogue, Davis' wit, invention and meticulous artwork make this a pleasingly old-fashioned read. He sets up numerous tantalising sub-plots, introduces a number of well defined new heroes and villains, and slyly insinuates *ClanDestine* within the Marvel Universe. After creative differences caused Davis to quit the series with 8, new writer Glenn Dakin and artist Bryan Hitch totally lost the plot. Davis returned to tie up some of the loose ends in a rather ho-hum two-issue team-up with the X-Men in 1996. All the Davis issues are collected.~AL

Recommended: 1-8

CLASH

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1991*

Uncovering a machine that endows him with an ancient power, Joe McLash goes rampaging through a politically unstable Middle Eastern state, and when the superpowers sit up and take notice he ensures there'll be no further remonstrations. It's another of Tom Veitch's treatises on the corrupting consequences of absolute power, very nicely drawn by Adam Kubert, but saying very little in a loud voice.~WJ

CLASSIC X-MEN

Marvel: *110 issues 1986-1995*

Reprints of the enormously popular *Uncanny X-Men* from (an edited version of) *Giant Size X-Men* 1 (the first appearance of the new team) to 206. Short back-ups, initially by John Bolton, develop characters or throw a new perspective on events featured in the main story, ran until 44 and the title changed to *X-Men Classics* with 46. Much cheaper than buying the 'real thing'.~JC

CLASSICS ILLUSTRATED

Gilberton: *167 issues 1941-1962, 2 issues 1969*

Devised by Albert Kanter, who set up his Gilberton imprint in 1941 for the sole purpose of producing strip versions of popular classic literature, 1-34 were titled *Classic Comics*. When a new logo was sought in 1947 the title evolved to the more mature-sounding *Classics Illustrated*, but the adaptations still ran 68 pages, which wasn't much room for an entire novel. Gilberton's policy was to keep the majority of their titles in print, but sadly increasing paper costs led to a drop of twelve pages, and existing editions had pages excised or chopped up and re-pasted. The original linework covers became the opening splash pages of later editions, making way for painted covers and cutting the page count even further. First printings are often the only complete versions of these comics and are the most sought after. The earlier issues were assembled by whatever freelancers hadn't been drafted in 1941 but from 23 in 1945 the adaptations were edited and packaged by Jerry Iger and Ruth Roche's shop. The scripters included Antonia 'Toni' Blum and future EC editor and writer Al Feldstein, and there was a relatively limited selection of artists. Fifty of the ninety Iger produced Classics were drawn by either Alex Blum or H.F. Kiefer. Other artists included Maurice DelBourgo, August Froelich, Rudy Palais, Matt Baker, Ann Brewster, Bill Bossert and Bob Webb. The Iger shop often used more than one artist on a strip so sometimes just checking the bylines at the start of the strip can be misleading. A new editorial team lead by Len Cole took over packaging from 114 in 1954, and commissioned redrawn adaptations of earlier issues that had become nonsensical due to page reductions. 1954's introduction of the Comics Code Authority coincided with many big publishers closing, so there was plenty of willing talent available for the redrawn editions. Some are worth looking at, even if 1948's reduction to forty-eight page stories had made the scripts even harder to take seriously. Artists included Reed Crandall, George Evans, Gray Morrow, Gerald McCann, Lou Cameron, and Joe Orlando. A significant portion of Gilberton's sales were direct through schools, so the loss of a 2nd class mailing permit in 1962 was a major factor in their decline. The company had great difficulty staying afloat and could only issue reprints, while several completed stories were put on permanent hold. When the series ended they'd published 197 different Classic adaptations if one includes those redrawn.

1969's attempt to revive the series with 'In Freedom's Cause' and 'Negro Americans: The Early Years' flopped, and the title languished in relative obscurity until revived by First Comics. Its success can be measured, however, by the numerous copies of the idea by various publishers over the years. Issues of note include Lorna Doone in 32 by Matt Baker, the revised version of 35's *The Last Days of Pompeii* by Jack Kirby, *The Adventures of Cellini* in 38 by Froelich, the second version of *Julius Caesar* by Evans and Crandall in 68, *Green Mansions* in 90 by Blum, Graham Ingels drawing *Waterloo* in 135, *The First Men in the Moon* in 144 by George Woodbridge and chums, *The Conquest of Mexico* in 156 by Bruno Premiani, and two Gray Morrow adaptations, *The Octopus* (159) and *The Queen's Necklace* (165). *Classics Illustrated* may be an acquired taste, but there are plenty of American and British editions, as well as translations in 25 other languages, still in circulation thanks to Gilberton's reprint policy.~SW

CLASSICS ILLUSTRATED

Berkley/First: *27 issues 1990-1991*
Dark Horse: *2 issues (Dark Horse Classics) 1992*

This followed the established format in adapting literary classics for comics, acknowledging they aren't substitutes for reading originals, particularly as a shortened text is required in most cases. The poems of Poe illustrated by Gahan Wilson, the short stories of O. Henry and Ambrose Bierce and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* survive relatively unedited. It's with the hefty out of copyright 19th-century novels that there are problems. With no fluctuation from the uniform 44 pages, some works are more sympathetically abridged than others, and attempts to remain faithful to the source mean that many artists do little more than illustrate a text caption. Visual impressions being paramount, Classics Illustrated stand or fall largely on the quality of the art, and artists are generally well matched with their subject matter. Particular triumphs are Rick Geary's portrayal of Victorian England for *Great Expectations* and *Wuthering Heights*, and Peter Kuper's depiction of the industrial turmoil and tragedy of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. Mike Ploog's rendition of *Tom Sawyer* is superb. Given the restrictions, most adaptations are of a reasonable standard, and some much better than could be expected. An appallingly drawn *Hamlet* and uninspired *Rip Van Winkle* are to be avoided, and while Bill Sienkiewicz's stunning art conveys the density of *Moby Dick*, it's not very accessible, surely contradicting an intention of the series.

First ceasing publication scuppered the project. Already completed adaptations of *Last of the Mohicans* by Gary Gianni and Jack Jackson's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* were published as *Dark Horse Classics* in 1992, but the advertised *Kidnapped* and *Around the World In 80 Days* never appeared. Although numbered in solicitations, there's no numbering on the covers of *Classics Illustrated*, hence recommended issues are listed by title.~FP

Recommended: *A Christmas Carol, The Fall of the House of Usher, The Gift of the Magi, Great Expectations, The Jungle, Through the Looking Glass, Tom Sawyer, 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, Wuthering Heights*

CLASSICS PENETRATED

Aeon Press: *One-shot, 1996*

This sexually-orientated anthology has little to recommend it. No story is outstanding and all fail in their attempts to be either poignant or funny while talking about sex. Very much a comic for the creators' friends and family.~DB

CLAW the Unconquered

DC: *12 issues 1975-1978*

Like his contemporary Iron Jaw, DC's Conan wannabe had a gimmick to distinguish him from the numerous other beetle-browed barbarians littering the publishing schedules of the time, in this case a demon hand which, like Elric's runesword Stormbringer, acts to protect its owner whether he likes it or not. Otherwise Claw is an identikit character inhabiting a world that looks and feels just like Conan's, which is unsurprising with practised Conan artist Ernie Chua working on issues 1-7. Writer David Michelinie trots out all manner of monsters for Claw to conquer and throws in some eye-watering self-mutilation scenes for good measure, but the series remains undistinguished.~FJ

CLERKS:The Comic Book

Oni Press: *One-shot 1998, one-shot ('Holiday Special') 1998, one-shot ('The Lost Scene') 1999*

The continued exploits of the heroes from Kevin Smith's 1994 film *Clerks*, after a run-out in *Oni Double Feature* 1. Randal Grave runs a video rental business next door to Quick Stop, the late-night grocery run by his cousin Dante

Hicks. In the first comic the evildoers from Toast Comics berate Randal over the success of their Star Wars merchandise. Determined to get his own back, Randal reveals an underworld of monopolised toy stock to his cousin (who's just been paid). Lovable drug dealers Jay and Silent Bob manage to undermine whole scam, but not before Randall has exacted his revenge on Toast by playing the system. The Holiday Special features Randal's hallucinatory encounter with a down to earth Santa and his depraved helpers. Meanwhile Dante visits his catatonic ex-girlfriend Caitlin and acts on some of Randal's advice that does for candy canes what *Last Tango in Paris* did for butter. 'The Lost Scene' is one excised from the *Clerks* shooting script. The guys attend the viewing of a dead high school conquest at a funeral parlour. Randal's unease translates into him saying all the wrong things on Dante's behalf. The first two stories are chock-full of in-jokes courtesy of artist Jim Mahfood, while the third is drawn in a more realistic style by Phil Hester and Ande Parks, all over Smith's incredibly funny scripts. All three are collected as a paperback.~SW

Recommended: One-shot, 'Holiday Special', 'The Lost Scene'

CLICK!

Catalan: *2 volumes 1985-1992*
NBM: *4 volumes 1994-2002*

These are the adventures of the sexually inhibited Claudia Cristiani, a frigid woman whose husband implants her with a device to control her arousal operated by remote control. Or so it seems. When the control is stolen by infatuated surgeon, Dr Fez, Claudia's increasingly public sexual displays cause her husband to try to hide her in various out of the way destinations around the world, but Fez is always close behind her. The second volume is more explicit as the transmitter falls into the hands of Faust, who plays havoc with Claudia's life as a television presenter. In the third volume, Faust follows Claudia to the Amazon, where she is investigating a cult led by the Thaumaturgist, who, unnervingly, also acts as part of an extended metaphor about the exploitation of the Rain Forest. Dr Fez sells a second device to Deva Boralevi in the fourth volume. Deva's father is a victim suing for compensation from a chemical firm that Claudia's husband represents, but the subsequent bizarre plot takes in the fixing of a football match and the Convent of the Divine Spasm! Milo Manara's artwork is developed with each volume, as he experiments with line weight, inks and colour, but it's always beautiful to read. The stories themselves are mostly not to be taken seriously, often culminating in Benny Hill style chases, and Manara seems constantly to be trying to confound the expectations for eroticism. NBM reprinted the Catalan volumes in colour and also published a single volume collection of the first three.~NF

CLOAK AND DAGGER

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1983-1984, series one 11 issues, 2 Graphic Novels 1985-1987, series two 19 issues 1988-1991*

She's white, he's black, and they were runaways in New York when snatched from the street to be test subjects for narcotic substances. The pair escape, but they are oddly changed: he has acquired an enveloping, madness-inducing darkness (hence 'Cloak'), and she can emit cleansing, dazzling white light, and throw light-knives (hence 'Dagger'). Starting a mission to protect other runaways attracts the attention of Detective Bridget O'Reilly, who has no time for vigilantes. The miniseries portrays an interesting depiction of the early stages of a partnership, and although the characterisation is too thin to allow for any sustained or consistent arguments, writer Bill Mantlo gives it a good try. The artwork by Rick Leonardi and Terry Austin tells the story well, and supports the script in making the detective the most convincing and vibrant character.

The ongoing title picks up immediately after the miniseries, and the pair still have teething troubles, though there's barely a runaway child in sight. No, Cloak and Dagger have elected to help runaways indirectly, by fighting the drug trade, which means they never have to meet the brats, and they travel the world from 7 onwards. This change of direction takes away most of the comic's character, and it rapidly hops to the shelf marked 'Superhero Team (Generic)'. Bill Mantlo writes and Terry Austin inks throughout. Rick Leonardi pencils most of the early issues (1-6), but thereafter it's a different penciller every issue, including Mike Mignola (8) and Art Adams (9), a good choice for the story in that issue.

Bridging their first and second ongoing series, Cloak and Dagger starred in *Strange Tales*, where it was revealed that they owed their powers to their mutant natures. The new series has the title *The Mutant Misadventures of Cloak and Dagger*, and jumps into the middle of a storyline from *Strange Tales*, with Dagger on the side of the bad guys. 1-13 are written by Terry Austin and show a greater sense of humour than previously, with many storylines played solely for laughs. Austin's writing makes for a more entertaining read, but the characters are now very far removed from those two runaways, and surely the shelf marked 'Mutant Superheroes (Generic)' is crowded enough already? Marvel must have been asking the same question, since 14 brought an abrupt change of direction, with the first page giving a statement of their 'sworn' mission to protect others, and Detective O'Reilly is back (almost) as before. It's a relief to be back on track, thanks to writing from Steve Gerber and Terry Kavanagh, though by 17 the story is derailed and wildly out of control (goodbye, runaways – hello, demons). The final issue is a reinterpretation of Cloak and Dagger's origin story, which works well. There were many changes of art team throughout the series. The longest runs were Mike Vosburg in various capacities (3-11), and Rick Leonardi as penciller (12-16).~FC

CLOCK!

Zoo Arsonist Press: *2 issues 1997*
Top Shelf: *1 issue (3) 1998*

Collections of pieces of Paul Sharar, some single-pagers, with others of four pages or more. Mostly, it's a festival of misanthropy – a fast-paced, frequently inventive parade of cruelty, numbness and degradation. This makes the exceptions particularly striking, such as 'Yugoslavia' in 2, in which a Californian of Yugoslavian descent describes the images he's built up of a place he's never seen, making an unusual and vivid account of the processes of memory and immigration.~FC

Recommended: 2

CLONEZONE

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1989*

A spin-off from *Nexus*. Mike Baron scripts a tale of the reptile Hilariator (that's a crocodile stand-up comedian to you and me) as he attempts to regain his big time status by hosting a telethon for back zits. Neil Vokes and Jim Bradbury produce sound black and white illustrations for a very particular kind of humour strip. Enjoyable enough as long as you find coprophilia, women and doctors funny.~WW

CLOWN WITH A GUN

Caliber: *One-shot 1991*

Clown with a gun wanders about talking rubbish and feeling sorry for himself. Not an activity you'd think merits a comic.~DB

THE CLOWNS

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1998*

P. Craig Russell adapts Leoncavallo's opera *I Pagliacci* (The Clowns), although he departs from previous form by providing layouts for Galen Showman's pencils. It's a powerful tale of life imitating art as the wife of the lead performer in a travelling troupe is having an affair, mirroring the play they perform. The latter is all the more effective for concealing brutal emotion beneath clown make-up. This atmospheric adaptation won't meet all tastes, the chasm between opera and comics being too vast, but it's excellently considered and produced.~FP

Recommended

COBALT BLUE

Innovation: *One-shot 1989*

An old prospector uncovers a long-buried alien city containing the last survivor of an alien race. On the other side of town another city rises containing the last survivor of another alien race, mortal enemy of the first; and events take their course. For a story Mike Gustovich claims he waited ten years to tell, it's all rather silly and pointless.~WJ

COBALT 60

Tundra: *4 issues 1992**

Vaughn Bodé created endearing stories about a cartoon character wandering a post-atomic wasteland and having to fight for his survival at every turn. Twenty years later Vaughn's son Mark and Larry Todd continue the story, adding a complexity absent from the original. As the original stories are reprinted alongside it makes for an uneasy mixture.~FP

COBRA

Viz: *12 issues 1990-1991*

Cigar-smoking, superpowered outlaw Cobra criss-crosses the galaxy in search of a legendary treasure that turns out to be the ultimate weapon. The action never stops as Cobra is pursued by agents of The Guild, eager to claim this new weapon for themselves. Buichi Terasawa's original Manga (translated by Marv Wolfman!) is a lot of fun but never really transcends its space-opera conventions.~NF

COCAINE COMIX

Last Gasp: *4 issues 1975-1982*

Before Leonardo DiCaprio was born his dad George started Cocaine Comix, extolling the virtues of rich man's speed. The highlight of 1, and indeed the run, is the art of Brent Boates, although like almost everything else published here, the story is slim. Five years elapsed between 1 and 2, to which, retroactively, Jim Valentino is a surprise contributor. The best issue overall is 4, by virtue of the variety, with well drawn strips from Carol Lay and Curtis Cim, neither having much to do with the topic at hand, and Scott Shaw.~FP

CODE BLUE

Image: *1 issue 1998*

The story is set at Highland ER, a small Hospital run by Jayeen 'Chicken' Michaels and her staff who have to deal with the results of an inner city bombing. Author Jimmie Robinson's artwork and story are very accomplished. The layouts (4 horizontal panels per page) suggest that this may have begun life as a TV or film storyboard. Good characterisation, consistency and flow in both the art and writing go a long way to making the somewhat mundane subject matter appealing. One wished for more, even if the blurb on the back cover describes the pages as 'beautifully illustrated in stunning water color' when they obviously had their tones applied with grey markers.~SW

CODE OF HONOR

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1997*

An attempt at a sequel to *Marvels*, this series follows the career of a cop in the Marvel Universe, and his perception of the strange and mysterious super-beings who live in his world. Chuck Dixon's script isn't strong enough to make us care about the protagonist, and the multiple artists, most of whom are still in the "I'm in love with Photoshop" stage of their careers at this point, deliver an inconsistent, washed-out mess.~HS

CODENAME: DANGER

Lodestone: *4 issues 1985-1986*

There are some interesting creators involved in this superhero/spy series but it's not their best work by any stretch of the imagination. Kyle Baker (2), Paul Smith (3) and Paul Gulacy (4) never really manage to raise any sparks from the scripts, dialogue at least being provided by Robert Loren Fleming in all issues.~NF

CODENAME: KNOCKOUT

DC/Vertigo: *24 issues (0-23) 2001-2003*

Hmmm... what a delicious cocktail (shaken of course) of espionage and sex. Novelist Robert Rodi goes over the top with this wonderful satire of the spy genre. A knockout? You betcha! Ahh...poor Angela St.Grace/Devlin has to divide her loyalties between her mother who heads G.O.O.D and her father who leads E.V.I.L, aided and abetted by her outrageous gay sidekick, Go-Go Fiasco. Don't you just love the subtlety? The series begins with 0, which sets the mood as Angela rescues a bound Go-Go, but the action starts in earnest in 1-3 as Angela gets to grip with her parentage. Will she be G.O.O.D or E.V.I.L? Before we find out, 4 flashbacks to how our sexy bundle of joy came about, spotlighting her super-spy parents, and more family secrets are revealed in 15. On a similar theme 13 offers a gem of a story set in 1932 featuring Angela's grandmother, and yet another enjoyable flashback in 8 offers a glimpse of Angela's somewhat unorthodox Swiss finishing school. The things those girls have to learn! Keeping with international settings our dynamic duo head off to Africa (6-7), and it's off to Siberia in a sex-slave-trade episode in 10-12. England gets the Rodi treatment in 14, introducing yet another organisation, H.E.A.V.E.N, and two of their operatives who bear remarkably similar attributes to Angela and Go-Go. Also bearing similar attributes are various clones and dark family secrets. Don't just expect silly stories with a spy theme, though as Rodi is clearly having a ball casting characters and creating situations that lift this beyond just simple satire. The series is also blessed with wide, varied and wonderful art by the likes of Louis Small, Mark Farmer, Yanick Paquette, Amanda Conner, Jimmy Palmiotti, Ed Benes and John Lucas. They all know how to draw a gorgeous body – oh, forgot to mention all the gratuitous nudity – both male and female. No sign of genitalia, but never mind.~HY

Recommended: 0-4, 8, 13, 14

CODENAME: SCORPIO

Antarctic: *4 issue miniseries 1997*

Some attractive linework by Essad Ribic is wasted on a dystopia in which Scorpio is a renegade policeman who sides with humans left behind on Earth to serve as the organ bank for an orbiting Council. Ribic's mix of pencilled and fully inked artwork doesn't always work and Miki Horvatic leaves too little space for plot developments between the action scenes.~NF

CODENAME: STRYKEFORCE

Image/Top Cow: *15 issues (0-14) 1994-1995*

Taking their name from their leader, Stryker, who was also a member of Cyberforce for the duration of this series, Strykeforce was a team of mercenaries that also included Kill Razor, Black Anvil, Bloodbow and Tempest. Created and written by Marc Silvestri and drawn by Brandon Peterson, the first two story-lines provide the team with a base in an ex-Russian nuclear submarine and see them join Stormwatch in battle against invading aliens, the Shu'rii. The series takes an unusual turn here as Bloodbow is killed and replaced by one of the aliens, who betrays her own kind to help the team. It is the revelation of this secret that precipitates the break-up of the group in *Cyberforce, Strykeforce:* 'Opposing Forces'.

The creative team is a little unsettled after 8, but 10 sees Steve Gerber take over the scripts and Billy Tan Mung Khoy the artwork. With well-thought-out stories that were really just beginning to explore the characters, Strykeforce never quite got things right. The series wavered between humour and seriousness but was always entertaining. 0, the team's origin, actually appeared after 14.~NF

COFFIN

Oni Press: *4 issue miniseries 2000-2001*

Dr Ashad Ahmad is a researcher into after-life phenomena who builds a device to categorically disprove the concept of the soul. Imagine how he feels when he's murdered and wakes inside his own device, which he calls The Coffin. He embarks on a quest to atone for all the evil he's done when alive and also prevent his family from becoming victims of the immortality obsessed millionaire who killed him. Compelling metaphysical drama from Phil Hester and Mike Huddleston.~WW

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* Available in a collected edition

COLD BOOM

Caliber: *One-shot 1997*

The peculiar descent of Marilyn, sensitive to the point of telepathy as her obsessive fascination with Adolph Hitler draws her into his world, into his dreams and perhaps into his grip. She knows what he loved, she sees what he saw as the bullet entered his head. Will she experience the last thing the Furrier felt... the Cold Boom? Chilling science fantasy from Jon Proctor.~WW

COLLIER'S

Fantagraphics: *4 issues 1991-1994 (1-3), 1998 (4)*
Drawn & Quarterly: *1 issue + 2001 to date*

With initially limited cartooning skills, David Collier provides extended slice of life stories in 1-3 that largely fail to engage or stimulate. The best of them is 3, recounting the life of Native American chief Grey Owl, who has a more complicated history than at first seems to be the case and was later the subject of a David Attenborough film. The fourth issue, though, is a big step forward, a charming and affectionate scattershot biography of Collier's grandfather. The art has greatly improved, and don't be put off by the largely inappropriate Ditkoesque cover. The first Drawn & Quarterly issue a is warm tribute to a troubled friend, and one-time mentor, displaying the contradictions and complexities of his character.~FP

Recommended: 4

COLONIA

Colonia Press: *8 issues + 1998 to date*

Captain Cinnabar and his pirates rescue Jack and his uncles, Peter and Richard, fresh out of Massachusetts, from a shipwreck. Then Jack meets Adarro, the old man-of-fish, a talking duck called Lucy, and a mermaid, and realises that he's not in his own world anymore. Jack's ability to communicate with these creatures sets him apart, but remains a mystery. Amongst other differences explored by Jeff Nicholson's alternative history, are the facts that there were no Native Americans before the continent's discovery and that Drake didn't stop the Spanish Armada. To save their lives, the trio manage to convince Cinnabar and more pirates, Anne Reed and Bonnie O'Malley, that they can lead them all to the treasure of Colonia Norte. 1-5* set the scene before the group set out to explore mainland America. Nicholson's artwork is weak on facial expressions, but his storytelling is compelling and the world he's created offers many pleasures.~NF

COLOR

Print Mint: *One-shot 1971*

Conceived as storyboards for an unmade film, this has the distinction of being the first colour underground comic. As one would expect from noted psychedelic poster artist Victor Moscoso, this digest-sized comic looks ravishing, but is rarely troubled by anything approaching a story.~DAR

COLORS IN BLACK

Dark Horse: *4 issues 1995*

An agreement with film-maker Spike Lee resulted in this affirmative-action title giving new creators the chance at a wider audience. Resolutely uncommercial covers and the odd title probably dissuaded many people from sampling this anthology, which is a shame as there's plenty of good material. Each issue is loosely themed, with 3's examination of crime being the best, and if the writing occasionally hammers a point home in obvious fashion, there's also depth, subtlety and warmth. Sarah Byam and Gil Ashby's 'Larry Can't Wash It Off' in 2 is a fine, understated exploration of personal identity, and one has to wonder why Ashby's engaging watercoloured pencils and artists of the calibre of Greg Simanson haven't been seen before or since.~FP

Recommended: 2, 3

COLOSSUS

Marvel: *One-shot 1997*

The ex-X-Man who can turn himself into steel teams up with *Excalibur*'s Meggan for a light-hearted adventure in a thinly-disguised Disneyland Paris. Old enemy Arcade – a hitman who uses games and theme parks as his weapons – runs them through a gauntlet which is by no means deadly in a predictable and thrill-free ride. Excellent artwork by Bryan Hitch and Paul Neary fails to offset Ben Raab's soporific script.~WW

COLUMBUS

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1992*

An unflinching biography of Christopher Columbus, written by Starlen Baxter and illustrated by Jack Jackson. The script deals primarily with Columbus' genocidal governorship of Haiti and insane beliefs about his divine mission on Earth. Jackson's artwork is detailed and brings the often harrowing events to life. Though not written by Jackson, here as in other examples of Jackson's work, the concentration on the bare narrative can leave the reader aware of the facts but without any wider understanding of their relevance.~NF

COLVILLE

King Rat: *1 issue 1997*

A short story by Steven Gilbert, set among high school kids in Colville, Ontario, and apparently based on fact. David is an aspiring comics creator who has already had one close encounter with the law, but the next job that's suggested seems so trivial, and the thousand bucks would be so useful, especially since he has plans for self-publishing... The artwork looks crude at first, but shows its strengths as we see more of the characters, since Gilbert is very good at conveying personality and emotions. It's an atmospheric, chilly story that's short on surprises, but effective.~FC

COMBAT

Image/Extreme: *2 issue microseries 1996*

A menace that apparently terrorised the universe for millennia, eventually killing the old Gods, is defeated by Youngblood's alien bezerker and a female F.B.I. agent who electrocute it in Las Vegas. Someone didn't put on their thinking cap.~WJ

COMBAT KELLY

Marvel: *9 issues 1972-1973*

Combat Kelly was a relatively successful title for Marvel's early 1950s incarnation, lasting 44 issues. This revival of the World War II platoon of ex-cons, led by the Combat Kelly of the title, is notable for the addition of a female member. It doesn't get any more interesting than that except for the final issue, in which Marvel, giving a nod to the realism of combat, killed the lot of them.~WJ

COMCAT Graphic Novels

Although they were intended as the junior arm of Catalan Communications graphic-novel enterprises, many adult readers will find some Comcat graphic novels of interest. Their output consisted of four series – *Young Blueberry*, *Code XIII*, *Yoko*, *Vic and Bob*, and *The Magic Crystal*, plus the first volume in an intended series, *Kogaratsu*.

The three *Young Blueberry* graphic novels ('Blueberry's Secret', 'A Yankee Named Blueberry' and 'The Blue Coats') were produced in 1969 and 1970 by Charlier and Giraud at great speed while working on the regular *Blueberry* strips, and tell the story of how Blueberry became a hard-bitten sergeant in the army. A certain simplicity in plotting and use of open pen work (as opposed to the usual brush detail Giraud employed for the regular strip) gives them a hurried feel. If you like Blueberry you'll get something out of these, although they're appallingly coloured.

Code XIII is a series of thrillers by J. Van Hamme and W.

* Available in a collected edition

Vance that show no sign of being produced for children. The first volume sets the tone for the later pair: a man is washed up half-dead, unable to remember who he is or how he got there. Befriended by a young couple, he has to flee when people start trying to kill him. With no clues to his identity but a tattoo on his shoulder reading 13 and the address on the back of a photo he doesn't recognise, he sets off to discover his identity. Whoever he is he knows a lot about killing, as evinced by the way he polishes off various agents of the mysterious Mongoose. The art's extremely tight and detailed, and the scripts are highly competent thrillers.

The three-volume *Magic Crystal* saga ('The Magic Crystal', 'Island of the Unicorn' and 'Aurelys' Secret') by Moebius and Marc Bati is a fantasy based on philosophical principles shared by the two creators, and drawn in a simplified version of their styles. Another series that was actually created for children is the adventures of *Yoko, Vic and Bob* by Roger Leloup. Two volumes appeared, 'Vulcan's Forge' and 'Three Suns of Vina', both cheerful juvenile adventures in the Jules Verne mould. The first features a mysterious undersea race and 'Three Suns' sees them battling an evil scientist and his robots on a distant planet.

Finally *Kogaratsu:* 'The Bloody Lotus' (1990) is a historical drama set in feudal Japan, written by Bosmans and drawn in a cod-Japanese print style by Michetz. Real Manga, fresh and dynamic, made the series rather pointless and it was not picked up when Catalan stopped publishing.~FJ

COME OUT COMIX

Portland Women's Resource Centre: *1 issue 1974*

As the title suggests, this is an autobiographical comic about coming out by Mary Wings. While the art is undeniably crude, the story remains gripping and eminently readable.~DAR

Recommended

The COMET

DC/!mpact: *18 issues 1991-1992*

This Mark Waid-scripted revival of the silly old Mighty Comics superhero started off with jolly stories about carefree orphan Rob Connors' youthful attempts to fit the novelty of superheroics in with his journalist girlfriend and his ambition to make a career in baseball. It's all rather reminiscent of early Spider-Man stories. The series gradually became more serious as it revealed that the Comet's corny 'electrical charge' origin wasn't true and hid a nasty tale of alien experimentation. Unusually, the story has a very firm conclusion in the last issue and makes some curious moral points on the way about blood ties, selfishness versus selflessness, and corrupt sex-partners. The Comet is also a focus of *Crucible*, the series tying up all loose ends of the !mpact titles.~GK

Recommended: *7*

COMET MAN

Marvel: *6 issue miniseries 1987*

An astronaut is destroyed by a comet, but reincarnated with amazing powers. Returning to Earth he faces the duplicity of his best friend, the abduction of his son and the death of his wife. Graced with striking Bill Sienkiewicz covers and strikingly bad interior art by a neophyte Kelley Jones, this was the attempt of actors Bill Mumy and Miguel Ferrer to add to the Marvel Universe. Never mind.~HS

COMIC BOOK

Comics Conspiracy: *9 issues + 2001 to date*

A surprisingly successful and sustained joke about a generic earnest superhero under simple (different) one colour covers bearing only the title, issue number and price. Doug Miers' scripts are witty pastiches, and penciller Amilton Santos is good enough to be drawing the real thing. Try 3's encounter with a scantily-clad female villain, or the collection of 1-5.~FP

Spümco COMIC BOOK

Marvel: *1 issue 1995*

Dark Horse: *2 issues 1996*

There's always a problem with John Kricfalusi's animated shows, the most famous being *Ren and Stimpy*. While magnificently designed and animated, some are gut-bustingly funny, while others leave one scratching one's head going "Wha..?". If the latter permit the former the ratio is high enough that it's fair exchange, and so it is with the *Spümco Comic Book*. The comic uses the same contrasts as Kricfalusi's animation, switching from line drawings to painted panels for effect, and with madcap illustration from Kricfalusi, Mike Fontanelli and Jim Smith on the oversize format (12" x 9") it looks great. The main characters are Jimmy The Idiot, a slavering retard, and the redneck good ol' boy George, a man's man, and the best place to start is with Jimmy's gut-busting chase for an elusive quarter in the second Dark Horse issue. Rarely is the spirit of animation so successfully transferred to comics. While the portrayal of Jimmy is bound to offend some, others will find the depiction of bodily functions gross, so be warned. In a fine show of moral hypocrisy, Marvel, the company that publishes superheroes willing to eviscerate or kill on a monthly basis, apparently decided Kricfalusi's work was too distasteful, prompting the move to Dark Horse. It worked out better for all concerned, with a $1 reduction in cover price and better paper to boot.~WJ

Recommended: Marvel 1, Dark Horse 1-2

COMIC LIBRARY INTERNATIONAL

Comic Library International: *10 volumes 1999-2002*

George Broderick's solution to a comics industry slump was to publish all-ages trade paperback anthologies in the hope of reaching areas not serviced by standard comics. Ten volumes indicates success. Despite good cartooning, the early issues have too much whimsy and too little substance, with a generous page count merely encouraging contributors to extend meagre plots with big figures in big panels. Happily there are exceptions. Broderick's own work is always welcome, and there's plenty of it in each issue. In 1-5 it's funny silent strips about superhero Stardust and his dog Thor, which are now collected in a single volume. There is the impression of Scott Roberts also plotting by the seat of his pants, but he's good enough that his story of a former movie star and a stuntwoman engages throughout (1-5). Chris Yambar's strips have their moments, from 3 Wes Alexander's 'Stormfield' has a real professional polish as a newspaper gag strip about two kids, and the work of Derek Drymon from 4 is also very good.

From 6 editorially imposed themes encourage more discipline, and the individual volumes are titled, respectively *Giant-Size Itsy-Bitsy Comics* (funny animal), *Big Space Comics*, *Wild Adventure Comics*, *World's Greatest Christmas Comics* and *Off the Wall Adventures*. Mr Beat is present from the start and is joined from 6 by other strips familiar from elsewhere including Chuck *The Ugly American*, *The Hoon*, *Roswell*, and *Astounding Space Thrills*, the latter two in 7 only. Broderick and Yambar team-up on the very funny adventures of El Mucho Grande, a legendary mysterious masked Mexican wrestler in 7-9, and there are two charming restored Walt Kelly Christmas strips in 9. Scott Roberts contributes three absolute gems to 10, one of them a Spirit pastiche, but it's otherwise a weaker issue. Overall there's little thought-provoking, but from 4 on the entertaining material generally outweighs the disappointing. After 10 the decision was made to cancel this series and instead focus efforts on the production of volumes spotlighting particular characters.~FP

COMICO CHRISTMAS SPECIAL

Comico: *One-shot 1988*

Doug Wheeler supplies a selection of unashamedly heartwarming offbeat stories with Christmas as the uniting theme. Contributing artists Ken Holewczynski, Bernie Mireault, Tim Sale, and the teams of Steve Rude and Al Williamson, and Bill Willingham and Chris Warner, all excel, and you'd have to be a humbug of enormous proportions not to be charmed by this sentimental selection.~FP

Recommended

Tex Avery's COMICS AND STORIES

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1996*

One of four Dark Horse titles featuring Tex Avery characters, *Comics and Stories* has writers like Scott Shaw and Mark Martin, but neither seem to be inspired by the antics of Bad Luck Blackie or Meathead and Screwball Squirrel. Jay Stephens comes closest to matching the appearance of the cartoons (see, for example, 'Son Of King Size Canary' in 3) but overall the title's nowhere near as interesting as a video of the cartoons themselves.~NF

COMICS' GREATEST WORLD

Dark Horse: *12 issue limited series 1993*

Dark Horse introduce a new line of superheroes in this action-packed tour guide to four areas of their new world. Steel Harbour is the best observed, a run-down industrial city home to Barb Wire, The Machine and Motorhead, all of whom graduated into their own series (and Wolf Pack, who didn't). Golden City is clean and safe the way cities used to be, run by Amazing Grace and her team of superpowered agents including Mecha, Rebel and Titan. Arcadia's administration is corrupt to the core and home to X, Ghost and the lesser known Pit Bulls and Monster. Aliens observe in each four-issue arc (one per location) before homing in on the desert area of Cinnibar Flats, finding Division 13, humans who've been mutated through exposure to something emanating from The Vortex. It's the Vortex that's the crux of the slim plot uniting the stories, and *Out of the Vortex* continues the mystery. There's some excellent artwork, particularly Chris Warner on X, Adam Hughes on *Ghost* and Paul Chadwick's *King Tiger*.~WJ

THE COMICS JOURNAL Special Edition

Fantagraphics: *2 volumes + 2002 to date*

After twenty-five years *The Comics Journal* is a precious institution that publishes the most insightful reviews and probing interviews to be found concerning English language comics. Pugnacious and tempestuous, it vigourously pursues excellence, according all else short shrift. This offends many whose work is deemed below par, but if the occasional misguided enthusiasm and sometimes gratuitous baiting are the prices paid for the remainder, it's an equitable trade. In 2002 the *Journal* began publishing broadly themed anthology coffee-table books. The second volume is more satisfying overall, the first containing as much polemic as interviews and essays. In 2 more so than 1 the latter are accompanied by generous helpings of vintage comic strips along with appreciation, recalling Fantagraphics' old Nemo magazine. The new work covers cartoonists (1) and music (2). Space restrictions don't permit a complete contributors' listing, particularly as only Linda Medley and Kim Deitch, both in 1, and Ho Che Anderson supply over three pages, and most restrict themselves to one or two. There is a group of creators that the publisher draws on, and suffice to say, all expectations are met, yet there are some surprising submissions. It's nice, for instance, to see Dave Sim contributing an appreciation of Alex Raymond and Gary Panter's detailed doodling in 1, while P. Craig Russell produces a three page biography of the neglected composer Korngold for 2. The music issue is the more varied, with contributors talking about music, musicians, being musicians, meeting musicians (Carol Lay), fantasies about musicians and the effect of music. The cleverly constructed rhyming couplets of Ted Jouflas accompanied by his distorted paintings are a highlight, while there's a good story from Justin Green in 1, in which Phoebe Gloeckner's rant contains some truths. Special mention must be made of the covers from interview subjects Joe Sacco and Jim Woodring. Neither has much relevance to the theme, but they're both stunning pieces. A 2003 volume spotlights patriotism.~FP

Recommended: 2

COMICS LIT

NBM: *12 issues 1995-1996*

This serialised and previewed NBM's graphic novels and story collections. It's all black and white, so some of the strips painted for colour book publication come out looking rather murky. Particularly badly affected are Bo Hampton's watery nineteenth-century vampire nonsense 'Verdilak' (1-6) and David Wenzel's charming 'Snow White' (3-5). P. Craig Russell's adaptation from *The Jungle Book*, 'The Spring Running' (6-8), has some very pretty Mowglis, but to read it you need to be able to stand Rudyard Kipling's absurd prose. Extracts from Rob Maisch's 'Confessions Of A Cereal Eater' (1, 2) tend to contradict the publisher's claims that Maisch has had an amazing life, and Jacques Tardi's hilarious Adele Blanc-Sec story 'The Two Headed Corpse' (10-12) is unfinished by the last issue. Andreas's occult 'Rork' (10-12) and Miguelanxo Prado's pretentious quasi-porno power struggles in 'Tangents' (8-10) are both well worth avoiding. Most issues (4-11) have an amusing couple of Ted Rall's vox pops 'The Worst Thing I've Ever Done' but the best strip is Andre Juillard's 'The Blue Notebook' (2-9*), an elegant and complicated modern thriller full of romantic obsession, betrayal, and coincidences.~GK

Recommended: 2-9

COMICULTURE

Mad Science Media: *1 issue + 2002 to date*

A group of former Marvel creators banded together to produce this *Heavy Metal*-lite style anthology. There's an admirable diversity of genres covered, and no-one lets the side down. On the other hand, assessing the strips presented so far, there's nothing compelling either, although as further chapters appear (and a second issue is three months overdue as of writing) this could change. Don Hudson draws a decent western strip, and Steve Buccellato showcases an admirable diversity on two very different strips, but top of the class so far due to a novel approach and great cartooning is Jessica Wolk-Stanley's eccentric autobiographical piece.~FP

COMIX BOOK

Curtis: *3 issues 1974-1975*
Kitchen Sink: *2 issues (4-5) 1975*

A bizarre idea. Superhero publishers Marvel note the popularity of underground comix five years after everyone else, so decide to produce one of their own. But hey, just in case those crazy underground cartoonists include sex and drug use in their work why not put it out under another imprint? Despite the warped logic of wanting to absorb something successful, but only if it can conform to their corporate standards, *Comix Book* manages to entice a fair number of the underground greats over five issues. It's a patchy anthology, though, with only Howard Cruse, John Pound, Sharon Rudahl and Skip Williamson consistently approaching top form, although Art Spiegelman previews *Maus* in 2. The marriage between Marvel and the underground appears to have ended over the matter of creators' rights, so Kitchen Sink published material already commissioned for the following issues. Ironically and entirely coincidentally they're the best of the run, with 5 a real quality package. In addition to Cruse, Pound, Rudahl and Williamson there's good stuff from Bob Armstrong, Leslie Cabarga, Gary Hallgren, Richards and Murphy; and Justin Green finishes the very odd 'We Fellow Traveleers' started in the first issue.~FP

Recommended: 5

COMIX INTERNATIONAL

Warren: *5 issues 1974-1977*

These are collections of the colour stories from Warren's regular horror titles (*Creepy, Eerie, Vampirella, Spirit*). In 1 all the artwork is by Rich Corben, whose style and colours are lush to the point of claustrophobia and can induce queasiness with the most innocuous scene, let alone when he's depicting a face pecked raw by gulls (grisly photo-realism in 5). From 2 onwards, there's a mixture of artists, and the variety is welcome. The writing is always competent, and the artwork well above average, but few of the stories really stick in the mind. The best is Berni Wrightson's 'Muck Monster' from 2. It's yet another version of *Frankenstein*, but beautifully done.~FC

Recommended: 2

THE COMIX OF TWO CITIES

Aeon Press: *6 issue miniseries 1996*

Abstruse strips by Matt Howarth, largely concerning the inhabitants of a planet where the population developed into two distinct species. These beings were created by members of the equally abstruse rock band The Residents, and prods at the music industry are a feature throughout, as are the beings slipping into characters from old American situation comedies, and Howarth's inventive alien life forms. This makes the comic sound far more interesting than it actually is, and the average reader's patience will have worn thin far before the end of the first issue.~FP

COMIX 2000

L'Association: *1 volume 1999*

A truly grand gesture to celebrate the millennium, the two thousand-page *Comix 2000* contains the work of three hundred and twenty-four authors from twenty-nine countries. The brief was that the strips must have no dialogue and so be universal, though many use pictorial dialogue, with a general theme of the 20th Century. An initial problem with this is the almost overwhelming use of surrealistic and dream imagery instead of narrative storytelling. Creators like Max Andersson, Edmond Baudoin, Mariana Chiesa Mateos, Julie Doucet & Max, Kazuishi Hanawa and Michel Pirus may do this in an interesting manner, but there's a distinct sense that the prescription against dialogue has made for a limited choice of storytelling techniques, with only one attempt at a biographical approach, for instance. Apart from these largely symbolic visions, humour is the most common aim of the strips, though many contain a mix of several elements. Despite this, there are many examples of historical or political analysis (Jean-Francois Caritte, Eric Drooker and Kakouwo are among the best), horror (including the ever reliable Hideshi Hino), slice of life (Julie Graux) and others. Two other highpoints amongst all this: Lewis Trondheim managing to squeeze one hundred and seventy-one panels into his two pages and Zou telling a story with brand names as dialogue. The introduction suggests that the final contents were selected from seven thousand pages, but the absence of many better-known creators is notable. Clearly, this was always going to be about the 'independent' creators (there are no superheroes and few straight genre pieces), but perhaps it should have been two thousand creators rather than two thousand pages. This is not to say that Comix 2000 is a failure. There are a large number of terrifically illustrated strips in almost every cartooning style, from clear line to punk scrawl. It's just that it's probably best to borrow a copy first before deciding to buy one.~NF

COMMIES FROM MARS

Last Gasp: *6 issues 1982-1987*

Largely second-rate underground title produced periodically by Tim Boxell. The name comes from a repeated satirical strand in which Martians have invaded earth and are trying to spread their Communist ideals among an unwitting populace. Each issue also had a separate theme (passion and romance in 4, crime in 5). Later issues contain excellent work by Hunt Emerson and Peter Kuper.~NF

THE COMPLEAT FART

Kitchen Sink: *1 issue 1976.*

Lee Marrs discourses not only about farting, but also sweat, zits, snot, earwax, menstruation, dandruff, semen and urine, in an hilarious fake-educational guide to secretions, emissions and excretions, whose charm and wit belies its coarse subject matter. Neither the topic nor Marrs' rounded, earthy style will appeal to all, but broad-minded readers will forgive the gross-out humour because, over all else, it's bloody funny!~HS

COMPLETELY BAD BOYS

Fantagraphics: *1 issue 1992*

A collection of J.R. Williams' *Bad Boys* strips, as the recalcitrant youths taunt and torment their playmate Fatty and generally get up to no good. At times they can be hilarious, but as the strips spread over eight years from their first appearance there's a wide difference in tone, with the sanitised version prepared for possible newspaper syndication totally disembowelled. Williams' goofy cartooning is brilliant throughout, though.~WJ

CONAN the Adventurer

Marvel: *14 issues 1994-1995*

A short-lived *Conan* title, set in his youth, to tie in with the animated TV series of the same name. Roy Thomas churned out reliable but slight single-issue stories, drawn by Rafael Kayanan, who seemed to have picked up on a lot of superficial rendering schticks from Barry Smith's work on the character in the 1970s. Sadly this is without the necessary accompanying design and storytelling skills.~GK

CONAN the Barbarian

Marvel: *294 issues, 12 Annuals, 5 Giant-Size, 1 Treasury 1970-1993*

For many years almost any issue of Conan provided reliable entertainment, but it never quite matched its enormous early promise and certainly hobbled along in a horribly drawn-out decline during most of its final decade. Conan was created in 1932 by pulp-magazine writer Robert E. Howard and is the most famous sword-and-sorcery character, a genre almost unknown in the comic format before this successful attempt. The genre consists, very basically, of simple heroes wandering about primitive civilisations battling supernatural enemies such as monsters and wizards, usually winning through using a combination of brute strength, bloody violence and dumb luck.

The character presented in comics by Roy Thomas and the young British artist Barry Smith (now Windsor-Smith) didn't match one's idea of a typical barbarian. With his nice long hair and clean bare chest the lithe young Conan looked like no one so much as Jim Morrison of The Doors before his dissipation. The art on the first half-dozen issues, like all Smith's early comics, is notable only for its huge debt to Jack Kirby's work, but he soon began to experiment with sets of congruent frames in which each picture differed only slightly from the last. This quasi-cinematic technique, often emphasised by the absence of word balloons or captions, is derived from the work of the EC artist Bernard Krigstein, probably, in Smith's case, via Jim Steranko's 1960s Marvel work. Simultaneously, Smith, aping his favourite painters, started packing his panels with ornate detail. Thomas, who is rarely less than competent, responded with increasingly ambitious prose, and even some of Howard's atrocious poetry. Such obviously carefully crafted dramatic comics had not appeared in the USA since the heyday of EC in the early 1950s.

Smith drew 1-24 (apart from 17-18, by Gil Kane). Many won industry awards and are widely regarded as classics. 11's 'Rogues in the House' is a good representative story. Conan is jailed thanks to his treacherous girlfriend Jenna. He swaps his freedom, stopping only to do something quite appalling to Jenna, for a hit job on a corrupt priest whose house has been taken over by his King Kong-like friend. Ultraviolence ensues. 'The Song of Red Sonja' in 24 shows the style taken right over the top. All inquisitive readers will want to try these early Conans, though they may find Smith's figures stiff and over-decorated and Thomas's captions florid and pompous, if not unfaithful to Howard. The team's best work on the character was the 'Red Nails' sequence, originally published in black and white magazines but reissued in colour in the 1980s *Conan Special Edition* and, to great advantage, at very large size in Marvel Treasury Edition 4 (1975), which also includes 'Rogues in the House'.

Thomas decided from the start that each year of the comic would cover a year in Conan's life, which caused the comic, while he was writing it, to be sometimes crammed with decent stories, as in the first twenty issues, and at other times rather short of them. There were some good ideas for filling gaps Howard had left, such as teaming Conan with Michael Moorcock's Elric of Melnibone in 14-15. Unable to use Howard's often superior stories of the older Conan and lacking the rights to the books written by other authors, Thomas later resorted to adapting *Kothar the Barbarian* novellas by Gardner Fox, who was better suited to science fiction.

John Buscema took over the art from 25. He'd been the original choice of artist, but Marvel were unwilling to match his page rate on an untried title where extra expenditure was already being incurred in paying for rights. Once aboard, though, he drew most of the next 165 issues. His Conan was much brawnier than Smith's, looking for the first time as though he really could lift and swing the heavy swords and axes he needed so often. Buscema was consistently good, usually inked by the reliable Filipino artist Ernie Chua (later known as Chan), though he couldn't help looking rather plain after Smith's baroque excesses. Most issues from 25 to 56 are unexceptional, though 37, gruesomely violent in places, is a good Howard adaptation by Gil Kane and Neal Adams, reprinted from the black and white magazine *Savage Sword of Conan*. Conan's only interests are sex and violence and he doesn't much like conversation, so the stories require good supporting characters other than the procession of cruel kings, mad wizards, grasping merchants and treacherous whores. They don't often get them, though. The introduction of Red Sonja in 23, lifted and rejigged by Thomas from one of Howard's non-*Conan* stories, was popular. She persistently refuses Conan's advances, reflecting the early 1970s atmosphere of female liberation. Tara, the tomboy acrobat who appears in 52-57, is also not a bad character. These issues reintroduce 11's crooked nobleman Murilo, now turned mercenary. 57 is beautifully drawn, in his slightly cute style, by Mike Ploog, and events therein force Conan to leave the comforts of the city for a while.

58-100 are among the most interesting of the run. Derived, remarkably, from a single Howard short story, they cover the three years Conan spent in what was, for him, a relatively mature relationship with Belit, Queen of the Black Coast, leader of the Black Corsair pirates. These issues differ from most others in having a long running supporting character, and in deviating from the usual Western-derived Conan settings of dusty plain, wooded riverside and tavern in the town, by being largely set on sailing ships. Belit is a much more convincing cast member than the silly Red Sonja (who, for contrast, also appears), and issues from this period are a refreshing read. Buscema continued to draw most, inked at first by the excellent Steve Gan, and from 70, by Ernie Chan again.

The 'Black Coast' story was marred by many fill-ins, though the two stories reprinted from *Savage Sword* (in 78 & 87) are good. The first is a classic pairing with Red Sonja, notable for some of Buscema's best art. Beware 79-81, drawn by a young Howard Chaykin. There are some curious things in later chapters, such as big blue lions and men riding on eagles, but the conclusion in the double-sized 100 is touching and quite eerie. Thomas was unable to match this standard before leaving with 115 in 1981. J.M. DeMatteis took over the writing, introducing a couple of clownish kid sidekicks, which doesn't make for good reading. Gil Kane was back as artist from 127, a sad tale that he also inked, notably, as in the remainder of his issues to 134 he's saddled with poor inkers and Bruce Jones' scripts are riddled with inappropriate wise-cracking dialogue. Buscema returned to the art with 135, but seemed to have lost interest unless able to ink his pencils himself. The stories became formulaic and there was no overall direction.

146 is a pleasant exception, written by Mary Jo Duffy. A drunken Conan is teamed up with three young wizardesses with personalities like Josie & The Pussycats. Reader reaction was polarised. Michael Fleisher, who wrote from 150, simply rehashed old single-issue story ideas, though everything improved for 155-159 as John Buscema plotted the comic, endowing a flavour of the Thomas years. Fleisher then reverted to the formula of having Conan, riding alone, perhaps talking to his horse, alerted by cries and rescuing a string of witless female characters from various gangs of evildoers. In 172 Jim Owsley introduced Tetra, a new, and continuing, resourceful female character who turned out to be a witch-queen, and she seemed to inspire Buscema's drawing. Owsley wrote a good story full of twists and political intrigue, and some excellent dialogue, some of which was about Conan not saying certain things. Buscema's final issue was 190, and he was replaced by Val Semeiks, who tried initially a little too hard to be like Barry Smith. The now multi-charactered story climaxed well in 200. After Owsley's departure *Conan* became chaotic in the hands of various old hacks until 232, which, with a cover pastiching that of the first issue, returned to Conan's youth in the frozen north. The nine issues set there look very rough by contrast with the first few from 1970.

Roy Thomas returned with 241 and wrote off all the stories since he'd left as a busy but inconsequential couple of years for Conan. The rapidly improving, and soon superb, Mike Docherty was the most expressive artist since Buscema, and, with a Falstaffian foil for Conan called Hobb providing light relief, the comic was an above-average read until cancellation. A great many of the first ten years' Conan stories were reprinted in ninety-eight issues of the excellent black and white magazine Conan Saga, with annotations and some new Smith covers, published from 1987 onwards.~GK

Recommended: 11-13, 16, 19-24, 57, 70-72, 100, 127, 'Red Nails'

CONAN Graphic Novels, miniseries and one-shots

Marvel: *2 issue microseries ('The Movie') 1982, 2 issue microseries (Conan The Destroyer) 1985, Graphic Novel ('The Witch Queen of Acheron') 1985, graphic novel (Conan The Reaver) 1987, graphic novel ('The Horn of Azoth') 1990, graphic novel ('The Ravagers of Time) 1992, one-shot (Conan vs Rune) 1995, 3 issue miniseries ('The Usurper') 1997-1998, 3 issue miniseries ('The Lord of the Spiders') 1998, 3 issue miniseries ('River of Blood') 1998, 3 issue miniseries ('Return of Styrm') 1998, 3 issue miniseries ('Scarlet Sword') 1998-1999, 3 issue miniseries ('Death Covered In Gold') 1999, 3 issue miniseries ('Flame and the Fiend') 2000*

By the middle of the 1980s Conan was a rather tired character and concept, but that didn't stop Marvel issuing four graphic novels devoted to Robert E. Howard's barbarian hero. All but one are no more or less deserving of the 'deluxe' format than any other Conan comic. However, Conan the Reaver, written by Don Krarr, gives us a rare chance to sample the commanding artwork of comics great John Severin in an extended format with better printing, and for that reason alone is worth acquiring. Two Conan movie adaptations are very ordinary, with definitive Conan penciller John Buscema drawing.

The monthly *Conan the Barbarian* comic finally ceased publication in 1993, but the hardcore Conan audience was still willing to pay for more of the same old-same old so a new monthly Conan title arrived in 1995. At first written by Larry Hama and drawn Barry Crain, it featured possibly the worst creative work ever seen on this character, and boy is THAT saying something. 10 is notable for the art of Alcatena, but after two further issues it was cancelled, to be followed by a succession of miniseries, beginning with 'The Usurper'. By this point, there was almost nothing new to say about Conan as character, icon, or genre archetype, so most of the creative teams involved settled for comfortable, professional mediocrity. Roy Thomas returned to pen 'The Lord of the Spiders' and 'Scarlet Sword', both pencilled by the ho-hum Stefano Raffaele, and 'Flame and the Fiend', the last of these miniseries to date. 'Death Covered In Gold' turned out to be the final Conan collaboration between Thomas and the late John Buscema, neither of them sadly at their best.

To end on a high note, *Conan vs. Rune* marked the first time that original Conan artist Barry Windsor-Smith had drawn the character in a comic since the early 1970s, and his artwork had improved in the interim. Windsor-Smith's wry script pitches the barbarian up against his new tortured vampire anti-hero, and includes an astonishing amount of gorgeously rendered blood'n'guts.~AL

Recommended: *Conan the Reaver, Conan vs Rune*

CONAN THE KING

Marvel: *55 issues 1980-1989*

Known as *King Conan* for 1-19, this double-length comic delineated the mighty barbarian's late middle age after he had become King of Aquilonia and taken the harem girl Zenobia as his bride, a period not covered by his creator, Robert E. Howard. Their son, Prince Conn, was showcased, either behaving recklessly, requiring rescue action from Dad, or inquisitively requesting from old buffers tales of his father's past bold strokes.

1-4 adapt L. Sprague deCamp and Lin Carter's *Conan of Aquilonia* stories and 5-8 Sprague de Camp and Bjorn Nyberg's novel *Conan the Avenger*. These eight, by Roy Thomas and John Buscema, are all good, if a little dense. Other seemingly less interested creators, including writers Doug Moench and Don Kraar and artists Mike Docherty (not doing his best work) and Geof Isherwood, slogged on but there is not an interesting issue in the rest of the run. This is not the place to start with this character. Try *Conan The Barbarian* instead.~GK

CONAN THE SAVAGE

Marvel: *10 issues 1995-1996*

Marvel cancelled *Savage Sword of Conan* and swiftly replaced it with this, also a black and white magazine, featuring rather similar stories to those that would have appeared in its forerunner. It includes contributions from the likes of Roy Thomas and John Buscema, although the work of both seems rather weary after so many years producing Conan stories, Chuck Dixon and Rudy Nebres. There doesn't seem to be any discernible difference between the two titles. So, if you liked *Savage Sword of Conan*...~FJ

CONCRETE

Dark Horse: *10 issues, 1 Special 1987-1989*, one-shot ('Earth Day Special') 1990, 4 issue miniseries ('Fragile Creature') 1991-1992*, 2 issue microseries ('Eclectica') 1993, 4 issue miniseries ('Killer Smile') 1994*, 6 issue miniseries ('Think Like a Mountain')1996*, 5 issue miniseries ('Strange Armour') 1997-1998**

Paul Chadwick is hardly the world's most prolific cartoonist, but each of his *Concrete* stories is well thought out, gripping, and has a point. Although some may find the eco-sensitivity of his later books annoying, he points out both sides of the argument and presents enough information to allow readers to make their own minds up, in an action-packed format. His artwork is precise but flowing, centred around meticulous hatching and modulated use of heavy and fine line. His occasional weakness for cosmic splash pages is more than balanced by the simple, but expressive way he draws his central character, who has all the visual charm of a boulder.

Having débuted in early issues of *Dark Horse Presents*, by the solo series, Concrete had evolved into a comic about character. Its first thought is: How does Ron Lithgow, his brain transplanted into a huge, alien cyborg, feel about being near-invulnerable but trapped in a body he doesn't understand, unable to touch, unable to have sex, but capable of walking along the sea bed for an hour or climbing Everest unaided? Throughout the series, Concrete is finding out more about himself both in terms of physiognomy and emotions. Scientist Maureen Vonnegut, who's been assigned to carry out continual testing on his body and whom he soon falls in love with, is key to both channels of exploration. Concrete sets out both to earn a living and to do things ordinary men cannot. In the 1989 colour special he is hoaxed by two artists into thinking the aliens who created him have returned. In 'Fragile Creature', he takes a job on a fantasy film to defray the increasing costs of being a huge rock monster living in a fragile world. 'Killer Smile' is a change of pace as Larry Monroe, his aide-de-camp, is kidnapped by a couple of psychotic teenagers on the run. Chadwick's answer to *Natural Born Killers*, it's both funny and insightful, getting behind the romance of killing. The 'Earth Day Special' introduces a number of devices Chadwick routinely employs in later series, such as drawing landscapes showing what's beneath the ground as well as above it. His stories are more monologues on preserving the earth, while Charles Vess contributes some illustrations to random selections of Thoreau and Moebius turns in a long, wordless tale of two explorers encountering a new, alien civilisation. In 'Think Like a Mountain' Concrete is involved with an Earth First! expedition to save virgin forests in Washington State, at first as an observer and then, comically, as a fake Bigfoot. Each 'Eclectica' contains a couple of short, humorous strips and a series of watercolour paintings, done as commissions, in which the influence of Moebius shows strongly. Finally, in 'Strange Armour' Chadwick revisits Concrete's origin to retell in detail what we're already familiar with. Pleasant, but not earth-shattering.~FJ

Recommended: 1-6, 'Fragile Creatures' 1-4

CONCRETE JUNGLE The Legend of the Black Lion

Acclaim: *1 issue 1998*

Terry Smalls is the son of a hero of the Black Panther Movement, but he's as corrupt as his father was. In fact the premise of this tale is that everybody is on the take, which makes for some excellent writing from Christopher Priest, as the likeable community activist becomes the focus of attention of the Cult of the Black Lion. An intriguing beginning for this spin-off from *Quantum and Woody*, sadly curtailed by the closure of Acclaim's publishing division.~WW

CONFESSIONS OF A CEREAL EATER

NBM: *Graphic Novel 1995, 4 issues + 2000 to date*

A good rule of thumb with autobiographical comics is: if you're going to talk the talk, you have to have walked the walk. The problem with 'Cereal Eater' Rob Maisch is that he possibly has not lived enough. The choice material, tales of high-school, B-movie has-beens and *Star Trek* conventions, is used up in the graphic novel, which boasts very handsome artwork by the Hampton Brothers, Rand Holmes, and the ever wonderful Sandy Plunkett. The comics dwell on anecdotes rather than stories, and suffer accordingly. With art by Scott Hampton's talented but raw art students, it is a less satisfying read.~DAR

THE CONFESSOR

Dark Matter Press: *1 issue 1996*

There are standard horror elements to this, but primary creator C.D. Regan was obviously setting his sights a lot higher, with some subtlety and characterisation accompanying the horrific events. Thrown into the mix are a small girl who's witnessed a black magic sacrifice, a tortured child psychologist and a lunatic fundamentalist christian who believes he has a mission to repel demons from Earth. The art is too dark, and shaky in places, but this was nonetheless a promising, but stillborn, debut.~WJ

CONGO BILL

DC: *7 issues 1954-1955*

Various stories, typically two or three per issue, featuring "ace adventurer" Congo Bill and his sidekick Janu the Jungle Boy. It's a shame they're such boring, pompous characters since work has clearly gone into this comic. The Nick Cardy art is clean and attractive, and the stories involve plots rather than just a succession of fight scenes. Admittedly, they're not compelling plots and they usually hinge on some piece of jungle lore that Congo Bill reveals only at the end, and in that smug, plonking way that makes you want to thump him. The most interesting aspect of the comic is probably the large number of stories involving film-making. They appear in nearly every issue and make it clear that *Congo Bill* grew out of the Saturday serials. Was the comic consciously trying to convince people that *Tarzan* was shot in the Congo and not in California?~FC

CONGORILLA

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1992-1993*

Starting in *Action Comics* from 248 in the late 1950s, Congorilla was a means of attracting interest to the near moribund Congo Bill strip. Jungle explorer Bill acquired the ability to transfer his consciousness into a giant golden gorilla, while being tied tightly to a tree by a scantily clad jungle boy. The latter part was essential to the ritual as the gorilla transferred its consciousness into Bill, leading to much hijinks and boffo yocks. This fine concept was revived in *Swamp Thing* Annual 3 's guest appearance, handled there with as straight a face as possible. Sadly thereafter the Golden Ape of the Jungle was revived for a grim'n'gritty miniseries. Incoherent where it wasn't merely stupid: the resultant mess proves that not every old character can be successfully spin-doctored.~HS

CONJURORS

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1999*

In this Elseworlds tale, the Phantom Stranger, having stolen the powers of magic from ancient demons at the dawn of mankind, may now be all that stands in the way of their return. Variations on some of DC's supernatural heroes, plus the Challengers of the Unknown and Ted Kord, man of science, are on hand to help. Chuck Dixon's depiction of a world that runs on magic is not entirely convincing, but he's good at this sort of action adventure and Eduardo Barreto's artwork has the right period feel.~NF

CONQUEROR

Harrier: *9 issues, 1984-1985, 1 Special 1987*

Initially a gag twist-ending strip in the fanzine *Bem, Conqueror* was extended to a full-length strip as Harrier Comics spun-off from *Bem*. After an initially favourable response, the suspiciously familiar adventures of the spaceship 'Conqueror' and her motley crew had a certain musty charm, helped considerably by the sedate artwork of Dave Harwood, whose renderings gave a very 1950s, *Boy's Own Paper* look to the series. There was also one issue of a companion title, Conqueror Universe, which was stretching the idea a little too thin.~HS

CONQUEROR OF THE BARREN EARTH

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1985*

Once humanity has colonised the universe attentions are turned back to the home planet. By this time Earth is a ravaged wasteland populated by assorted human mutations. Cadet Jinal is assigned to recover the planet wearing folded down thigh boots and a nice blue short skirt in an ordinary sword-and-sorcery romp with a dubious moral subtext. The series débuted in *Warlord* 63.~FP

CONSPIRACY

Marvel: *2 issue microseries 1998*

X-Files meets *Marvels*, as reporter Mark Ewing is given information that seems to indicate that all the founding heroes of the Marvel Dynasty gained their powers as the result of a massive conspiracy by a military, corporate and scientific cabal. An intelligent story by Dan Abnett that leaves matters just open enough for questioning, and grotesque, but appropriately so, painted artwork by Igor Kordey, with a perceptive use of colour to suggest the various time periods involved.~HS

CONSTRUCT

Caliber: *6 issue miniseries 1996*

Verbose yet obscure story of a future dystopia larded with *Brave New World* riffs and haunted by ethereal victims of a faulty teleportation system. Paul Jenkins would do better at Marvel.~HS

CONTEST OF CHAMPIONS

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries (Marvel Superhero Contest of Champions) 1982*, 5 issue miniseries (Contest of Champions II)1999**

In 1982 two competing squads of superheroes had to locate a golden globe. The Collector will be returned to life should Grand Master's team win. They don't, but neither the editor nor any of the omnipotents present notices and it's welcome back, Collector. It's a very ordinary precursor to the crossover titles that were to strangle Marvel for a decade. The return was altogether more logical and satisfactory, with dynamic pencils from Oscar Jimenez (1-3, 5) and Michael Ryan (4, 5), and a better plot, if wordy script, from Chris Claremont in which all Marvel superheroes are abducted, mentally adjusted by nanites and forced to battle each other. An interactive element permitted fans to decide some outcomes, and the fights are well contrasted with Iron Man's role as the sole hero to deduce the truth and his efforts to mount a resistance.~WJ

COOCHY COOTY Men's Comics

Print Mint: *1 issue 1970*

To date this is still the only solo title by Zap regular Robert Williams, and it contains some of the most obsessively detailed artwork and truly bizarre subject-matter ever seen on the printed page. The fact that the lead story is titled 'Coochy Cooty and the Gorilla Women of the Third Reich' speaks volumes. This is not a comic for everyone, but for a certain type of reader it's an absolutely essential purchase.~DAR
Recommended

COPS

DC: *15 issues 1988-1989*

Doug Moench does his best to instil some sort of sophistication into a comic developed to showcase yet another toy at a time when, in place of the bar code, comics sold through comic shops got "DC Comics aren't just for kids!". The Central Organization of Police Specialists consists of different law-enforcement stereotypes with big guns fighting against villains with names like The Big Boss, Dr Badvibes, Buttons McBoomboom and 'Junior' Berserko. Pat Broderick's unrealistic style doesn't help much. The Bart Sears issues (3 and 4) are a better attempt at humanising the plastic policemen.~NF

COPYBOOK TALES

Slave Labor: *6 issues 1996-1997**

Jamie and Thatcher are aspiring comics creators hoping to make it big with their property, "Maskman", but Jamie keeps finding himself distracted by his teenage journals – his copybooks – in which he recorded the day-to-day lives of himself and his friends. Eventually, he decides to try an autobiographical comic inspired by these diaries. Switching the narrative between the present day and the 1980s, writer J. Torres invokes a sense of nostalgia and naïveté that, while touching and endearing, is ultimately depressing, as Jamie becomes preoccupied by his wrong decisions and missed opportunities. Tim Levins' art is very good at conveying emotion, but his practice of drawing everyone with round, childlike features makes it occasionally difficult to immediately distinguish between the 'then' and 'now' segments. This is particularly the case when Torres has tried a clever-clogs Alan Moore-esque transition with someone starting a sentence 'then' and a similar phrase ending 'now'. It's not a major drawback, but it is a definite speed-bump in the reader's enjoyment. Read them, by all means; they're bloody good. But be prepared then to waste half a day in melancholy reflections of your own roads not taken.~HS
Recommended: 1-6

Sandman Presents THE CORINTHIAN

DC/Vertigo: *3 issue miniseries 2001-2002*

The setting is the grandeur of 1920s Venice just before the annual carnival. You've got a lead character who's trying to become a serial killer, and whose eyes are small pairs of teeth. So, how dull can it be? Sadly, extremely. When the start of issue precis has to explain the significance of what you've just read in the previous issue, someone's not doing their job properly. Ponderous and pretentious, the king is in the altogether.~WJ

CORMAC MAC ART

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1990*

Uninspired Roy Thomas adaptation of four of Robert E. Howard's *Cormac Mac Art* stories. Tying them into one storyline may have seemed like a good idea to avoid repetition but there's too much plot to get a decent feel for the character. E.R. Cruz's artwork is static and lacks any real sense of atmosphere. If you must know, the late 5th-century warrior fights druids, Picts, monsters and gods when hired to find the kidnapped daughter of a British chieftain.~NF

CORN FED Comics

Cartoonists Co-Op: *2 issues 1972-1973*

An early solo title from the inimitable Kim Deitch, *Corn Fed* features his 'usual' mixture of midgets, aliens and 'America's favourite psychic detective' Miles Mycroft. The stories frequently revolve around a nostalgia for the 1920s and 1930s and old entertainers of various sorts. Deitch was to go on to greater things, but there's certainly much to enjoy here.~DAR

Recommended: 2

CORNY'S FETISH

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1998*

Corny lives with his small dog. Attracted to the sadness of his neighbour, whose husband he watches die in a garden accident, he tries to communicate with her, building a tableau from a stuffed bird, modelling clay and papier-mâché, and sending her a hand-made chocolate squirrel (from his shop, 'Corny's Chocolate Universe'). The tableau takes shape and direction from vivid dreams of his neighbour and own dead wife, but he neglects his shop and keeps missing his son's visits, his obsession growing. Renée French's simple, yet precise, drawings beautifully evoke the simple desperations of loneliness, and the whole is suffused with melancholy and compassion.~NF

Recommended

CORPORATE CRIME COMICS

Kitchen Sink: *2 issues 1977-1979*

A good mixture of contemporary and historical corporate-sponsored injustices, union-bashing, swindling and tragic lack of concern for basic employee safety. Some, like the case of Karen Silkwood, have since become well publicised, others have been forgotten. Sadly, the message conveyed is that those with enough money can get away with anything.~FP

CORTEZ and the fall of the Aztecs

Tome: *2 issue microseries 1993*

Cortez led the Conquistadors who conquered most of South America on behalf of Spain in the 15th century. The comic itself is interesting, and obviously a labour of love, but feels like an educational tool rather than fun, mainly due to the detail and pages of background text.~DB

CORTO MALTESE

NBM: *8 volumes 1986-1990, 7 issue limited series ('Ballad of the Salt Sea') 1997-1998*

The Harvill Press: *2 volumes 1996*

Hugo Pratt's *Corto Maltese* books, originally published in Europe, are among the most gripping adventure yarns ever told in the comic format. They're the adventures of a mysterious Maltese sailor who seems to wash up wherever history is being made in the early years of this century, from the Easter Rising in Ireland to the Russian Revolution. What distinguishes them from even the best American adventure strips like *Terry and the Pirates* is a philosophical depth and a sense of creative exploration. Corto exists in a world full of fantastic possibilities, and doesn't question meeting Oberon and his fairies in Ireland or having mystical experiences among the cabalistic courtyards of old Venice. But while *A Midwinter Morning's Dream* has its whimsical fairies, it also successfully explores a difficult issue like the founding of Sinn Fein in a way rarely seen in popular literature.

Corto also exists very much in a 'real' world, full of accurate detail, meeting historical characters in books like *Corto in Africa*, a complex exploration of the breakdown of empire in North Africa, full of Lawrence-like agitators, foreign spies, hard-pressed British soldiers and independence-minded natives. By propelling Corto into the centre of the conflict, Pratt can explore the various viewpoints using significant characters such as the mercurial young warrior Cush. Pratt was a great traveller, and based many of the details of his stories around his own experiences, producing hundreds of sketches on his journeys that would later bring his strips to life, commenting sagaciously on the cultures he was presenting in his introductions (sadly omitted from these editions). Corto travels the world in the last possible days of true adventure, before World War II destroyed the glamour, beginning in 'Ballad of the Salt Sea', which NBM only released as a series (UK publisher, The Harvill Press, however, published this and The Celts). Pratt never explains him, never reveals all the secrets. His agenda is often inexplicable, selfless heroism followed by self-seeking machinations. Is he hero or anti-hero? His behaviour is generally better than the extraordinary cast of characters he becomes involved with, but that's not saying much. Throughout the series, from which there are a lot of longer stories still un-translated, Pratt is refining his cartooning style in the same way that Alex Toth pared his down over the years – from pretty basic to complete minimalism. Influenced by the broad brushwork of Caniff and Roy Crane, among many others, there is a rough edge to Pratt's artwork even at its most polished. By *Corto in Siberia*, a long and extremely rewarding chase across Russia by train in search of a hoard of smuggled gold, there is a vast gulf between the foreground figures, drawn by Pratt, and the background details (cars and trains) by his assistants. They almost look as if they've been cut out of a book and pasted in. *Fable of Venice* is the first Corto story in his mature style, expressionistic, ornately patterned, with form often reduced to vague shapes. It also reflects a change in approach to plotting in which actions become even more oblique and the exploration of ideas comes to the fore rather than sitting within a plot-driven structure. But it's also a cracking Masonic mystery in which Pratt draws upon childhood memories of visiting Venice's Jewish quarter to conjure up atmospheric alleyways, hidden gateways guarded by magical symbols and secret societies within societies. Read *Corto Maltese* and you're reading the work of a master storyteller, magnificent in his confidence.~FJ

Recommended: *Corto in Africa, Corto in Siberia, Fable of Venice, A Midwinter Morning's Dream*

Michael Moorcock's The Chronicles of CORUM

First: *12 issue limited series 1987-1988*

Corum is one aspect of Michael Moorcock's 'Eternal Champion' series: the sole survivor of an elder race, he doesn't escape his encounter with the Mabden unscathed. Luckily, he's given a replacement eye able to see into other dimensions, and a replacement demon's hand, which prove both boon and curse. Adapting *The Knight of the Swords* and its two successors at four issues apiece, Mike Baron's scripts never really humanise Corum in any fashion, and the feeling is that those who've not read the original novels might be left scratching their heads. It doesn't stand in the way of a good story, though. The highlight of the run is the magnificent Mike Mignola artwork, particularly as inked by Kelley Jones in 3-6. Although Jones remains to ink succeeding pencillers Jackson Guice, Ken Hooper and Jill Thompson, none match the elegance of Mignola's finely rendered pages.~WJ

Recommended: 3-6

THE COSMIC BOOK

Ace: *1 issue 1986*

After long careers of producing comics for others, Pat Boyette and Fred Himes decided to produce their own. Despite printing what are probably the last two pages of science fiction art Wally Wood produced, and a three page Alex Toth rant on UFOs, it's Boyette's art that shines here, dramatic and full of life, with a stunning pirates centrespread. Himes' story is the best, though, about the perversion of a world, with the first two pages the best use of colour in an otherwise very poorly coloured comic.~FP

COSMIC BOY

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1986-1987*

Legion of Super-Heroes co-founder Cosmic Boy and his significant other Night Girl become trapped in the twentieth century. They have an inconclusive scuffle with the Time Trapper, and find their way home with the plot continued in *Legion of Super-Heroes*. Cos comes across as an amazingly liberated guy who's not threatened by his girl-friend's vastly superior strength, but that's the sole, and accidental, interesting aspect.~HS

COSMIC ODYSSEY

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1988-1989**

Complete gobbledygook in terms of what's meant to be happening, but Jim Starlin's characterisation makes for a surprisingly successful read, and Mike Mignola's artwork (after early reminders of Walt Simonson) is splendidly appropriate. The Anti-Life Equation is discovered to have sentience and a desire to return to the universe that contains Earth, New Genesis and Apokolips. Darkseid and High Father decide to recruit a band of superheroes to battle the four aspects of the Equation that are threatening four planets – Earth, Rann, Thangor and Xanshi – the destruction of any two of which will cause a cosmic upheaval which will destroy the galaxy. Why this will happen is nonsense, and Starlin wilfully disregards what is already known about Jack Kirby's Fourth World, let alone facts about characters as diverse as The Demon, Dr Fate, Orion and John Stewart. Mignola's efforts deserved better.~NF

COSMIC POWERS

Marvel: *6 issue miniseries 1994*

Oddly structured limited series essentially comprising solo tales of various cosmic entities. A framing sequence dictated by Thanos links all the stories and takes centre stage in the first and last issues as he pulls strings around Terrax, Jack of Hearts, Ganymede, Legacy, Morg and Tyrant. Ron Marz writes and Various Artists pencil forty pages of story per issue with as much substance and reading-time as a regular twenty-page comic, owing to the profusion of double-page spreads and single-page panels. Exceptional artwork would merit the format. This doesn't. Plots go through the motions. 4 starring Legacy, the 1990s Captain Marvel, is the pick.~APS

COSMIC POWERS UNLIMITED starring Silver Surfer

Marvel: *5 issues 1995-1996*

Thick, glossy, sixty-four page mothers weighing in at a hundred grams apiece. Each issue anthologises two or three cosmic tales, many spotlighting the newer generation of cosmic heroes: Kismet, Sundragon, Ganymede and Xenith. More established entities such as Silver Surfer, Quasar and Beta Ray Bill ensure a blue-chip feel. The largely unconnected stories are scripted by Many Writers and pencilled by Even More Artists. It is a sad reflection on the series that the traditional Silver Surfer, Thanos and Captain Marvel openers in 1 stand head and shoulders above the subsequent newer concepts. Describing these as ordinary would be unwarranted flattery and the Lunatik short in 3 leaps out as an appallingly blatant *Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* rip-off.~APS

COSMIC RAY

Image: *2 issues 1999*

The only seemingly original idea in this unably drawn pompous and feeble hodgepodge of private eye and science fiction clichés is that of North and South Dakota united as one state. Please pardon uncontrollable excitement.~GK

THE COUGAR

Atlas: *2 issues 1975*

Dull genre title about a stuntman who sees off a vampire, then a werewolf. The blurb for issue 3 promised "the most devastatingly different superhero of all time", and for once there might have been truth to the claim since the Cougar broke his spine in 2. Alas, the third issue was never published.~FP

COUNTDOWN

WildStorm: *8 issue limited series 2000-2001*

Countdown begins intriguingly enough with a group of flawed humans given super-powers seemingly at random. There is a point and purpose, though, but a left turn into space-opera halfway through while good for team bonding, loses the few unique qualities the title has. This is by no means a bad series, and plenty will enjoy it, but there are many better.~WJ

COUNTER-PARTS

Tundra: *3 issue miniseries 1993*

A wealth of interesting concepts and a surfeit of alliterative dialogue characterise this strange story about a future where personalities can be switched and replaced. When composite body parts from an experiment gone wrong assume their own agenda, allying themselves with rebels, the social structure begins to collapse. Obviously not to be taken seriously, there are amusing moments but by and large *Counter-Parts* is too clever for its own good, sacrificing coherency and structure for each opportunity to include another pun or whimsical thought.~FP

A COUPLE OF WINOS

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1991*

Adapted from one of the autobiographical short stories collected in *South Of No North*, Charles Bukowski's low-key slice of dirty realism really is about a couple of winos – two unnamed drifters who get work laying railway tracks, before blowing their meagre wages on whores and booze. The Moebius-influenced line-style of German artist Matthias Schultheiss perfectly captures Bukowski's bleak view of human nature.~AL

Recommended

THE COURAGEOUS PRINCESS

Antarctic: *One-shot 2000*

There's great delicacy and charm to this traditional-style fairy tale concocted by Rod Espinosa. The Princess Mabelrose grows up loved and happy in a small kingdom, discovers the pretensions of the city are not for her, is captured by a dragon and escapes. The bare bones of this plot are delightfully filled in by Espinosa, using the standbys of the genre, and this is a rare comic with appeal to all ages (apart from teenagers).~WJ

COURTNEY CRUMRIN AND THE NIGHT THINGS

Oni Press: *4 issue miniseries 2002**

Ignored by her shallow parents and spurned by her classmates, Courtney develops her own company while showing an interest in her allegedly infirm Uncle, a wizard. She also has an affinity for goblins, demons and other such creatures. Ted Naifeh's magical fantasy has elements in common with both *Scary Godmother* and the works of Roman Dirge in its whimsical look at the supernatural, but the most obvious touchstone is the dark children's tales of Edward Gorey. Every issue is self-contained, and likely to have broad appeal to anyone out of their teens or not quite there yet.~WJ

Recommended: 1-4

COUSCOUS EXPRESS

AIT/Planer Lar: *Graphic Novel 2002*

Couscous Express is the name of the award-winning restaurant run by motormouth sixteen year old Olive's parents. When it looks as if they're being shaken down she has her petty criminal boyfriend intervene. Brian Wood writes a very good slice of urban adventure with a distinct narrative voice, that would transfer very well to film, which makes it a shame that Brett Weldele's sparse art sucks so much of the life from it. Muddy panels, sketchy features, and flat effects combine to distract from the story. Take a flick through, and if you can live with the art you'll be rewarded.~FP

COUTOO

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1994*

Collected from its appearances in *Cheval Noir* (8-11), *Coutoo* is a strange thriller about a murderer who's been killed but whose spirit keeps moving on. A detective whose father killed Coutoo (meaning 'knife') is assigned to the latest slayings and begins to find odd clues to the real nature of the killer and his father's recent illness. Illustrated and written by Andreas in a style that's looser and more experimental than his *Rork* stories, this is atmospheric and nicely done but, in the end, lacks depth.~NF

COVEN

Awesome: *6 issues 1997-1998, one-shot ('Fantom Special') 1998, one-shot ('Black & White') 1998, series two 3 issues 1999, one-shot ('Dark Origins') 1999*

Avatar: *2 issues (½-1) ('Spellcaster') 2001, 3 issues (½-2) ('Dark Sister') 2001, 2 issues (½-1) ('Tooth & Nail') 2002*

The Coven consists of Fantom (half-human vampiress), Scratch (Catholic priest possessed by a demon) and Blackmass (leader, descendent of Cain). 1-4 deal with the recruitment of Spellcaster (white witch with owl familiar) and Phenomena (can tell when trouble's coming) and the attempt by the villainous Pentad to resurrect Cain using five Christ-held objects. A story set in New Orleans featuring Fantom's brothel and a race of goblins follows, but isn't concluded. The 'Fantom Special' introduces Fantom's werewolf brother, Kristophe. 'Black & White' showcases Fantom, Phenomena and Scratch in short stories, while the second series begins guest starring Supreme. 'Dark Origins' is a badly coloured version of two thirds of 'Black & White'. The Avatar issues effectively ignore Blackmass and Phenomena, as 'Spellcaster' and 'Dark Sister' concentrate on Spellcaster's fight for her mother's soul and against her sister. In 'Tooth and Nail', Kristophe tries to kill Spellcaster leading into the origin of Fantom. Created by Ian Churchill, who drew and co-wrote the Awesome series with Jeph Loeb, there's a strong sense in the first series that the characters have purpose and that there's an interesting world being laid out in the stories. The tone can be both light-hearted and horrific, while Churchill clearly enjoys drawing scantily clad people. Unfortunately, this is frittered away in subsequent issues and at Avatar different artists, including Al Rio, all ensure a lot of female posing at the expense of a decent story. Avatar's treatment is exemplified by the fact that they've published seven comics in sixty-two different editions.~NF

COVEN 13

No Mercy: *1 issue 1997*

Drummer with poodle-mulleted rockers Poison, Rikki Rockett (possibly not his birth name) wrote this story and added "color effects". Three alluring modern-day witches discover an illegal trade in kidnapping pets for sale to science labs, but are arrested by the police, from whom they escape by flashing their assets. Not much plot for twenty-four pages, and while Matt Busch's heavily photo-referenced painting is good, it's also static and doesn't tell a story.~WJ

COVENTRY

Fantagraphics: *3 issues 1996-1997*

A great cover of a small frog heralds Bill Willingham's series. The title, which is the only other item on the cover, refers to an American state very similar to Oregon, except that it's also a nexus for magic, with assorted supernatural visitations and occurrences affecting day-to-day life. Claudia Nevermore is the person to call when you want something sorted out. The first issue gives little away, but introduces several eccentric characters and lots of frogs, all extremely nicely drawn by Willingham. A rather appalling demon is introduced in 2, and the series was moving along nicely when Willingham pulled the plug for reasons best known to himself.~FP

COVER-UP LOWDOWN

Rip Off: *1 issue 1977*

Flip-book pocket-sized compendium of every conspiracy theory going from Jay Kinney and Paul Mavrides. Amongst other pieces it includes such gems as 'Lee Harvey Oswald: Robot or Rastafarian?' and 'You Killed Kennedy and Here's the Proof!', but the undoubted highlight is an inspired self-assemble Moebius-strip flow-chart of conspiracies, linking the Vatican to Will Eisner and the Beach Boys to Satan.~DAR

COVERED IN GLORY The 26th North Carolina at Gettysburg

The Heritage Collection: *One-shot 1996*

The second of a series imparting the history of the American Civil War. This is far more successful than its predecessor, Shiloh, in presenting a decisive battle, working because it doesn't attempt to show the entire battle from numerous aspects. Wayne Vansant's art is stiff, but adequate, and his approach of humanising the conflict by focusing on ordinary troops as well as the top ranks makes for an enjoyable history lesson.~FP

COW-BOY

Ogre Press: *One-shot 1997*

Having run as a strip in *Comics Buyer's Guide* for a few years, this was Cow-Boy's first solo outing. Anyone failing to work their way through the very dry and over-long first strip will have missed out on a good-natured, silly and amusing superhero parody. Cow-Boy has the speed and agility of a cow, and has constructed a battle udder to help him fight crime. There are elements, including the punchline to one strip, that won't have the same impact for someone not well versed in comics, but then presumably superhero parodies will have no appeal for the uninitiated anyway. Jay Hosler is an adaptable cartoonist and presumably progressed to better paying work than self-published comics.~WJ

COWBOY BEBOP

Tokyopop: *4 issue miniseries 2002, 3 volumes 2002*

Bounty Hunters, Spike Spiegel, Faye Valentine and Jet Black, along with computer expert, Ed (female) and intelligent dog, Ein, are more often than not hungry, because they never seem to have much luck with the rewards of their profession. This is either through bad luck or because the job turns out to have some hidden catch or even because they're just too kind-hearted.

In the miniseries, they all turn up to arrest different criminals at the same restaurant (1) and Spike has to go to prison to break out their target (2). In 3, Faye chases a loser in love who's put out a bounty on himself (but only women are allowed to collect it) and Jet's past in the Inter Solar Systems Police comes back to haunt him in a tale of corruption in 4. The volumes begin with a reprint of the miniseries and then continue with further humorous misadventures.

This manga captures much of the spirit and humour of the anime series on which it's based, thanks to the writing of Hajime Yadate, but, with Yutaka Nanten's lacklustre artwork, misses out on the cartoon's impressive style, to which the musical soundtrack and kinetic animation add a great deal.~NF

THE COWBOY WALLY SHOW

Doubleday: *Graphic Novel 1988*

Presented as if the reader were watching a documentary, this is the story of Cowboy Wally's enduring popularity. Beginning with his start in children's television as a result of the (implied) blackmail of a studio boss, he's quickly moved to prime time after parental complaints about inappropriate content. The running joke then is that his shows never last more than two weeks; even his own network, for which he only appears in half of the shows, runs into financial and then legal trouble as Wally's gambling debts force him to promote the mob, allegedly. The second chapter is the running of 'The Sands of Blood', his first film with actor and writer Lenny Walsh, whose melancholy suffuses a tale of despair in the French Foreign Legion – though Wally does rewrite the ending. Directing his own, day-in-the-life, documentary, which takes up chapter three, Wally attends a meal with some filmmaking friends and is asked to make them a film before the end of the tax year. Lenny jokingly suggests Hamlet, which Wally then has only a week to make, from prison, as he and Lenny are arrested after leaving the restaurant. The final chapter covers the first episode of Wally's talk show, on which one old friend (enemy) tries to kill him and another decides to kill himself.

Wally is big, loud and his own biggest fan. Lenny is sensitive and 'cranky'. Yet, through their dialogue, Kyle Baker makes all of his characters believable. The artwork is very good indeed, as Baker's fine line creates some rich textures. Baker's satire on television and film is funny, sometimes laugh-out-loud hilarious, often witty, but mostly very subtle. A real pleasure.~NF

Recommended

COYOTE

Marvel/Epic: *16 issues 1983-1986*

Returning from a self-imposed exile from mainstream comics, hot 1970s writer Steve Englehart, with artist Marshall Rogers, originally presented Coyote in 2-8* of the black and white Eclipse anthology title. This material was then coloured and collected in the 1984 'I Am Coyote' graphic novel. At Epic Englehart and new artist Steve Leialoha continued the story of Sly Santangelo, shape-changing superhero educated in "the ways of the were-world". For purely personal reasons Sly, as Coyote, is waging a war against "an international conclave of unknown dimensions, dedicated to toppling the North American Governments", called The Shadow Cabinet. Leialoha's fine artwork on 1-2, beautifully coloured by the artist and Steve Oliff, is ideally suited to Englehart's ambitious combination of South American mysticism, Arab/Israeli conflict and security-service conspiracy. Sadly deadline problems forced Leialoha off the title.

He was replaced by the inexperienced Chas Truog, whose slapdash pencils brought the flaws in Englehart's scripting into sharper relief. His headstrong, arrogant central character was difficult to warm to, the sub-Castaneda waffle quickly became tiresome, and the conflict between Coyote and The Shadow Cabinet mutated into a mundane alien-invasion plot. Finding an inker for the crude, and apparently unpopular, Truog also proved problematic. Bob Wiacek, Richard Howell and Frank Springer all tried their hand, with varying degrees of success. 7-10 also featured back-up strip The Djinn, an entertaining Middle Eastern adventure written by Englehart and drawn by Steve Ditko, one of this legendary creator's most satisfying late works. The first part, inked by Steve Leialoha, is especially fine, and shows how good artwork brings out the best in Englehart's writing.~AL

Recommended: 7-10

CRACKED

Major Magazines: *213 issues 1958-1985*
Globe Communications: *126 issues (214-339) 1985-1999*
American Media: *19 issues (340-358) 2000-2001*

If Mad was number one in a field of hundreds, then *Cracked* was a very honourable second. For 1-10 men's magazine publisher Bob Sproul appointed Sol Brodsky as editor, and he in turn brought his pals from the recently imploded Atlas bullpen. While there's no disguising that *Cracked*'s look and subject matter was shamelessly cribbed right down to its nebbish janitor mascot Sylvester T. Smythe, it was undeniably a handsome piece of work. The line-up of talent that included Carl Burgos, Bill Everett, Russ Heath, Joe Maneely, Gray Morrow, John Severin, Syd Shores, and Angelo Torres (with Bill Elder in 5, 6 and 10 and two pages of Basil Wolverton also in 10), it was undeniably a very handsome piece of work. Brodksy left after a year, accompanied by his artists with the very important exception of John Severin who would become the principal artist for the rest of the run.

Under new editor Paul Laikin *Cracked* settled into the mix of TV and Movie satire spoofs and humour features that would define it. Laikin and his editorial successors and Bob Sproul crafted decent enough scripts (with contributions from future underground star Jay Lynch between 1963 and 1966), but it was Severin who gave this title its real quality. From his beautifully painted covers to his varied approaches to gags and strips and his incredible gift for likenesses, a match even for *Mad*'s Mort Drucker, Severin was a class act and well worth the price of admission.

In several of the post-Brodsky issues Severin was joined by an on-form Jack Davis (11-17, 24, 40, 80), but as the 1960s progressed, the magazine built up a varied roster of its own cartoonists. These including Vic Martin, Don Orehek and pin-up king Bill Ward, who'd contributed to the earliest issues. By the 1970s they were joined by the savage pen of Charles Rodrigues and the slicker than slick Howard Nostrand, with scripts by Joe Catalano and George Gladir. With sales at this point over 400,000 an issue this was certainly the commercial heyday. Never one to miss a trick, Sproul augmented the monthly magazine with a seemingly endless array of reprint specials and paperbacks, even instituting a British edition.

The 1980s saw *Cracked* acquired by Globe Communications and a new editor in the left-field Mort Todd. Under Todd, and later Michael Delle-Femine, the comic sought to reposition itself as a more adventurous cutting-edge magazine, and consequently he brought in such talents as Dan Clowes, Rick Altergott and Evan Dorkin. Todd also pulled off the coup of the decade in 1987 by poaching Don Martin (from 234 to 287) when Martin tired of *Mad*'s policy of not returning artwork. Other veterans who contributed to *Cracked* in the 1980s included Steve Ditko (218, 223, 225, 226, 231) and Pat Boyette (244, 248). If the 1970s was the commercial highpoint, this was a creative period during which Cracked generally outshone the staid *Mad*, regularly beating them to A-list topics for parody, and bettering the *Mad* versions to boot. This was all done under adverse conditions as well, with institutions realising the credibility of a *Mad* parody and providing advance materials, but generally not aware of *Cracked*. Delle-Femine's replacement as editor was Jerry DeFuccio, whose years at Mad resulted in a more conservative style, and by the 1990s, Cracked had become increasingly marginalised despite the ever-present Severin and a new generation of cartoonists, including Tom Richmond on more recent parodies. When new publishers American Media inherited *Cracked* by default, after a period of maintaining the status quo, they slashed contributor rates, thereby shunting out Severin, and a new edition hasn't been seen in almost two years.

For collectors, the truth is that no-one needs the entire run, but it's a title warranting an occasional glance if for nothing more than Severin's glorious artwork.~DAR

CRAP

Fantagraphics: *7 issues 1993-1995*

J.R. Williams, who writes and draws *Crap*, is a very funny and accomplished underground cartoonist. Much of his early work, including brilliantly inventive and anarchic wordless minicomics such as *Mr. Artistic* and *Mr. Badd*, entirely in silhouette, is collected in *Fun House* (published by Starhead in 1993).

Crap presents more conventional, albeit mature, work. Most of the lead strips concern the tribulations of an old Williams character, Milt the Mutation, his socially inept housemates, and their various addictive behaviours. Sadly, Williams' drawing style seems to have relaxed too much and there are fewer panels, and they're larger and more repetitive. It's all a little lame and predictable, rather like a television sitcom. The characters, a cowardly aspiring writer who drinks too much, a fragile recovering bulimic, an extreme feminist, a jock and a nerd, are too like real boring and pathetic people to be very funny. The dry, perhaps would-be educational tone is maintained in autobiographical work such as 'My Bad Trip' in 6.

It's not all disappointing, though. 'Milt The Mutation

* Available in a collected edition

Goes To Heaven' in 7 is marvellously bleak, as is 'The Junkeez', a violent fantasy about consumerism gone wrong, and 'Sheep', in 5, is a self-mocking piece about non-conformist ranting. Williams remains an interesting talent well worth investigating.~GK

The Incredible CRASH DUMMIES

Harvey: *2 issues 1993-1994*

Crash test dummies take on the evil Junkman and a bunch of mummies in this poorly-drawn computer game tie-in. If you really care, 2 also has an origin story.~DB

CRASH METRO and the Star Squad

Oni Press: *1 issue 1999*

A pastiche tribute to 1950's science fiction shows such as *Tom Corbett, Space Cadet*. All-American Star Squadder Crash hurtles through the heavens losing crewmen and slaughtering aliens and robots in equal measure in a practically plotless tale from Mike Allred and Martyn Ontiveros.~WW

CRASH RYAN

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1984-1985*

Writer and artist Ron Harris revives the classic adventure strip with 1930s flyer Crash Ryan having to face a pulp villain called The Doom. Sadly, talent doesn't match ambition, and while the plot is fine adventure, Harris' artwork falls short of the folk he's trying to emulate, particularly in a rushed issue 4. Crash re-appears in *Dark Horse Presents* 44-46.~WJ

CRAZY

Marvel: *94 issues, 1 Special 1973-1983*

Crazy was one of many shameless rip-offs of *Mad*, and it's only surprising feature was its longevity. Like *Mad* it was a mixture of film and TV spoofs, text, and, in this case borrowing from *National Lampoon*, photo strips. Sadly, what it lacked was a sense of humour. In its favour the first few issues boasted some top-flight artists: Mike Ploog (1, 4, 7), Neal Adams (2) and Ralph Reese (2, 3) in addition to the inevitable Marie Severin. The magazine soon became dominated by lesser talents, though, many of them shameless Mort Drucker clones, and most issues have little of interest. Towards the end of its run *Crazy* revived Howard The Duck for a number of very poor short strips and introduced the world to the wretched Obnoxio The Clown. Avoid.~DAR

CRAZYMAN

Continuity: *Series one 3 issues 1992, series two 4 issues 1993-1994*

Typical for a Continuity production, Crazyman mixed decent artwork with absolutely unintelligible writing, in this case applied to one of comics' most repellent characters. Despite principal artist Dan Barry's best efforts the title is more likely to be remembered for the stupid gimmick of the second-series première: yes, each and every one of the pages is cut in the shape of Crazyman's head. Under no circumstances should this be considered a recommendation, however.~DAR

CREATURE

Antarctic: *2 issues 1997*

Yakuza, gargoyles, demons, aliens, female ninja warriors and rampaging tax investigators – this comic has it all! Unfortunately, it doesn't have a clue what to do with any of it! People stayed away from the resultant mess in hordes, resulting in a second-issue drop to black & white from colour, then an abrupt cancellation.~HS

CREATURE COMMANDOS

DC: *8 issue limited series 2000*

Tim Truman, Scot Eaton and Ray Kryssing reboot the old series from Weird War Tales. It's the same basic premise as before, with the US military turning humans into versions of classic monsters such as a Frankenstein construct, a werewolf, a vampire and even an undead cyborg. Rather than sticking it to the Japs and the Hun, though, this time only an invading extra-dimensional horde are threat enough to need such grisly opposition. Mindless rubbish but oddly satisfying.~WW

CREATURES OF THE ID

Caliber: *1 issue 1990*

A beautiful black and white anthology, this forerunner to *Graphique Musique/Grafik Musik* contains the first appearance of Michael Allred's Frank Einstein, the character who will eventually become Madman, in a real gem of a tale. The other two stories, both illustrated by Allred, are written by Jeffrey Lang.~JC
Recommended

CREATURES ON THE LOOSE

Marvel: *28 issues (10-37) 1971-1975*

Numeration continues from *Tower of Shadows*. 10 features Marvel's first King Kull strip. 11-15 reprint weird/horror short stories. Gullivar Jones and Thongor occupy 16-21 and 22-29 respectively. The former is an early version of John Carter, concerning a man teleported to Mars to engage in heroic fantasy battles. Created by Lin Carter, Thongor is a Conan clone in all respects bar quality, which is abominable.

In *Amazing Spider-Man* 124-125, J. Jonah Jameson's astronaut son John was revealed to have discovered a weird gem on the moon which embodied the essence of an alien intelligence and transformed him into a werewolf at night. Man Wolf won his own series from issue 30, limply scripted by Doug Moench and Tony Isabella until Dave Kraft and George Pérez evolved his storyline into a gem of a tale from 33. Pérez's first full published stories in comics were cancelled in a most intriguing situation which eventually saw conclusion three years later in *Marvel Premiere* 45-46.~APS
Recommended: 33-37

The CREECH

Image: *3 issue miniseries 1997*, 3 issue miniseries ('Out For Blood') 2001*

Spawn artist Greg Capullo, in his first attempt at writing, cooks up a version of Frankenstein via Man-Thing, involving Roswell Incident aliens, aborted foetus tissue, cloning, religious fundamentalists and Christ-like sacrifice It's all rather too much for 75 pages of comics. Capullo's art is fine, though, and the big Creech (short for creature) himself, with his hair of metal snakes and his skateboarder's kneepads, is comically impressive. The literary abuses throughout scarcely prepare the reader for Capullo's exceptionally self-aggrandizing and semi-literate text features, though, and, unsurprisingly, no editor is mentioned anywhere. In the second series each issue is twice as long, making room for the hero's ex-girlfriend, a nauseating interfering long curly-haired buxom psychiatrist, whose violent exit is not the only trick Capullo has borrowed from Frank Miller, but it's all well done again.~GK

CREED

Hall of Heroes: *2 issues 1994-1995*
Lightning: *One-shot 1995, Two 3 issues 1995, 3 issue miniseries ('Cranial Disorder') 1996, one-shot ('The Good Ship and the Journey Home') 1997*
Avatar: *2 issue microseries ('Use Your Delusion') 1998*
Gearbox Press: *2 issue microseries ('Mechanical Evolution') 2000, 2 issue microseries ('Apple Tree') 2000-2001*
Image: *4 issue miniseries ('Utopiate') 2002*

Schoolboy Mark Farley is The CreeD, a kind of garbage disposal unit for the realm of dreams. With his friend and mentor CJ, the talking, shape-changing frog has to periodically pop into dreamland to beat the stuffings out of various menaces, when all he really wants to do is impress his classmate, Mary. It has a sort of rough charm, but very little actually differentiates one story from another. The exception is 'The Good Ship and the Journey Home', which feels a touch more personal, perhaps because Trent Kaniuga chose to retire the series (temporarily it seems) with that issue. What followed was rushed microseries that dwell on the increasing "leakage" of dreamland phenomena into the real world. It's as if Kaniuga wants to stay true to his original concept of the disaffected teen and the disorientation of the jump to adulthood, whilst keeping the stories commercial. He reveals to his best friend Walter just who and what he is.

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* Available in a collected edition

There's a subplot where Walter runs away from home to live on CreeD's roof. CreeD even gets a new 'costume' but the series flounders until 'Utopiate'. No longer simply content to bounce between worlds and classrooms, and presumably due to the advent of Christina Z as scripter, Mark is allowed to grow a little. He meets a girl who may be the same kind of being he is, only to fall under the influence of a real world sorcerer who may be able to reveal the true nature of the universe. The first Lightning Comics issue is a compilation reprint of the Hall of Heroes series.~WW

Beware The CREEPER

DC: *Series one 6 issues 1968-1969, series two 12 issues (1-11, 1,000,000) 1997-1998*

In his initial appearance in *Showcase* 73 maverick newscaster Jack Ryder attended a costume party wearing a green wig, curly scarlet cape and yellow body paint, very similar to artist Steve Ditko's earlier Madmen from *Blue Beetle* 3. Whilst there he rescued Professor Yatz an imprisoned scientist. The grateful Yatz injected him with strength-enhancing chemicals and also implanted a small device that enabled Ryder to instantly appear as The Creeper and vice versa – a completely secure secret identity was a major theme in Ditko's work in the late 1960s. Striking fear into the hearts of wrongdoers with his maniacal laughter and scary turn of phrase, The Creeper is Ditko's major contribution to DC's characters, one sadly doomed to guest appearances and back-ups. The first run features escalating appearances by arch-enemy Proteus, a criminal with a white, featureless face that can be moulded into any human likeness. Scripter Denny O'Neil, who shared scripting credits with his own pseudonym Sergius O'Shaughnessy, was pulling in a different direction to Ditko and this produced a well-balanced start to the series. When, however, O'Neil's dialogue altered plots, seemingly with the approval of editor Dick Giordano, Ditko's departure was inevitable. Many hands are discernible on the disappointing swansong including inker Mike Peppe, Giordano and a final section drawn by Jack Sparling. Ditko's Creeper soloed again in *First Issue Special* 7 before appearing as back-up in *Adventure Comics* 445-447, *Flash* 318-323, and *Worlds Finest* 249-255, only in the latter written and drawn by Ditko.

The revival of the Creeper in his own title was by writer Len Kaminski. The Creeper is portrayed as being driven mad by his dual personalities, and his insane laughter is identified as a paralysing super-power. His cape moves like plant tendrils at his command, and his body heals so fast that guns don't stop him. Kaminski's revisionist origin spanned 1-4, and a journalist's job along with the beginnings of a supporting cast arrived with 5. As long as you can stand Kaminski's enthusiasm for crazy dialogue this is a surprisingly rewarding new start, despite the severity of the revisions. The stylish art team of Shawn Martinbrough inked by Sal Buscema, tastefully coloured by Sheri Van Valkenburgh, hardly put a foot wrong in what is a good example of a readable modern superhero comic.~SW

Recommended: Series one 1-3, series two 1-4

CREEPS

Image: *4 issue miniseries 2001-2002*

Guardians of a city beset by corruption that stems from corporate giant The Genesys Corporation, The Creeps are led by a blind empath called Eyeball. They include a mountain of saggy flesh named Gelulite, a two-headed woman called Debs, a fountain of mucus known as Booger, a half skinny/half muscular man named Breaker, a terrifying aggregation of insects called Chitter. Unnamed misfits including a cannibal armed with a knife and fork and a porcelain masked girl as well as Mrs Skank who is a pheromonally manipulative bag lady. Genesys executive Mr G tries to cover up their interference in public affairs but The Creeps lead a crowd of citizens in protest. Yes, that's right – the heroes in this book really are revolting! Dan Mishkin writes a well-woven conspiracy whilst artist Tom Mandrake misses no opportunity to outrage the reader with The Creeps' stomach turning behaviour. This needs to be looked at as a mixture of black humour and drama to dispel the suspicion that it may simply be the authors slipping you an emetic.~SW

CREEPY

Warren: *145 issues, 5 Yearbooks 1965-1985*
Harris: *1 issue 1985*

Spawning a host of imitators over twenty years, *Creepy* was a black and white magazine-sized anthology title in the tradition of EC's horror comics. As with any anthology the contents were inevitably variable in both subject matter and quality, but *Creepy* was blessed with two periods of consistent excellence.

For the earlier issues publisher Jim Warren managed to reassemble almost all the major EC horror artists, and in editor/writer Archie Goodwin he had the ideal man to bring out the best in them. Artists like Reed Crandall, Angelo Torres, Alex Toth, Gray Morrow and Johnny Craig were all on top of their form and produced far too many notable stories to list in detail here. A few, however, deserve particular mention, like 'Werewolf' in 1, regular cover painter Frank Frazetta's last comic strip; 'Success Story', also in 1, by Al Williamson, in which a conniving cartoonist is killed by his assistants (ironically reflecting the much-assisted Williamson's own work patterns); and 'Collector's Edition', by Steve Ditko, in 10. Perhaps the best art of this period was to be found in 14's glorious 'Curse of the Vampire' by the young Neal Adams. Sadly, by 17 almost all the Warren artists and, vitally, Goodwin had suddenly left.

Between 17 and 34 *Creepy* was a sorry mixture of reprints and dross, only occasionally enlivened by the odd Tom Sutton strip. With the exception of 32, containing the Harlan Ellison and Neal Adams collaboration 'Rock God', these issues are best avoided, and it was only with the return of Archie Goodwin in 35 that things improved. Creepy briefly became a showcase for fresh talent, introducing the likes of Richard Corben (36), Frank Brunner (39), Dave Cockrum (39), Don McGregor (40) and Bruce Jones (41) to a wider audience. Goodwin also enticed Wally Wood back for two memorable science-fiction and fantasy epics in 38 and 40. More significant, however, was the discovery of Spanish artists, first featured in 42, who came to dominate the title. An early triumph was Lynn Marron's 'Spellbound', breathtakingly illustrated by José Luis Garcia-Lopez, though strips by the likes of Felix Mas, Esteban Maroto and José Béa were also highly impressive. The Spaniards brought a unique illustrative flair to their work and were technically far in advance of their American counterparts.

Creepy's second golden age began with 50 and the appointment of Bill Dubay as editor. Whereas Goodwin's stories had been largely sting-in-the-tail material, Dubay's stable of writers (Jim Stenstrum, Budd Lewis, Steve Skeates, Jack Butterworth, Gerry Boudreau and Rich Margopoulos) favoured more psychological subjects and denser scripts. *Creepy* was soon crammed with excellent stories and there's something of interest in every issue between 50 and 90. Along with top-flight Spaniards like José Ortiz and Luis Bermejo, Dubay enticed back Alex Toth (75-80) and John Severin while Richard Corben was a regular (54, 56-64, 66-70, 73, 77, 83, 84). The best artist of the period was Berni Wrightson, who produced a number of memorable strips in 62, 63, 87 and 95, often with Warren's top writer Bruce Jones. Other stories of note from this period are 'Creeps', by Goodwin, Wood and Severin, and 'Unreal', a silent-movie tribute by Alex Toth, both in 78, and the horrifying shark story 'In Deep' by Jones and Corben in 83. Undoubtedly the best story in this or any other Warren comic was 'Thrillkill' in 75, by Jim Stenstrum and Neal Adams, a deeply troubling story of a rooftop sniper, which epitomises the literate approach of the Dubay era.

Dubay also introduced the notion of theme issues, an idea continued under his successor, from 79, Louise Jones. Notable themes were Edgar Allan Poe (69, 70), sports (84, 93), monsters (85), Mars (87) and sharks (101). Early Jones issues were largely indistinguishable from Dubay's, but as time went on she increasingly turned to American artists instead of Spaniards, built up her own stable of writers and played down the sex and violence that had begun to creep into the comic. Highlights of her editorship were the strips by Russ Heath (79, 83, 92, 100, 105) and Alex Niño (94, 96, 97, 100, 101, 104, 105, 108, 112). Issues after 100 are far less consistent than earlier ones and, although not without merit, many later issues lack the inspiration of the comic's glory years, a situation the returning Bill Dubay in 117 failed to rectify. The last few years saw increasing gore and reprints. On the plus side Dubay did bring back his favourite writers and Spanish artists, although the best art of the period came from little-known Filipinos Anton Caravana (125, 126) and Noly Panaligan (127, 128, 131). It was clear, however, that the comic had lost direction and it was no surprise when Creepy was cancelled.

The early *Creepy* Yearbooks reprinted the best of the magazine's strips and when they ceased the tradition was continued in the regular title (48, 55, 65, 74, 82, 91 103), with later issues concentrating on the work of a particular artist. Wrightson (113), Nino (119), Severin (121), Corben (132), Williamson (137), Toth (139) and Torres (142) were collected, and for casual readers would be the ideal introduction. In 1985 Harris published a low print run issue consisting of some new material and choice reprints, but a series failed to materialise and copies are now almost impossible to find. Harris later published a paperback featuring a good selection of stories from 1-17.~DAR

Recommended: 1-16, 38, 41, 46, 50-90, 95, 100, 112

CREEPY

Harris: *4 issue miniseries 1992*

Although using the same logo and host, this bears little relation to the Warren title. On a dark and stormy night eight people arrive at a mysterious house to be confronted with their past and the consequences thereof. Main writer Peter David toys with familiar clichés, but is adept enough to sidestep them while keeping the reader interested to the end. A selection of fine artists including Dave Cockrum, Gene Colan, Carmine Infantino, Jim Mooney and Tom Sutton contribute.~WJ

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Lev Gleason: *74 issues 1948-1955*

Anthology comic relating 'true stories' of the inevitable downfall of gangsters and hoodlums. A companion title and very much weak sister to the groundbreaking *Crime Does Not Pay*, the stories never quite seemed to match the quality of its forerunner, often substituting over the top histrionics and sensationalism for the well-paced procedural pieces that made CDNP such a commercial and critical hit. The art however is consistently of the very highest standard. Incidentally, the title is reputedly taken from a 1935 film and not the classic novel.~WW

Recommended: 13, 31, 39, 45, 57, 66-72

CRIME CHRONICLES

Tome: *2 issues 1992*

True Crime exposés in an anthology format featuring illustrated examinations of such famous cases as the Errol Flynn rape case, Sinatra's mob connections and the Kray Twins. Turgid, and uninspiring.~WW

CRIME CLASSICS

Eternity: *8 issues 1988-1989*

These reprinted vintage newspaper daily strips of the Shadow have stories that are weak and tedious, when they are comprehensible, and unimaginative stilted art by Vernon Greene. If you like femme fatales by the yard and racial stereotypes, though, then step right up. Thoroughly unrecommended.~GK

The CRIME CLINIC

Slave Labor: *2 issues 1995*

Dylan Williams' attempt to revive the crime comics genre all but killed off by the Comics Code Authority in the mid-1950s. Beginning with a hilarious and possibly slanderous exposé of Charlton Comics, Williams also relates the biographies of mobsters Kid Sly Fox (in 1) and Dillinger (in 2). It's real two-barrelled action with a blackly humorous narrative voice.~WJ

CRIME DOES NOT PAY

Lev Gleason/Comics House: *104 issues (22-126)1942-1955*

Generally regarded as the first and best crime comic in America. Previous publications had featured crime (*Detective Comics* 1-26 and beyond, for example), but *Crime Does Not Pay* created a genre by concentrating solely on true crime cases researched from police ledgers and history books. It then applied writer/editor Charles Biro's phenomenal scripting abilities to produce strong humanistic stories, usually in an unrelenting nine-panel grid art format that did much to add to the documentary feel of the material. With co-editor Bob Wood and his regular stable of artists, supplemented by the best freelance talent in the industry, Biro published work that was ground-breaking. Steeped in the philosophy of the period, and with a tendency to moralise, the tales were never as patronising as the seemingly endless string of imitators they spawned. The usual payment for criminals tended to be death, yet most of the stories are fresh and entertaining, seldom repetitious. During the latter part of the 1940s, some variations in the drawing structure allowed artists of the calibre of Dan Barry, Norm Maurer, Joe Kubert and even Frank Frazetta to create some fine work, but generally the stars of the magazine are the scripts.

Crime Does Not Pay started life as *Silver Streak Comics* (1-21), a popular superhero title, and it must have come as quite a surprise when Charles Biro became editor in 1942 and immediately dropped all regular features in favour of what he termed 'Popular Illustories'. The tactic paid off and sales soared. Within three issues, he'd created another comics first with the introduction of the spectral Mr Crime, a ghostly, ghastly narrator who acted as Greek chorus, cheering on the criminals in their dastardly acts, remonstrating with their eventual 'big mistake' and lamenting their inevitable downfall. The title was an anthology throughout its run, although some regular features were included from the late 1940s onwards, notably 'Officer Common Sense'. There was also Fred Guardineer's 'Who Dunnit', real crimes presented in the format of mysteries wherein the reader is provided with all the facts and challenged to deduce the perpetrator. Rarely equalled and never surpassed in the flooded field of crime comics, it was the top selling publication (closely followed by *Daredevil Comics* and *Boy Comics*, also produced by Charles Biro) for most of the US early post-war period. It was also one of the main targets of the Senate hearings on comics in 1954, having been singled out by both Dr Frederick Wertham in *Seduction of the Innocent* and Geoffrey Wagner in *Parade of Pleasure*. They felt it contributed to the glamorisation of crime and the illiteracy of children, charges that are almost indefensible if the comics are actually scrutinised. Although the work was seldom gratuitous and never sleazy, the adoption of the Comics Code Authority meant its end, and the magazine lasted only six issues (142-147) thereafter before cancellation.

From 1944 to 1953 there was an annual 'Best Of' issued, which bound together four issues from that year's publications.~WW

Recommended: 22-27, 41, 63, 69-75, 114, 140-147

CRIME PATROL

EC: *10 issues (7-16) 1948-1950*

Gemstone: *10 issues 2000-2001**

With crime comics all the rage, EC jumped into the patrol car. This, though, was the nascent EC, still feeling their way around. There are usually three rather than four stories to an issue, for instance. Later EC mainstays Johnny Craig and

Al Feldstein are regular contributors, with Graham Ingels illustrating a story in 13, but there's a reason later EC material is held in very high regard, and why Gemstone waited until all that had been reprinted before reissuing this. It's competent, occasionally gruesome, largely uninspired, but the editorial decision to drop the likes of stories concerning a frozen giant octopus being released for murderous purposes (9) didn't come soon enough.~FP

CRIME SUSPENSTORIES

EC: *27 issues 1950-1955**
Gemstone: *27 issues 1993-1997**

By the beginning of the 1950s William M. Gaines had transformed his ailing company Educational Comics – publishers of such bland fare as *Animal Fables* and *Fat and Slat* – into the much racier Entertaining Comics, responsible for the legendary anthology titles *Tales from fhe Crypt*, *Frontline Combat* and *Weird Science*. Gaines, and his talented roster of artists, editors and writers, quickly broke free of the polite restraints crippling the American newsstand comic by offering "a new trend in magazines". Using such commercial genres as horror, science fiction and crime, EC comics mixed beautiful artwork from the likes of Harvey Kurtzman, Wally Wood, Bernie Krigstein and Al Williamson with florid, literate scripts inspired by radio shows, B-movies, pulp fiction and the whole atmosphere of 1950s USA. The proudly paternalistic Gaines showcased his artists, allowed his creators a great deal of freedom (within the admittedly constraining limits of the EC 'twist ending' formula) and developed brand loyalty through witty editorials appealing to 'EC Fan-Addicts'.

Soon notorious for their extreme gore and dark black humour, EC titles also contained a fair measure of socio-political satire, liberal sermonising and cultural critique, more than enough to offend "the powers that be". Latching onto Dr Fredric Wertham's bizarre "exposé" of the link between comics and juvenile crime (*Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954), Senator Estes Kefauver convened outraged Congressional hearings with a flippant, benzedrine-fuelled Gaines as chief victim. In the wake of falling sales and outraged public opinion, many of the major comic-book companies formed the Comics Code Authority, a voluntary body designed to reassure anxious distributors and parents that any titles with the Code seal on had met 'the high standards of morality and decency required'. It also effectively put Gaines out of business, although salvation was at hand in the shape of the phenomenal Mad Magazine, created by Kurtzman for EC in 1952.

Crime Suspenstories was the fourth 'New Trend' title launched by Entertaining Comics, and followed on from their 'Pre-Trend' crime titles *Crime Patrol* and *War Against Crime*. Before Crime Suspenstories, comics in this genre, like Lev Gleason's best-selling *Crime Does Not Pay*, revolved around the victory of law and order over vicious gangster killers. Now Gaines and editor Al Feldstein turned away from detective heroes, and concentrated instead on 'ordinary' men and women caught up in tawdry crimes of passion.

Early, rather uncertain issues of *Crime* featured such inappropriate artists as Kurtzman (in numbers 1 and 3) and Graham 'Ghastly' Ingels, but soon settled down to the inspired roster of George Evans, Reed Crandall, Jack Kamen, Jack Davis and the perpetually underrated Johnny Craig. A painfully slow writer and artist, Craig drew the vast majority of *Crime*'s shatteringly lurid covers and provided the lead strip for most of its run. His sweating, hysterical, atmospheric artwork, reminiscent of Will Eisner and Milton Caniff, defined *Crime*'s obsession with human corruption and despair, marking it out as the comic-strip equivalent of film noir, or the work of writer James M. Cain. In stories like 21's superb 'Understudies' or 'When The Cat's Away...' (15), Craig's adulterous lovers plot to bump off unwanted spouses, their murderous desires motivated as much by money or power as by love or lust, their fates inevitably tragic and absurd. Other highlights include three exquisitely experimental strips from Bernie Krigstein: 'Monotony', 'More Blessed To Give...' and 'Key Chain' in 22, 24 and 25 respectively.

Although the strips in *Crime* were required to end on ludicrous plot twists that often made nonsense of the establishing narrative, read in small doses many of the stories still offer a pleasingly sick blend of dark social realism and over-the-top revenge fantasies. As with all anthology titles, individual issues are highly variable, and although towards the end of the run one senses a certain tiredness and timidity setting in, *Crime Suspenstories* remains one of EC's most consistent and entertaining achievements. The Gemstone editions are facsimiles of the originals, and were collected four issues to an annual, and a luxury box set is also available.~AL

Recommended: 5, 15-17, 21-25

CRIME WAVE

Caliber: *One-shot 1999*

Flip-comic featuring leftover tales from previous Caliber publications. The Detective is a hard-boiled strip relating the search by a contemporary reporter into the fate of legendary post-war gumshoe Max Faccioni. Untouchables occurs in a parallel world where prohibition never ended and Elliot Ness's 'incorruptible' team of gang-busters return, albeit under new leadership, and somewhat less noble in character. Inadequate and insubstantial.~WW

CRIMSON

Image/Cliffhanger: *7 issues 1998-1999**
Cliffhanger: *17 issues (8-24) 1999-2001**

Scripted by Brian Augustyn, co-created and drawn by Humberto Ramos, *Crimson* tells of spoilt yuppie brat Alex Elder, whose nose is firmly smacked by the rolled-up newspaper of life when a night-time jaunt with his friends leaves them terminally shredded, and himself turned into a vampire. Rescued from the tender mercies of Rose de Puppet, the voracious vamp-gang leaderene, by the mysterious Ekimus. Possessed of abilities far beyond the average vampire, Alex is trained by Ekimus to fulfil his 'chosen' destiny, as the next, and last evolution of the species. In his quest to discover his true purpose, he is reluctantly assisted by the nubile wolf-mistress Scarlet X, a novitiate in the demon-hunting Order of the Red Moon, who of course wear fishnet body stockings because it's such a practical outfit in which to do their holy work.

A bunch of disgruntled manifest angels are series regulars, and St. George, a former mounted police officer now inhabited by the spirit of the ancient Christian warrior, is also embroiled under the guidance of the Temple Knights. The cast assembled, it's eyes down for Sacred Wars A Go-Go, as we build up to an apocalyptic battle with a malevolent species from legend. Not very original, but stylish and slick, a perfectly acceptable entry in the angst-ridden teenage-vampire genre so popular in the last decade of the Twentieth Century. It's just a pity that our protagonist rather too often gets lost in the crowd of his supporting cast. For a sampler, try the rather clever 7, a convocation of celestial beings in a big city diner, reminiscent, admittedly, of Neil Gaiman's similar scene in *Sandman*, but enjoyable nonetheless.~HS

CRIMSON AVENGER

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1988.*

The oldest DC costumed adventurer, predating Batman, the Avenger premiered in *Detective Comics* 20, in 1938. Originally a masked vigilante similar to the pulps' Shadow, he later switched to red tights and enjoyed a second career as a superhero. This series by Roy Thomas and artist Greg Brooks takes him back to his 1930s roots, in an amiable, if unexceptional, B-movieish tale of love and death.~HS

Star Wars: CRIMSON EMPIRE

Dark Horse: *6 issue miniseries 1997-1998*, 6 issue miniseries ('Council of Blood') 1999**

For first series Mike Richardson and Randy Stradley craft an above average tale of the *Star Wars* Universe set after the death of the evil Emperor Palpatine and featuring Kir Kanis.

He's a fanatically loyal Imperial Guard tracking down the bodyguard who murdered the Emperor and took his place. Paul Gulacy's occasionally stiff artwork benefits from the inks of P. Craig Russell, resulting in an excellent read. The sequel disappoints. Kir, still avenging the death of his emperor, is embroiled in the machinations of the ruling council as they scheme to take over the Empire. It's confused and meandering, with Gulacy's development of a more cartoony drawing style ill-suited to the melodrama.~WW

Recommended: First miniseries 1-6

THE CRIMSON NUN

Antarctic: *4 issue miniseries 1997*

Set in the late 1930s/early 1940s, this is a martial arts/superhero fantasy rather than a period piece. The idea that a woman in a tightly laced judo outfit with a red-lined hood constitutes a 'nun' is a good indication as to how much leeway the reader has to give the authors. Despite that and the generic hardware and location shots this is an extremely attractive comic. The script by Brian Farrens is suitably unintrusive and Bobby Diaz's big-faced artwork is surprisingly effective. The production standards are excellent, as are the inks and colouring. Since this spins-off from Ben Dunn's *Warrior Nun Areala*, that would probably be a sensible place to familiarise yourself with the characters and the stylised setting.~SW

CRIMSON PLAGUE

Event: *1 issue 1997*
Image/Gorilla: *2 issues 2000*

George Pérez' science fiction horror series began well with an intelligent script and his usual meticulously detailed artwork. Dina Simmons' blood is the plague of the title, causing flesh to disintegrate on contact and the first issues begin to explain how she came to exist. The first Image issue reprints the Event issue with additional pages. Perhaps in another few years, Pérez will reward his loyal readers with a third issue.~NF

CRISIS on Infinite Earths

DC: *12 issue limited series 1985-1986*, one-shot 1999*

In the late 1950s DC started creating new superheroes based on 1940s characters, such as Flash, Green Lantern and Hawkman. Eventually it was decided to reintroduce the 1940s versions, explaining that they existed in a parallel dimension, christened Earth Two, while the newer heroes lived on Earth One. Over the years more other-dimensional Earths arrived, housing various doppelgängers (on Earth Three, the Earth One superhero counterparts were villains, and Earth C housed DC's funny animal creations). The DC worlds expanded to the point where it was deemed that all these parallel universes with similar characters were confusing readers. Nonsense, of course, as it was this multiverse that made the DC's universe such an interesting tapestry. If a ten-year-old could understand the dual universes of Earth One and Earth Two during the 1960s, why should a ten-year-old in the 1980s find it confusing? Nevertheless, it was decided to merge all parallel universes into one new definite DC Universe.

Over twelve issues, writer Marv Wolfman, with artists George Pérez, Dick Giordano and Jerry Ordway, expertly wove an intricate plot featuring virtually every DC hero from the Stone Age to the far future. Earths started to disappear and characters were displaced through time by an entity known as the Anti-Monitor who was slowly destroying the multiverse. After an inter-dimensional struggle, the heroes manage to destroy the Anti-Monitor, but not until the surviving Earths, One and Two, are merged. Characters in action during both the Golden and the Silver Age (such as Superman, Wonder Woman and Robin), and thus existing as two versions, had their older incarnation removed. New characters were created (female versions of Dr Light and Wildcat), and many minor (Aquagirl, the Dove, Immortal – apparently not – Man) and major characters were killed. In 7 Supergirl dies gallantly, still able to bring a lump to the throat, while 8 contains the final fate of the Silver Age Flash.

As a series, *Crisis* was a magnificent effort and a true delight for any DC fan, but ultimately the exercise failed. The whole point was to clean up the DC Universe, but over the years it in fact complicated matters more. The Crisis was used as an excuse to reboot features (sometimes years after the event) such as Superman and Hawkman, thereby contradicting the series. Only in recent times has the DC Universe settled into a cohesive timeline. Still, that shouldn't stop you enjoying this fine effort, which shows what a varied and wonderful place the DC Universe is, or was.

The one-shot special as part of the *Legends of the DC Universe* was an untold story set after 4, again written by Wolfman, but alas no Pérez. Still Paul Ryan does his best. The story involves a bunch of Earth One heroes, led by Barry (Flash) Allen to help save Earth D and its multi racial version of the Justice League from destruction. Entertaining, but pointless in the grand scheme of things.~HY

Recommended: 1-12

CRITICAL ERROR

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1995*

One begins to wonder just how many times John Byrne can recycle this simple wordless story of an astronaut crash-landing on an idyllic world. Run in the back of his *Art of John Byrne* book and in *Epic Illustrated*, it's now new-coloured, with the naked female's pubes neatly airbrushed out for the prudish 1990s audience. Any kids who want to know how babies are made should pick this up, but otherwise inessential.~WJ

CRITICAL MASS, A Shadowline Saga

Marvel/ Epic: *7 issue limited series 1989-1990*

This squarebound series concludes the plots from Epic's cancelled superhero titles *Doctor Zero, Powerline* and *Saint George* in fine fashion. Good plots from Dan Chichester and Margaret Clark are allied to decent artwork from the likes of Gray Morrow, Kev O'Neill, Jorge Zaffino and pre-Image and appallingly coloured Jim Lee (in 4). The thread running through two stories per issue is the coming apocalypse organised by Henry Clerk, who's so grateful for the restoration of his memory that he intends to set off nuclear explosions across the USA as thanks. As he plans, Doctor Zero continues to manipulate everyone, the Order of St George want Zero brought down and Powerline need him as an ally.~FP

CRITTERS

Fantagraphics: *50 issues, 1 Special 1986-1990*

There are very few anthologies that leave one feeling that every strip deserves its place. *Critters* almost manages it in that, even if there are some strips that you don't enjoy, Kim Thompson's editorial selection is of a consistently high quality so that you can admire the craft if not the result.

Critters proved to be a valuable showcase for both new and established creators, though only Stan Sakai's and Cathy Hill's creations continue to be published in the U.S. Funny animal strips had seen a resurgence of interest in the mid 1980s (with *Omaha, Albedo* and *Neil the Horse* leading the way alongside the longer established *Cerebus* and *Maus*), and Thompson provides space for practically everyone of note in the field, including Sam Kieth (7, 11, 12, 23), Ty Templeton (8, 11, 23 – including a song on the free flexi-disc – and 50), Mark Armstrong (7, 8, 11, 13, 23), Steve Lafler (9,11), J. Holland and Ron Wilber (11, 17, 19, 21, 23, 24, 29, 31, 32), Jim Engel (18, 50), Steve Purcell (19, 50), Mark Martin (30, 50), Stephen DeStefano (32, 38, 50), Donna Barr (38), Arn Saba (50), Tim Fuller (15, 18, 22, 28, 31, 34, 38, 44, 50), Cathy Hill (50), Doug Gray (50), Joshua Quagmire (1, 50) and Sergio Aragonés (50).

Stan Sakai's excellent samurai tale *Usagi Yojimbo* appears in 1, 3, 6, 7, 10, 11, 14, 23, 38 and 50, while the Groo-like 'Adventures of Nilson Groundthumper and Hermy' features in 5, 16, 27 and the whole of the *Critters Special* (1988). From the same source (*Albedo*), Steve Gallacci's

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* Available in a collected edition

Birthright is a furtherance of the science-fiction series 'Erma Felda', which began in that title (1-6, 12-17 and 47-49).

Translated from the Danish by Thompson himself, 'Family Gnuff' by Freddy Milton is the heavily Barks-influenced story of a family of dragons. Light-hearted and good-humoured, the strength of this strip serves as the cornerstone for much of the title's run (2-5, 7, 9-11, 13-16, 19-26, 30-34, 40). 2 contains a preview of the just-released *Captain Jack* series by Mike Kazaleh, who contributed a number of other strips to Critters, though his best work remains that on *Captain Jack* (42, 50). J.P. Morgan's 'Fission Chicken' and Tom Stazer's 'Lionheart' are both parody strips, the former of superheroes, the latter of hard-boiled detectives. Well presented, they only occasionally hit all the right points but are generally good fun.

William Van Horn's 'Ambrose' and 'Angst' series, however, are definitely worth looking out for. The former is a Krazy Kat-inspired frog (22, 25, 26, 30, 33, 38), the latter has a couple of small-time crooks waxing philosophical about their lot (20, 45, 50). Another series inspired by a great newspaper strip is Kyle Rothweiler's Duck 'Bill' Platypus. Taking Pogo as a starting point, this is much more manic and surreal (34-37, 41).

From 39, each issue contained a single character title featured in hopes of improving sales, to the point of 47-49 being titled Birthright, with no mention of *Critters* on the cover, but the series ended with 50. It was on a high, though, with an eighty-four-page issue. Cathy Hill's 'Raccoons' strip had previously appeared in *The Dreamery* while Doug Gray's *The Eye of Mongombo* was a short-lived but excellent title about an intrepid explorer who was turned into a duck. Reed Waller and Kate Worley's 'Speakingstone' (12, 20) was unfortunately never finished.~NF

Recommended: 1-3, 6, 7, 10, 11, 14, 20, 22, 23, 25, 26, 33, 38, 42, 45, 50

CRITTURS: Hairballs From Hell

Mu: *1 issue 1992*

Humour title consisting of one-page skits about creatures called the Critturs, who are shapeless blobs sharing a house together. Not funny, badly drawn and without any sense of focus or purpose.~DB

CROMWELL STONE

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1992*

Presented in comic size, rather than the traditional European graphic novel format, Andreas' Lovecraftian mystery tale was published without fanfare or explanation, though Dark Horse were printing his Rork series in *Cheval Noir* at the same time. Beautifully rendered in black and white, Andreas' artwork is too clinical for some, but he combines the influence of Gustave Doré and Escher to create stunning pages. The story's much what you'd expect: strange buildings, weird 'dreams', hidden worlds and a limp hero who stumbles around, just managing to keep one step ahead of whatever dark lump is after him.~NF

Andrew Vachss' CROSS

Dark Horse: *6 issue miniseries 1995-1996*

Despite the prominence of his name on the cover, crime-fiction writer Andrew Vachss only appears to have co-plotted these stories. They're uncompromising material, featuring the former inmate of a Chicago young offenders institution during the 1960s, Marlon Cross. Already tough on arrival, the years there hardened him, and supplied him with his lifelong companions. In the present day they're a respected, if offbeat, crew who'll move beyond the law to kill for a price. The proviso is that it's a case Cross wants to take, and he has no qualms about turning down pleas from close friends. After the first issue's background run-through Cross targets a particularly unsavoury gang distributing videos they film of brutal assaults and rapes. The narrative captions are disjointed and often superfluous, and the cast is sometimes just too contrived, but if you're looking for a well-drawn, fast-paced thriller there's plenty worse than this.~FP

CROSSFIRE

Eclipse: *26 issues, 4 issue miniseries (Crossfire and Rainbow) 1984-1988*

Antarctic: *1 issue 1994*

A textbook example of how to produce an entertaining mainstream comic. First pretend it's not a detective comic by having the lead costumed, then situate in Hollywood and populate with has-beens, wannabes, never-wills, sleazy execs and celebs all clawing for that golden opportunity. Mark Evanier's witty scripts ensure *Crossfire* reads like a superior TV drama, matched by great artwork from the adaptable and woefully underrated Dan Spiegle.

Bail bondsman Jay Endicott inherits the trademark costume of now deceased industrial spy and burglar Crossfire. He trades on Crossfire's reputation and contacts to appease his sense of right by helping those who can't afford any other justice. Fallible and generous, Endicott's a likeable soft-boiled detective, and a further strength is the detail afforded supporting characters, even if they're only present for a single issue. Endicott's relationship with the DNAgents' Rainbow means she often features, with her superpowers sometimes providing all-too-convenient get-out-of-jail-free solutions to seemingly insurmountable problems. A temporary hiatus in publication between 17 and 18 is filled by the four-part *Crossfire and Rainbow* series, stories that would have occupied Crossfire 18-21. From 18 the title becomes black and white, although not to its detriment, and 24 concludes the *Whodunnit* series, which starred Endicott sans costume.

Promoting an already excellent package to higher level are the text pages, in which Evanier recounts experiences as a TV writer, a sort of *Adventures in the Small Screen Trade.* There's not a bad issue in the run, with 15, featuring Howard Hughes and both Crossfires, a good sampler. The putative revival in 1994 didn't come about, although in addition to Crossfire and the DNAgents the package includes another excellent essay, about attempting to develop the latter as a TV series.~FP

Recommended: 5-7, 10-13, 15-22, Crossfire and Rainbow 3, 4

CROSSGEN CHRONICLES

CrossGen: *8 issues 2000-2002*

1 promotes the first batch of CrossGen titles, with The First, not fully introduced until later, monitoring the acquisition of powers by assorted individuals on different worlds. These are snippets of the origin stories presented in *Meridian*, *Mystic*, *Scion* and *Sigil.* Thereafter George Pérez draws four individual stories of the worlds or lead characters featured in the above titles during a time before they were empowered. 3's glimpse into Meridian's world is the standout, as Barbara Kesel reveals the story of how Sephie's parents met. The next best issue is 7, drawn by Rudy Nebres and dealing with the military career of *Negation*'s Obregon Kaine, which is not all it seems. 6 and 8 deal with characters from *The First,* and *Crux* respectively. Each issue also presents background material on forthcoming titles, or the title spotlighted.~WJ

Recommended: 3

CROSSROADS

First: *5 issue miniseries 1988*

A series of one-off teamings of First's most popular titles, if not characters. Jon Sable and Whisper retrieve the abducted son of a big-time mobster in 1, from which Sable goes on to pair with The Badger in 2, an uninspired tale of CIA spooks and vengeful Vietnamese. 3 has the time displaced Badger meeting American Flagg's robot sidekick, Luther Ironheart, to battle a demon, and 4 reunites Grimjack and Judah the Hammer in a hunt to destroy a Slaver. The final team-up features Nexus (who is compelled to execute mass-murderers by an omniscient alien) battling Dreadstar (who began his career by destroying the Milky Way Galaxy) as Grimjack and Judah try to explain that the latter is a good mass murderer, really. Mediocre at best.~WW

THE CROW

Caliber: *4 issues 1989**
Tundra: *3 issue miniseries 1992**
Kitchen Sink: *3 issue miniseries ('Dead Time') 1996, 3 issue miniseries ('City of Angels') 1996, 3 issue miniseries ('Flesh and Blood') 1996, 3 issue miniseries ('Wild Justice') 1996, 4 issue miniseries ('Waking Nightmares') 1997-1998*
London Night Studios: *5 issue miniseries (1-4, 0 The Crow/Razor: Kill the Pain) 1998, one-shot ('The Lost Chapter') 1998*
Image: *10 issues 1999, 1 magazine 2000*

Débuting in *Caliber Presents* 1, James O'Barr's bleak vigilante thriller has a sort of poetry to its vision of violent city streets contrasted with the beauty of love. Eric Draven and his girlfriend are killed by thugs, high on drugs. Resurrected as a spirit of vengeance, Eric becomes the Crow, who wreaks bloody revenge on those responsible, plus anyone else in the criminal chain that leads back to the drug lords. O'Barr's artwork is influenced by Will Eisner, among others, but changes wildly according to the prevailing emotional winds. It becomes more accomplished as the series progresses, but faces remain a weakness throughout.

The Tundra series reprints the Caliber issues before continuing Draven's quest. For 'Dead Time' O'Barr hands over to John Wagner and Alexander Maleev for a story about a different Crow. This one was murdered with his family during the American Civil War and is resurrected in the present to exact revenge on the reincarnations of his killers. Wagner returns for the adaptation of the second Crow film, *City of Angels*, illustrated by Dean Ormston. It's very much a re-run of the original, down to the villain finding a way to restore the Crow mortality for the final showdown. Ormston's artwork owes much to Ted McKeever but doesn't really impress. 'Flesh and Blood' features the first female Crow. James Vance introduces an environmental plotline and tries to heighten the emotional tension by playing off her unborn (now dead) child with the villain's large family. Maleev's artwork is promising, but too reliant on illustration and lacking basic storytelling abilities.

'Wild Justice' returns to the original premise as the Crow resurrects Michael Korby, killed with his wife by car thieves. Charlie Adlard's artwork is suitably dark in his scratchy and impressionistic style, but Jerry Prosser's story can't work new life from the old plot. 'Waking Nightmares' takes a new approach as a murdered policeman becomes the Crow, and tries to balance his sense of justice against his need for vengeance as the Crow. Christopher Golden tries hard with the script and Phillip Hester's artwork is always a pleasure, but overall it doesn't rise above its origins.

The London Night issues form an almost completely inarticulate tale teaming our heroes against a demon that's killed some of their relatives (possibly). The 0 issue actually ends the series while 'The Lost Chapter' provides illustrations for series writer, Everette Hartsoe's 'lyrics'. Most of the art is by Jerry Beck and it's competent – pity about the storytelling, though. For the Image series, Jon J. Muth (alone and then with John Kuramoto from 5) retells the Eric Draven story in 1-3 and then takes it forward as the Crow runs into more evil men (and one woman, and a shark). This is really dire, overwritten pretentiousness. Jamie Tolagson's artwork on 1-3 and 9 is the best of a bad bunch. The magazine has some movie articles and reprints 1 and 2 of the Image series, presumably intending to complete the story in a second issue that never appeared.~NF

CROW OF THE BEAR CLAN

Blackthorne: *6 issues 1987*

One of the best anthropomorphic animal series to come out of the black and white self-publishing boom of the mid-1980s, but one which sadly folded in the backlash. Crow is a barbarian wanderer in the Conan or *Last of the Mohicans* mould, just struggling to survive in a hostile world. The adventures are deceptively mature for a cute fuzzy bear with a feather in his ear. Solid writing, well drawn.~WW

Recommended: 1-6

CRUCIAL FICTION

Fantagraphics: *3 issues 1992*

The off-kilter strips of Julian Lawrence tackle a variety of strange topics without particularly illuminating or offering a new insight. There's some nice cartooning, but 2's story of Pope Joan is as good as this gets.~WJ

CRUCIBLE

DC/!mpact: *6 issue miniseries 1993*

Tying up all the loose ends from DC's failed !mpact line of titles, *Crucible* works well independently. A group of would-be global rulers have a device offering glimpses of the future, showing that Nate Cray (Black Hood) is somehow an important part of what is to come. Attempts to capture Cray are complicated by the return of the Comet, and by the story's end most !mpact characters are back. Fast-paced scripts from Brian Augustyn and Mark Waid and complementary art from Quesada, Wojtkiewicz and Palmiotti make for an engaging series.~FP

CRUEL AND UNUSUAL

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1999*

Satire dealing with the American prison system, and the death penalty in particular. Disgusted by the corruption and cruelty at the prison she takes over, a new governor decides to broadcast events live, with consequences that are both thought-provoking and darkly funny. Or at least, that's probably what writers Jamie Delano and Tom Peyer said when they submitted the proposal. Unfortunately, what we actually get is pointless and crass, and on no level funny, which is rather a failure in something intended as satire.~DB

Dennis Worden's CRUEL AND UNUSUAL PUNISHMENT

Starhead: *1 issue 1993*

Ivan Brunetti is the standout contributor and sets the tone for this jaw-droppingly repugnant anthology, edited by Worden, and containing promising early work from Sam Henderson. Brunetti's strips work because there's substance beyond a desire to shock, lacking in the remaining content. For strong stomachs only, and a bucket nearby is advised.~WJ

CRUEL WORLD

Teat Horn Entertainment Network: *One-shot 1993*

Magazine-sized compilation of work from Jim Blanchard with contents as varied as 'Attack of the Fifty Foot Hippie', the execution of Carl Jung, crime strips and psychedelic pin-ups. It is all very uneven and, while Blanchard is an excellent inker, he is a less accomplished penciller and so this is all less substantial than it should be.~DAR

CRUSADERS

Jack Chick: *17 issues 1974-1980*

Originally produced during the 1970s, *The Crusaders* is still available in speciality religious-themed bookshops, along with the equally amusing (and well drawn) smaller pamphlets from the same organisation. The series begins relatively well, with wholesome church troubleshooters Jim and Tim sorting out problems around the world. Whether performing an exorcism in India or inducing vomiting in some devil-worshipping Druids at home, a few prayers will do the trick. This is a world where God always comes through. If money is needed for a flight to India there'll be a mysterious donation. If a potential teenage suicide requires some convincing life's worth living, a few biblical quotations and a light show are just the answer, and she's turned on to God quicker than you can say Sodom and Gomorrah. Generally well plotted, 1-8 are a desperate attempt to appeal to the kids with contemporary fashions and hip language. It's all excellently drawn by Fred Carter, a commercial artist whose only comic work is for Jack Chick publications. With 9 *Crusaders* becomes completely mad, promoting text-heavy conspiracy mania pertaining to the Vatican's alleged global manipulation through the centuries, and its agenda to subvert God and promote Satan. 13 has some particularly graphically rendered Spanish Inquisition tortures. Each comic has a different title, with the series name appearing in the top right corner. These are narrow-minded in their version of the One True Way, and appallingly intolerant: just remember that if there were a God there'd never have been a Birdie Song.~FP

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* Available in a collected edition

CRUSADERS

DC/!mpact: *8 issues 1992*

Following the *!mpact Winter Special*, which saw these heroes team for the first time, a crossover story running through all !mpact titles resulted in this ongoing team comic. Named for The American Crusaders, an earlier group of heroes who disappeared, these five set out to discover what happened to their predecessors, only to be distracted along the way by various and sundry menaces. Light, boppy, fun superheroics, abruptly terminated by the collapse of !mpact following disappointing sales results. The ultimate fate of the Crusaders was revealed in the final !mpact series, *Crucible*.~HS

The CRUSADES

DC/Vertigo: *One-shot ('Urban Decree') 2001, 20 issues 2001-2002*

In San Francisco, an armoured knight, on horseback, is seen attacking criminals on the streets. Talk-radio host, Anton Marx, considers the knight his key to fame and fortune. He takes advantage of his girlfriend and researcher, Venus Kostopikas, who has a photographic memory (presenting the opportunity for lots of trivia when Venus needs information or is remembering facts relevant to her situation) and a nose for a good mystery. Detective Petronas finds his job on the line, if he can't stop the knight and prevent a war between the Pope and his Russian mob rivals. Cela is a blind child kept in the knight's underground lair, whom Venus takes home to her visiting mother, whose fondest wish is that Venus settle down with the lovesick Petronas. 1-5 deal with the First Crusade over a children's home, 6-12 with the Second over the mob's use of a fake knight, 13-17 with the Third as someone starts killing gays. In the Fourth (18-20), Venus sets about putting her life in order, from romantic entanglements to journalistic career, with a bit of swashbuckling on the side. With compelling storytelling and artwork, Steven T. Seagle and Kelley Jones have produced a violent thriller that nevertheless challenges the reader's moral perceptions, and can be very humorous too.~NF

Recommended: 'Urban Decree', 1-20

CRUSH

Aeon Press: *4 issues 1995-1996*

Neil has had bolt threads fitted into his frontal lobes. He works at an automated food counter where he's constantly bugged by a dimbulb roller-skating waitress he calls Jellbean. Neil gets involved with Diane whose marriage to Benjamin is seriously threatened by his writer's block.

Its all very expressive but perverse in its opacity. Author Stephen 'Burpo' Debonrepos' combination of cod surrealism with a cast of utterly unsympathetic characters fails to convey anything concrete enough to satisfy the reader.~SW

THE CRUSH

Image: *5 issue miniseries 1996*

Psychiatrist turned judge, jury and executioner struggles manfully against the all-pervading clichés. There's no current trend or street language too ridiculous for inclusion here. Funny now, expect it to be hilarious in ten years, particularly the Irish gang in 4.~WJ

CRUSHER JOE

Ironcat: *6 issue miniseries 1999**

Trouble-shooter, Joe and his crew, Alfin, Ricky, cyborg Taros and robot, Dongo, compete with pirates to find a freighter lost in space three years previously that now makes ghost-like appearances, close to where it disappeared. Then they're asked by a dying scientist to destroy his new energy source, which he fears his employers will misuse, but the only clue to its location is with his young daughter. This is undemanding science fiction adventure, but very agreeably drawn.~NF

CRUX

CrossGen: *21 issues + 2001 to date*

Over 400,000 years ago, whilst humanity is still banging rocks together an advanced race called Atlanteans are in the midst of a cultural crisis. Most feel they have evolved enough to move to the next level of existence whilst a goodly proportion feel they should remain corporeal to shepherd the slowly evolving Homo Sapiens. Because they're civilised they agree to differ and the ceremony takes place without the dissenters. Over 1,100 Atlanteans take to stasis tubes until the event concludes, but something goes wrong and the ritual triggers a catastrophe which drowns the continent and causes the tubes to malfunction. An unspecified amount of time later a mysterious stranger wakes seven of the slumbering Atlanteans who find themselves in a confusing and apparently deserted world of vastly disparate cities infested with vicious giant bugs. Gradually they discover that in the millennia since the disaster mankind progressed to the stage where they colonised space. Then, one day, after thousands of years of expansion, the home planet broke all contact with its colonies. When they investigated, the colonials found that Earth's entire population had vanished, literally overnight. No explanation was ever discovered and after a couple of centuries an off-world corporation called Terra Cognito took possession and sculpted the planet into a huge museum theme park dedicated to the Earth's past history. And then came the invading giant insectoids, The Negation. The Atlanteans happen upon the last humans just as they're evacuating their base. In a savage battle with the bugs they link up with Geromi, a history technician left behind in the scramble.

This saga sits squarely at the science fiction end of the superhero genre. The Atlanteans use their mighty powers to unravel the mysteries of the missing planetary population, fend off the increasingly more devastating attacks of the Negation and find a way to revive their sleeping compatriots and restore Atlantis. There's even the now mandatory huge helping of soap opera pathos with brothers Galvan and Gammid dueling for the affections of Zephyre and leader Capricia's incessant internal carping about her own worthiness. All in all though, a competent and entertaining yarn from writer Mark Waid to 12 and Chuck Dixon thereafter and penciller Steve Epting.~WW

CRY FOR DAWN

CFD: *9 issues 1989-1992*

An anthology considered synonymous with gratuitous gore actually has plenty of redeeming features, not least the constantly improving black and white wash artwork of Joseph Michael Linsner. Linsner and writing partner Joe Monks appear to have been damned by their first issue, featuring stories associating sex with violence and an ill-advised examination of abortion. Both Monks and Linsner are prone to florid prose, but they can also write genuinely bleak and shocking stories like 'Birthmarks' in 2 or 'Dropping Anchor' in 6. Sadly, Frank Forte excepted, other contributing artists are a shoddy bunch. *Angry Christ Comics* collects Linsner's solo work.~FP

CRYBABY

Exiled Studios: *1 issue 1999*

Mediocre and rushed spin-off from hero team The Exiled as leggy bimbo crybaby attempts to kickstart a messianic revolution against a backdrop of the end of the world. A big disappointment from Scott Lobdell and Greg LaRoque.~WW

CRYING FREEMAN

Viz: *8 issue limited series 1989-1990*, 9 issue limited series 1990-1991*, 10 issue limited series 1991-1992*, 8 issue limited series 1992*, 11 issue limited series 1992-1993**

Despite its frequent and explosive violence, *Crying Freeman* has a lot to recommend it to female readers. Its violence is almost balletic, its plot quasi-mythical, its storyline centred around romance: the central characters' love for each other, and the reader's infatuation with beautiful gangsters. The origin in series one immediately confronts us with the duality of the title. Crying Freeman is a sensitive potter forced to become an assassin, who kills impassively but with tears streaming down his face. The first story concerns the young artist Emu, who will eventually become his wife, who witnesses him in action, and is convinced he will return to kill her. Everyone accepts what happens to them as though it were fated. Freeman becomes leader of one of the most powerful and ancient secret societies and proceeds to defend his position against genetic mutations, Amazons and supersoldiers as a matter of honour. Emu unquestioningly marries him, and starts to learn the art of fighting, eventually receiving a magical sword; they swan around in a submarine tricked out to look like a dragon and have adventures that are halfway between *James Bond* and the *Twelve Labours of Hercules* in their romantic inevitability.

Ryoichi Ikegami's delicate linework and dry-brush shading produce images of extraordinary impact and elegance. The pace of the story allows for lots of splash pages, long, loving delineations of exceptionally violent fights, and really very beautiful sex scenes. Exciting but simplistic, *Crying Freeman*'s heady blend of martial arts, steamy sex, blood, doomed criminals and tattoos is an addictive mix.~FJ

Recommended: Series one 1-8

CRYPT

Image/Extreme: *2 issue microseries 1995*

Prophet is a superhero who has returned from the dead, and Crypt is his future self who has come back to the present, and possessed a Prophet clone that was just lying around. Meanwhile, a group of warrior monks called the beholders are wandering about with their own agenda. The tale is told through the actions of a winged girl who is/was/will be the ward of Prophet when he becomes Absolution just before he becomes Crypt. The inability to use flashbacks properly just adds to the confusion. Don't make this part of your future.~WW

THE CRYPT OF CUM

Eros: *One-shot 1999*

Masquerading as "DeMentia" artist Tom Sutton turned out a trio of EC horror comic parodies starring preposterously breasted women and plenty of ejaculate. He spent more time on this than Vault of Whores or Weird Sex, but it's difficult to imagine who'd find it either arousing or more than briefly amusing.~FP

CRYPT OF SHADOWS

Marvel: *21 issues 1973-1975*

Reprints 1950s weird and horror shorts, with a Basil Wolverton strip in the first issue of note.~APS

CRYPT OF TERROR

EC: *3 issues (17-19) 1950**

Continuing the numbering from *Crime Patrol*, *Crypt of Terror* was the first EC horror comic, and the template for all that was to follow. The formula and artwork haven't hit their peak here, but there's a curiosity in seeing Harvey Kurtzman illustrate the typical O. Henry-style horror tale and future successful science-fiction author, Harry Harrison, also trying his hand. With 20 the title changed to *Tales from the Crypt*, and immortality was assured. The issues are collected with Tales.~FP

The Saga of CRYSTAR Crystal Warrior

Marvel: *11 issues 1983-1985*

Fantasy by numbers, created by committee, with wizards, feuding sibling princes, half-naked women, dragons, prophecies and pacts, but without any real heart. As if acknowledging the creative redundancy, Marvel superheroes begin appearing from 3.~WJ

Jim Lee's C-23

Image: *8 issues 1998*

An enjoyable, cliché-ridden space romp in which Corbin – war hero and general leader-in-waiting – discovers that he is in fact one of the bug people he has been fighting his whole life. Lots of pointless fighting and hammy dialogue, but with the exception of 1, it's all very fast paced and raises a smile. And by the way, C-23 is a chromosome that the bug people's royal family carry.~DB

CSI: Crime Scene Investigation

IDW: *1 issue + 2003 to date*

Planned as a five issue miniseries based on the TV show, Max Allen Collins is an old hand at detective material, and comes up with a viable plot here. The art is little more problematical. If you're going to use likenesses they should be spot on, and these aren't all the time, with Grissom never really captured.~WJ

CUCKOO

Green Door Studios: *12 issues 1996-2001*

In 1992 Madison Clell began experiencing the first symptoms of multiple personality disorder (or dissociative identity disorder). It manifests in adult life when repressed memories of severe childhood trauma, usually abuse, begin to surface. *Cuckoo* is Clell's commentary on what happened to her before and after 1992. It starts as a fragmentary experience, with snippets of life under assorted personalities, and even after a linear narrative is employed from 5 it never becomes an easy read. The disturbing topics are compounded by a loose, scratchy style of art. Anyone working through it, though, should come away with a better sympathy for and understanding of an appalling condition to live with. The series was never completed, although thankfully the final issue published announced Clell's therapy at an end.~FP

CUD Comics

Fantagraphics: *8 issues 1992-1994*
Dark Horse: *8 issues 1995-1997*

Written and drawn by Terry LaBan, *Cud* eschews the confessional mode of many 'alternative' comics in favour of broad, adult, character-driven satire. LaBan is confident and accomplished enough to get laughs whatever the genre or situation, be it exotic adventure (with occasional character Muktuk Wolfsbreath, Hard-Boiled Shaman), rude Archie parody, 'The Primitives', or a Jewish parable, 'Ben Dordia's Confession' – respectively in the fourth issues of the first and second series.

Each issue of the Fantagraphics *Cud* features 'You Can't Spank the Monkey if he's on Your Back', a strip about the rise and fall of absurd performance artist Bob Cudd, one of the stars of LaBan's previous comic, *Unsupervised Existence.* Although he's a vaguely sympathetic lead, Bob is also a terrible phoney, and LaBan uses this extended story-line to take some hilarious, if rather easy, potshots at numerous 'radical' lifestyles. The Dark Horse series features archetypal slacker couple Eno and Plum, in a series of inventive, raunchy domestic vignettes bound to appeal to readers of Peter Bagge's Hate. 2's story 'Virtual Anxiety', where Eno dons a virtual reality headset and lands up in a brutal prison, is a particularly effective example of LaBan's ability to sidestep the often limiting realism of many strips bound up with grunge culture. The Eno and Plum stories are collected.

In the superbly smutty porn fantasy 'Class Action' (series one, 2) LaBan calls himself "Just another lame 'alternative' cartoonist with a ponytail", which, as with his other satirical observations, is a harsh but not wholly inaccurate judgement. LaBan always draws 'The Author' as a spindly, thirty-something hippy, and one often gets the impression that Cud's creator is a detached, bemused observer rather than a fully fledged participant hangin' with The Kids. Cud's superb, broad-brush artwork reinforces the sense of deceptive professionalism and personal detachment that

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* Available in a collected edition

further characterises all of LaBan's non-mainstream work. Sadly, LaBan decided to end the Dark Horse series with 8, but quality was maintained to the end. The last issue contains a poignant text piece about 'the author's' struggle to emulate the achievements of his underground comix heroes, particularly R. Crumb, but LaBan needn't have worried, *Cud* more than holds its own in such elevated company.~AL
Recommended: Series one 1-8, series two 1-8

CUDA

Avatar: *5 issues (0-4) 1998-1999*

Tim Vigil's usual blend of ornate drawing and mindless, exploitative sex and violence is on show in this sword and sorcery tale of the barbarian Cuda. If you like that stuff, you'll love this stuff.~WW

CUIRASS

Harrier: *1 issue 1988*

It's hard to credit that anything as piss-poor as Harrier's indescribably unerotic bondage fantasy *Barbarienne* could warrant a cash-in; however, the evidence is before us, sadly.~FJ

Batman:THE CULT

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1988**

Despite the big star names, Jim Starlin and Berni Wrightson, this was a best-selling disaster. After Frank Miller's Dark Knight Returns DC were obviously looking for another critical and commercial success. Starlin, despite having done little of note since leaving Marvel several years previously, still had a good reputation that promised much, and tempting Wrightson back to comics was another coup for DC. Neither creator was up to the task, though. Wrightson's artwork was far too loose for the ponderous script. Starlin's premise that Bruce Wayne's motivation for becoming The Batman was fear and the much-flaunted 'first time Batman is broken' story-line are entirely unconvincing. The series is representative of the failure of DC to understand how to handle Bruce Wayne, pretty much ignoring his character in favour of an emotionless Batman who's only allowed to interact with Robin and Alfred.~NF

CURSE OF THE MOLEMEN

Kitchen Sink: *One-shot 1991*

Charles Burns combines domestic brutality, childish curiosity and a smidgen of the inexplicable in 1960s-TV small-town USA. Originally issued by *Raw* in black and white, it's simple stuff given atmosphere by Burns' expressive and disturbing art.~FP

CURSE OF THE WEIRD

Marvel: *4 issues 1993-1994*

Together with *Monster Menace*, an attempt by Marvel to revive its mystery line by reprinting classic stories lovingly selected and presented. *Curse of the Weird* was definitely the more fun of the two, focusing on the loopier side of things with disembodied brains, floating eyeballs, amnesiac ghosts and literal roadhogs! Very mondo bizarro. In their native 1950s these demented ideas were the result of too many benzedrine-soaked nights trying to grind out fodder for the company's two dozen mystery titles; now they can be appreciated for the nostalgic trash classics they are.~HS
Recommended: 1-4

CUSP

Alternative Comics: *1 issue + 2003 to date*

Let's start with the good: Thomas Herpich is a brilliant cartoonist. His sparse illustrations, some seemingly produced freehand directly in ink, drip with talent and expression. He can manage a naturalistic style and produce flights of the imagination to boot. The tragedy is that he has absolutely nothing to say. Over forty pages there's not a shred of interest to the narrative or dialogue. The strips are optimistically described as "lyrical" and "exotic" by the publisher, who instead of trying to patch the deficiencies might suggest collaborating with a writer.~FP

Army Surplus Comics Featuring CUTEY BUNNY

Army Surplus: *7 issues 1982-1986*

Rather poor risqué anthropomorphic title, written and drawn by Joshua Quagmire, whose rough and ready approach to inking squeezed out what little eroticism there might have been in the unlovely original pencils. Comes over as vulgar and adolescent, rather than as a spirited and irreverent underground, which one supposes what it was aiming to be.~FJ

CUTIE HONEY '90

Ironcat: *6 issue miniseries ('Volume 1') 1997-1998, 6 issue miniseries ('Volume 2') 1998*

In this sequel to his 1973 *Cutie Honey* series, Go Nagai reintroduces the criminal organisation, Panther Claw and its leader, Sister Jill. Investigating a murder, detective Todoroki meets "The Warrior of Love", Cutie Honey, a super android, who defeated Jill thirty years previously. She tells him that Jill is a demon from a different dimension, preparing an invasion force. The story progresses with Jill turning naked women into demons to fight Cutie (usually with plenty of flesh on display and to violent, gruesome endings), trying to recruit new followers, or, eventually, just deciding to destroy the world. Utterly preposterous, Nagai's irreverent storytelling just about carries it off.~NF

CY-GOR

Image: *6 issues 1999*

Introduced in *Spawn* 38, Cy-Gor is a contraction of cybernetic gorilla, which is what he is, the result of covert experimentation. Of course, mess with a gorilla in the city and when he gets loose there's going to be trouble. With the gorilla's communication limited, there is a well crafted cast, particularly the amoral government operatives, but overall confusion is the order of the day, with too many voices muddying the plot.~WJ

CYBER CITY

CPM: *2 issue microseries 1995, 2 issue microseries 1995, 2 issue microseries 1995-1996*

Its AD2808 in Oedo City and the Cyber Police are former criminals controlled with explosive collars by boss, Hasegawa. Familiar themes mixing the supernatural and scientific form the backdrop for these tales of bad-boy cops. Based on the Japanese animations, they're drawn by Tim Eldred in a competent, clean-lined style but there's nothing compelling about any of it.~NF

CYBER CRUSH Robots In Revolt

Fleetway/Quality: *14 issues 1990-1991*

Reprints of early *2000AD* stories with covers bearing no relation to the contents. Ironically for a comic selling itself on the idea of robots, it's the humanity of the robots within that makes the strips work. 'Ro-Busters' is a *Thunderbirds*-style rescue squad wherein the team revolt against their masters. There's nice Mike McMahon on some chapters, but little worth noting otherwise until 14, which has an Alan Moore and Steve Dillon tale. Better by far are the earliest Robo-Hunter stories, finally reproduced sympathetically in colour. John Wagner (under the alias of T.B. Grover) and Alan Grant write hilarious scripts, matched by Ian Gibson's whimsical, detailed art. 1-8 have Sam Slade accompanied by a foul-mouthed, cigar-chomping pilot regressed to childhood on a planet where robots are eliminating humans, and the even funnier 'Day of the Droids' in 9-14 has all of the city's leaders replaced by robot duplicates.~WJ

Shuhoi Tahashi's CYBER 7

Eclipse: *8 issue limited series 1989, 10 issue limited series 1989-1990*

Two teens become aware, as you do, that they're extra-dimensional aliens who've been exiled on Earth, although they're the rightful heirs to the throne of a faraway world. There are, naturally, those who want to prevent their return, among them a giant rabbit called Cunningham. Luckily, they

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have allies in the form of the Cyber 7, a mixture of sprite and miniature robot. Excellent art and considerable charm combine for a decent first run, set on Earth as the strange events unfold. The second series, sub-titled 'Rockland', is more fantasy-oriented as our crew start travelling home through the dimensions with their path blocked by enemies.~FP

CYBERAD

Continuity: *Series one 7 issues 1991-1992, series two 3 issues 1993*

Unique among Continuity titles for keeping the same creative team (Peter Stone and Richard Bennett) for its entire run, *Cyberad* was best known for its inspired enhancements, from holograms to stickers and gatefold pages. Artistically Bennett's pages were a strange mixture of Neal Adams figurework and obsessive mangaesque detail, but ultimately the frantic pace and muddled story adds up to little. The second series was three chapters of the cross-company 'Deathwatch 2000' story.~DAR

CYBERELLA

DC/Helix: *12 issues 1996-1997*

Howard Chaykin, who's always had a retro love affair with the future, joins forces with animator Don Cameron to give us a boldly drawn, info-heavy version of the future. The Karoshi-Macrocorp run just about everything, thanks to their Cyberella system, personified as a cute virtual woman. Our heroine, Sunny Winston, is being questioned by computer because she's beginning to question the system when, due to a power surge, she's sucked into Cyberella itself. As ever Chaykin's grasp of recent social history adds interest, and saves the series from being just another cyberpunk comic.~FJ

CYBERFORCE

Image/Top Cow: *4 issue miniseries 1992-1993*, one-shot (0) 1993, 35 issues, 2 Annuals 1993-1997*

Marc Silvestri's glistening costumed group consists of wholesome leader Heatwave, American native Ripclaw, the truck-sized Impact, four-armed cyborg assassin Stryker and the beautiful Cyblade. The team have links with the prequel series *Codename: Strykeforce* via Stryker. In addition there's a teenaged computer whiz named Chip and his kid android Timmie. The miniseries starts with Carin, the super-fast Velocity, rescued and welcomed into Cyberforce, and there's also the matter of some key software stolen from Megasoft by Wyldfire and her partners who have guest star Pitt sleeping on their couch. The evil Cyberdata Technologies' pursuit troops turn out to be commanded by Carin's super-assassin sister Ballistic. Everything culminates in a showdown with prime-mover Mother May-i whose shocking identity is revealed in 4. We get more backgound information on Cyberdata's relationship with Cyberforce in 0, written and drawn by Walt Simonson. There's a prolonged crossover with *WildC.A.T.S* in 1-3's 'Killer Instinct' with mind manipulator Misery and Ripclaw's history with Warblade at the heart of things. 'Assault With A Deadly Woman' in 4-7 sees Ballistic's loyalties finally switch to her little sister's team. Silvestri provides the plot, leaving his brother Eric to script, and some spectacular art for the initial miniseries and these issues, with Scott Williams and other assistants gradually taking more of the weight. Todd McFarlane is 8's guest penciller. From Silvestri's plot Chris Claremont scripts 9-11 showcasing his new hero The Huntsman. 13-15 take Cyblade and Chip back to 15th Century France and introduce the contemporary schemes of Emil Zadroc. An epic story arc is then launched centreing on Zadroc, The Kraken and master planner Kimata's attempts to supercede Cyberdata in 17-25, resulting in casualties on both sides. Brian Holguin improves on Eric Silvestri's uniformly uninteresting scripts from 19, with most issues between 15 and 31 drawn by David Finch, inked by Jason Gorder to 24 and then by Joe Weems Scott Lee's art in 30 is to be avoided at all costs. 26-27 cross over with Ash and Heatwave is driven to suicide in 29 as a prologue to *The Devils Reign* starting in 30 and continuing in a series of one-shots teaming Marvel and Top Cow characters. Heatwave's funeral at the close of 31 is the real end to the series. The 'Royal Blood' story arc in 32-35 amounts to a Cyblade story set in Europe. Overall, this is a series where the early Image tenet of artist is boss leads to a complete lack of direction where hackneyed plots plus crowds of detail and information is supposed to equal story.~SW

CYBERFORCE ORIGINS

Image: *3 issue miniseries 1995*

Individually dealing with Cyblade, Stryker and Impact, there may be some interest in Randy Queen's pencilling 2 and portions of 3, the rest of which is by Michael Turner. None of it is very good, though. The one-shot *Misery* and the *Velocity* miniseries are both far better.~FP

CYBERFORCE, STRYKEFORCE: Opposing Forces

Image: *2 issue microseries 1995*

Following Codename: Strykeforce 14, this series sees Cyberforce and Strykeforce joining forces against the return of the Shu'rii, out to kill Sh'rrunn/Bloodbow for betraying her race. Leaving the future of the characters pretty much up in the air, Steve Gerber tells an engaging tale that wraps up most of the Strykeforce plotlines.~NF

CYBERFROG

Hall of Heroes: *2 issues 1994*

Harris: *4 issue miniseries 1996, 2 issue microseries ('Reservoir Frog') 1996, 2 issue microseries ('3rd Anniversary Special') 1997, one-shot (Cyberfrog vs Creed) 1997*

Future *X-Men* artist Ethan Van Sciver started with this tale of a creature part frog, part machine, and little explanation. Cyberfrog is out there maiming, mutilating and murdering ne'er-do-wells. As ideas go there are far worse, and with that concept it's hardly going to be angst-ridden soul-searching all the way. The Hall of Heroes issues are reprinted for the third Harris series and redrawn for the first, with Van Sciver's art already much improved. It takes another leap for 'Reservoir Frog', which, until the end, covers much the same ground. Van Sciver's obviously having a ball, but the smug captions irritate. While the dubious morality and celebration of gratuitous violence may offend some there's an equal crowd to be attracted by the art and often very funny dialogue.~WJ

CYBERNARY

Image/WildStorm: *5 issues 1995-1996*

WildStorm: *6 issue miniseries (Cybenary 2.0) 2001-2002*

Cybernary is the fusion of a freedom fighter and the daughter of Kaizen Gamorra, ruler of Gamorra Island. His head scientist, trying to please his master, decides to improve his daughter, Yumiko, but neither she nor Kaizen are exactly overjoyed by the end result, especially when the freedom fighter part of her wants to join the rebels in their attempts to free Gamorra from her father's rule. Written by Steve Gerber and drawn by Jeff Rebner, *Cybernary* is an entertaining series that sheds light on a particular aspect of the WildStorm Universe and partially sets the scene for the 'Fire From Heaven' crossover.

Picking up from events in *The Authority*, the apparent death of Kaizen Gamorra has led to political leadership squabbles. In Cybernary 2.0 one faction decides to find Yumiko and rule through her and cyborg rebels who want to assert their own claims to citizenship are also seeking her. Joe Harris' script seems at times wilfully obtuse, but the artwork by Eric Canete and Juan Vlasco is distinctive, if occasionally confusing.~NF

CYBERPUNK

Innovation: *2 issue microseries 1989-1990*, 2 issue microseries ('Book Two') 1990*, two issue microseries ('The Seraphim Files') 1990**

A lesson that should have filtered through to Innovation very early in their existence was that painted art doesn't necessarily mean good art. Here we have shocking anatomy placed on blurred backgrounds in stories about teens jacked into cyberspace via neck implants. Good ideas, weak stories, bad art. 'The Seraphim Files' continues from *Seraphim* 1.~FP

CYBERPUNX

Image/Extreme: *3 issue miniseries 1996*

It's heartbreaking to see Robert Loren Fleming, the man who wrote the magnificent *Thriller*, eking out a living by scripting nonsense like this for Rob Liefeld, even if he does manage to insert a few digs about the concept into the script. Computers control the world, and the remaining humans can be digitised and transferred about the place. That's not enough, though, and the Cyberlords want to eradicate humanity. It's not a bad idea, but unfortunately, having conceived it, Rob's more interested in people duffing each other up.~WJ

CYBERSUIT ARKADYNE

Ianus Publications: *3 issues 1992*

Beset by pirate raids in the asteroid belt, the Earth administration of 2052 eventually realises these are the first skirmishes of an alien invasion. Cue the latest battlesuit technology courtesy of inventor Dr Ann Gabel. The suit pilot is young Glenn Taback who is haunted by visions of his own death that seem far more like premonitions. The appearance of another battlesuit in 1 and evidence of an ancient alien outpost on Earth's moon in 2 complicate things further. During a test run Taback realises the alien carvings relate directly to visual aspects of the suit's gravitic drive. Creator and artist Tim Eldred's collaboration with scripter and "futurist" Jonathan Jarrard is only a technical success, their debt to innumerable Japanese battlesuit series is obvious. Characterisation is flat and poorly portayed next to the meticulously realised hardware. So – not much page turning impetus but enough hard detail and plot to keep fans of this genre happy. Planned as six issues, only three were published.~SW

CYBLADE/SHI

Image/Crusade: *2-issue microseries 1995*

Steamin' babe-on-babe action from comics' hottest heroines. Nah, only kidding. It's actually a pompous allegory about creative little guys fighting against a huge evil out to destroy their individuality and, with it, the land of wonder. The creators' hearts were in the right place, but the whole thing's a terrible mish-mash, written by William Tucci and Gary Cohn and drawn by Tucci, Nelson Asencio and Jimmy Palmiotti. Shi and Cyblade don't even do much. Along the way Cerebus, Fone Bone, Mr Spook and a host of other characters from better independent comics turn up.~FJ

CYBRID

Maximum Press: *1 issue 1995*

A cyborg has escaped from his creators, and they want him back. He, on the other hand, has no intention of returning. Hardly an original plot, but there are some interesting ideas and interludes. Unfortunately every time these occur they're curtailed by some bog standard fight scenes and pin-up pages.~WJ

CYCLOPS

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 2001*

There's nothing to distinguish this disjointed miniseries in any fashion. Cyclops goes on vacation, meets some old enemies employed by a new one with a grudge against him, drops into the Savage Land and returns home to settle everything, having filled eighty-eight pages along the way. For hardcore X-fans only~FP

The Adventures of CYCLOPS AND PHOENIX

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1995, 4 issue miniseries 1996*

Just to further complicate the already impenetrable *X-Men* continuity, Cyclops and Phoenix are snatched from their honeymoon and thrust into the dark, distant future. They're tasked with raising the child who will be Cable, doing all they can to ensure that a prophecy about the future stays on-line despite knowing the pain and anguish the future will hold for all of them. The artwork, by Gene Ha, is finely detailed and has almost fairy-tale qualities amid the usual big guns and helicopters of the X-comics house style, while Scott Lobdell's story puts flesh on the bones of a future mythology which has been hinted at but never before fully explored. The second series, written by Peter Milligan, has them thrust into the past of Victorian England to witness the origin of their arch-nemesis, Mr Sinister. Essential for *X-Men* aficionados but be warned: the complicated continuity may well be incomprehensible to the casual reader.~JC

CYCOPS

Comics Interview: *3 issues 1988*

Cybernetically enhanced policemen strive to uncover an assassination plot. Notable for the début of artist Brian Stelfreeze, it's nonetheless very ordinary science fiction.~WJ

CYNICAL GIRL

Mortco: *1 issue 2000*

Unfunny woman dons costume to shout at people who annoy her. Creative team seem to lack understanding of the word 'cynical'.~DB

DADAVILLE

Caliber: *1 issue 1991*

The idea of a surrealist comic must have sounded a very funny idea late one night in the bar. Unfortunately not only did the creators wake up the next morning and start producing it, Caliber published it. Not for long, though.~DB

DAEMONSTORM

Caliber: *One-shot 1997*

In another time and place the galactic civilisation of Numenia was on the verge of collapse as the fallout from their sole energy source, Magic, caused Daemonstorms. These amount to seismic instability, negation of all laws of physics, and the creation of hideous monsters. To fight these problems the Stormwalkers were founded. Now, an indeterminate time later, the last Stormwalker is summoned from exile as the Daemonstorms begin again. It's a prequel to a larger story, crossing over into a number of Caliber titles, but on the strength of this it's not worth waiting for.~WW

DAGAR the Invincible

Gold Key: *18 issues 1972-1976*
Whitman: *1 issue (19) 1982*

Gold Key's slide from grace was precipitous during the early 1970s. While rarely reaching great heights, their titles had always attained a level of professional competence, and their distinguishing painted covers (repeated as pin-ups on the back cover without logo and cover text) were always a treat. This is almost plotless sword-and-sorcery drawn by Jesse Santos. Why on earth Whitman (who dropped the Gold Key imprint in the early 1980s) would imagine a reprint might revive an interest is beyond all speculation.~WJ

DAI KAMIKAZE

Now: *12 issues 1988-1989*

A giant battle robot is named after the title, with the initial involvement of Brian Augustyn, Len Strazewski and Mark McKenna very early in their professional careers. The robot is Earth's last hope in fighting off an opposing faction of humans who departed two millennia previously and now want to return. It's all just about competent material despite the constantly changing creative staff, but there's no reason anyone should be remotely interested now.~FP

DAILY BUGLE

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 1996-1997*

Gritty Paul Grist story accompanied by gritty Karl Kerschl black and white artwork of the life and times of New York City's premier newspaper. Corrupt landlords and money-laundering rear ugly heads as this Spider-Man institution fails to have everything its own way. The gritty script is fine. The gritty pencils spurn the opportunity to depict a single recognisable character.~APS

DAKOTA NORTH Investigations

Marvel: *5 issues 1986-1987*

Nominally a thriller featuring spies on the Orient Express and corporate double-dealing in the world of high fashion. In reality, a piece of soft porn through which Ms North struts in stilettos and tight black leather, displaying her delectable rear as often as possible. This is more often in issue 1 than in any other, but the story doesn't improve to compensate for the loss, and it's a relief to discover at the end of 5 that there will be no more.~FC

DALGODA

Fantagraphics: *8 issues 1984-1986*

Dalgoda's a classic science-fiction tale set in a war-ravaged future where spending on space development means Earth technology is no more advanced than in the 1950s. Earth has made contact with one spacefaring race, the dog-like Canidans; both are threatened by a mysterious race of destructive spacefarers called The Nimp. Writer Jan Strnad builds a believable background of political manoeuvring against which his lead characters struggle to survive: Dalgoda, a Canidan spaceman sent to Earth when his own planet is about to be destroyed; Posy, a disgraced ex-Spacer who's on hand when Dalgoda's ship crashes; and Hathaway, Posy's ballsy sometime-lover, a mechanic with the space fleet.

It is in the development of characters that *Dalgoda* distinguishes itself as an adult story. By the end of the series you'll care about their futures so thoroughly that the ending will both shock and touch you. It's pretty inconclusive, however, clearly cobbled together when the series was curtailed early. Dennis Fujitake's art mixes equal parts Moebius and manga to give a gorgeous, rounded, clear-line style. In later issues the colouring (subtly suggesting a different future in its use of purple, orange and green where primary colours would normally be employed) suffered due to the downgrading of paper stock.

Dalgoda was also blessed with a superb back-up strip in issues 2-6. Written by Strnad, atmospherically illustrated by Kevin Nowlan, 'Grimwood's Daughter' is a tart antidote to sugary elf comics with its surly, often frightening heroes who are preparing for their final battle with man. As in the main strip he resists writing an easy, happy ending.~FJ

Recommended: 5, 8

DAMAGE

DC: *21 issues (0-20) 1994-1996*

Teenager Grant Emerson discovers latent superpowers on the same day he's attacked at school by Metallo, and finds out that his parents are not who he'd always believed. Talk about your bad days... Despite the determined efforts of the creators (who shall remain nameless) to link Damage to DC history by connecting his true parentage with iconic DC heroes, this is utterly mundane and unimaginative superheroics. One for Vandal Savage completists only.~HS

DAMAGE CONTROL

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1988-1989, 4 issue miniseries 1989-1990, 4 issue miniseries 1991*

What to do when the Masters of Evil trash downtown Manhattan in an all-out, no holds barred battle with the Avengers, for the third time this week and it's only Tuesday? Send for Damage Control! A massive repairs and renovations business, they specialise in cleaning up the mess after superbattles. A charming and logical idea, handled with a sense of humour by writer Dwayne McDuffie and penciller Ernie Colón, but sufficiently serious that it integrates smoothly into the Marvel Universe. For a while, we were treated to *Damage Control* miniseries on an annual basis, and it looked like it was going to become a regular feature. No such luck, which is a pity. Series one features a tie-in with the *X-Men*'s 'Inferno' story-line, series two are all 'Acts of Vengeance' crossovers, but with enough story that they can be read independently. Series three goes cosmic with the Silver Surfer. Guest appearances by the Marvel heroes and villains abound.~HS

Recommended: Miniseries one 1-4, miniseries two 1-4, miniseries three 1-4

DAMNATION

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1994*

A collection of assorted J.R. Williams strips, including a 1985 collaboration with Peter Bagge, sadly not much cop. Williams never raises less than a smile, but at times veers dangerously close to the conventions of vapid latter-day newspaper cartoons. Strangely, though, his apparent attempt at creating such material, Barfo the Clown, would provoke apoplexy across middle America. It's all the better for this. Other highlights include a few 'Bad Boys' strips, the work for which Williams is best known, a riotous adaptation of 2 Live Crew's *Get The Fuck Out Of My House*, and a great portfolio of different dreams. There's too much filler for unqualified recommendation, but anyone who's enjoyed Williams' work elsewhere will find many ribs tickled here.~FP

DAMNED

Homage: *4 issue miniseries 1997**

When Mick Thorne is released from prison he carries a secret, passed on by a dying friend. He's promised to get in touch with the dead man's sister but King Silver's after $15 million that was stolen from him and believes Mick knows where it is. Steven Grant's not written much to equal this hard-boiled thriller. There's nothing particularly new about the layers of intrigue and murder but the tale's well told and both Mick and his replacement Parole Officer, Charlotte Dahl are interesting characters. Perhaps the real revelation of the series, however, is Mike Zeck's reinvention of his art style. Part Frank Miller, part Jose Munoz and Denis Rodier's inking is significant but it's well worth a look.~NF

Recommended: 1-4

DAN O'NEILL'S COMICS AND STORIES

Company and Sons: *3 issues 1971*
Comics and Comix: *2 issues 1975*

O'Neill's 'Odd Bodkins' newspaper strip was collected from the underground paper *The Chronicle*. Visually O'Neill manages a beautifully loose evocation of the turn-of-the-century cartoonists, which is what one would expect from the founder of the Air Pirates group, whose style was based on the pioneers. Unfortunately the writing is completely mad, featuring characters like Billie The Giant Space Bunny, Micky Mouse and Jabberwocky. It sounds great, of course, but is frankly unreadable. Far, far too many drugs...~DAR

DAN TURNER HOLLYWOOD DETECTIVE

Malibu: *One-shot ('Lights! Camera! Murder!') 1990*
Eternity: *One-shot ('Dark Star of Death') 1991, one-shot ('Ace in the Hole') 1991, one-shot ('Homicide Hunch') 1991, one-shot ('Star Chamber') 1991*

Hard-boiled *Dan Turner* ran an impressive seventeen years in pulp magazines from 1934, starting a parallel career in comics in the 1940s, all written by Robert Leslie Bellem. The squarebound Malibu one-shot reprints examples of both, while the Eternity issues have John Wooley, the writer of a 1990 *Dan Turner* movie, adapting pulp stories. He's never a few steps from violence, and there's a rough and ready fast-talking attitude to Turner, as there was to many of his contemporaries, but time has diminished his personality to cliché, and the plots aren't sophisticated enough to overcome that. Presumably writing at speed and paid by the word, Bellem's stories follow a strict formula that juggles dames and corpses with a final page revelation. Artists Kevin Tuma and Gary Dumm aren't up to the evocation of 1940s Hollywood that added atmosphere to the original stories, and their stuff figures are put to shame by the reprinted 1940s back-ups drawn by one Adolphe Barreaux. Comics have served up plenty of better detection stories.~FP

DANCES WITH DEMONS

Marvel UK/Frontier: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

A Native American college student, discovers his dying grandfather is a spiritual guardian known as The Ghost Dancer. His investiture as the new Ghost Dancer involves ordeals and confrontations with demons. Simon Jowett delivers a solid rites-of-passage thriller, ably abetted by Charlie Adlard whose style adapts well to both campus life and the supernatural. The peachy colour work from Tony Lee is also an asset as is Ed Perryman's out-there costume design. A mainstream Marvel title with intercourse as part of its contents certainly makes it a conversation piece, if only in terms of editorial laissez-faire.~SW

DANCING WITH YOUR EYES CLOSED

Iconografix: *One-shot 1992*

A lonely guy in a new city joins an improvisational dance group that opens him to alternative ideas, but he eventually finds them as hidebound as conventional acquaintances. An admirable attempt by Joe Zabel to try something different, to be filed under "worthy but dull".~WJ

DANGER GIRL

Image/Cliffhanger: *4 issues 1998*
Cliffhanger: *3 issues (5-7), 1 Special 1999-2001, 2 issue miniseries ('Kamikaze') 2001*

Perpetrated mainly by J. Scott Campbell, 'Danger Girl' is not a person, but an organisation, a top-secret force of elite female operatives, who are, of course, told what to do by a man. By sheerest coincidence, all of them are shapely and gorgeous and, while competent, assertive and independent, keep having adventures that cause them to wear skimpy fetish outfits, or lose their clothes altogether. Protagonist Abbey Chase, an archaeologist and adventurer newly recruited to the team, tries hard to be Lara Croft, but comes across more like Kenny Everett's Cupid Stunt. Talk about having your cheesecake and eating it too. The first issues were a huge success, with prices skyrocketing (particularly on the chromium and tabloid 'Danger Sized' variants), but the aeons-long gap between issues caused much of its initial audience to drift away to newer, bustier titles. The Special was a flip-cover package with a fantasy 'TV Pilot' for the series on one side, and a dream sequence for junior member Silicon Valerie on the other. It's notable for guest artists Joe Chiodo and Arthur Adams, but virtually content-free. To keep the franchise alive, 'Kamikaze' was released with Tommy Yune writing and drawing. It manages to be a bit less sexist than the original.~HS

DANGER TRAIL

DC: *5 issues 1950-1951, 4 issue miniseries 1993*

The 1950s issues feature superspy King Faraday in adventures with agents of the Iron Curtain. Lovely art by Alex Toth and Sy Barry doesn't disguise the fact that they're unexceptional espionage tales, sought after today only because of their rarity. The 1993 miniseries, garnished with Paul Gulacy covers, sets Faraday and the lovely Natalia against the agents of Kobra. Written by Len Wein, drawn by Carmine Infantino, it's even duller than the originals.~HS

DANGER UNLIMITED

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1994**

Depending on your point of view, this is either a homage, pastiche or bare-faced rip-off of Marvel's long-running *Fantastic Four*. Written and drawn by John Byrne (who enjoyed a long, critically acclaimed, run on the FF during the 1980s), the story deals with the experiences of Calvin Carson, aka Thermal, who wakes up after seventy-five years of suspended animation to learn that his team-mates and family are dead and that the Earth is ruled by alien invaders. Events yo-yo between flashbacks to the original team and the formation of a new one in Calvin's present, giving us precious little of either before the series ends. All four issues have back-up stories featuring the Torch of Liberty, a character owing as much of a debt to Captain America as Danger Unlimited do to the FF. The promised further adventures never materialised.~JC

DANGLE

Cat Head: *1 issue 1991*
Drawn & Quarterly: *4 issues 1993-1994*

Lloyd Dangle's strips, broadly speaking, fall into the category of autobiographical comics, and as such he has substantially less of interest to relate than many others, and takes a long time to tell it, particularly with a strip about domestic conflict in 3. His scratchy style of cartooning often appears unformed, and the gag effects he attempts just don't really have the power they should. The Cat Head issue is reprinted as the first Drawn & Quarterly comic.~WJ

D'ARC TANGENT

ffantasy ffactory: *1 issue 1982*

Only issue of a projected sixteen part series, this is a science fiction fantasy tale that sets itself some epic targets. When a surveyor is killed without reason, his mate is ordered to report to an agent on the only other planet where such an incident has occurred: Earth (17th century

France to be precise). There she is discovered by the superstitious natives and will be burned at the stake unless her ship's computer can program an Arc Tangent unit to save her. Created by Phil Foglio and Freff and drawn in a more realistic style than Foglio has since become associated with, the magazine-sized issue can be read and enjoyed in its own right but its an introduction that really does make you wish there were more to follow.~NF

DARE:The Controversial Memoir of Dan Dare

Monster Comics: *4 issue miniseries 1991-1992**

It's a mystery why *Dare*, reprinted from British anthology *Revolver*, was issued under Fantagraphics' short-lived Monster Comics banner. Grant Morrison and Rian Hughes' radical re-think of the Pilot of the Future probably upset a lot of fans as a prime example of what happens when the desire to make all superheroes 'adult' runs riot. The future is once again grim, with food riots, Space Fleet HQ being turned into yuppie flats, and a crippled Dan Dare returning from retirement as a propaganda tool for the unpopular right-wing government. Rian Hughes draws in an ironic Jetsons style as Dare begins to smell a rat while investigating Jocelyn Peabody's supposed suicide. Morrison relies on simplistic politicking to give the strip an edge, alongside shock revelations about Dare's previous behaviour. Involving, but leaves a nasty taste in the mouth.~FJ

DARE the Impossible

Fleetway/Quality: *15 issues 1990-1991*

Reprinting the Dan Dare stories from British science-fiction anthology comic *2000AD*, *Dare the Impossible* introduced American audiences to some of the earliest work produced by artist Dave Gibbons, who made his name on the other side of the Atlantic with Watchmen. Reviving the old Eagle comic character in little more than name, the Dan Dare of the title was a descendant of the original, and has his adventures in the further-flung future. Often violent, but always fast-paced and entertaining, with clones, big monsters, aliens and, of course, the Mekon, it's worth picking up from the cheap boxes if you can find it.~JC

DAREDEVIL

Marvel: *Series one 380 issues, 11 Annuals, 1 Giant-Size 1964-1998, series two 40 issues + 1998 to date*

Daredevil was the final spurt of Marvel's initial creative orgasm. It was also the least original, applying the name of Lev Gleason's defunct character to the costumed identity adopted by blind Matt Murdock as a surrogate Batman. When blinded as a child, Murdock's other senses increase and his agility multiplies thanks to the accident responsible for his loss of sight involving a nebulous radioactive cocktail. Stan Lee collaborated with Bill Everett on 1, then Joe Orlando before Wally Wood arrived with 5 to provide Daredevil with the distinctive horned red bodysuit he's traded in almost ever since. These stories establish Daredevil as New York's urban crime-fighter, and someone who overcame the impoverishment and surroundings of his upbringing to become a noted lawyer. His partner Foggy Nelson and secretary Karen Page provide a soap opera cast. The best issues of the first year have a courageous Daredevil outclassed facing the Sub-Mariner in 7, and 10-11, written by Wood, but with Bob Powell heavily involved in the art, introducing the Ani-Men, a silly team of villains who recur over the years. Disagreements over these issues led to Wood's departure.

Then primarily known for romance comics, John Romita claims he lacked the technique to illustrate a superhero, and needed uncredited Jack Kirby layouts on 12. He was a quick learner, and graduated to *Spider-Man* leaving Gene Colan as penciller with 20. The stories? Well, they filled the pages as *Daredevil* increasingly looked the runt of Marvel's litter. Stan Lee plotting and scripting eight monthly titles in addition to acting as managing editor was an extraordinary output, and as praise was lavished on Marvel he expended more effort on the winners. Daredevil was treated very much as a second rate Spider-Man, fighting more and more super-powered villains. The prevailing inanity is exemplified by Murdock creating a new identity to fool his suspicious colleagues in 25, masquerading as his confident brother Mike, who must later pretend to be blind also. While Colan's fine-lined flowing pencils are never less than gorgeous, Lee only serves up the thrills for the final third of his run, by which time he'd relinquished several other titles. Daredevil and Dr Doom are both surprised in 36-38, Mike Murdock departs in 42, there's a sprightly encounter with the Jester in 44-46, and 47 is a decent stab at contemporary social problems. It concerns a Vietnam vet who's run up debts with the mob, and while not exactly subtle, Lee's heart was in the right place. In 50-52 pre-Windsor Barry Smith drops by with his early Jack Kirby imitations, not very good and unsuited to a character requiring grace and athleticism, and so does the Black Panther, as Roy Thomas writes 51-71.

Thomas' high point is dispensing with superhero convention by having Murdock reveal his other identity to Karen Page (57), causing their relationship to fracture, and her eventual departure to try her luck in Hollywood. It's an unpredictable and well handled piece of soap opera amid standard superheroics. Colan's art, meanwhile is hitting peaks and troughs under assorted inkers, George Klein from 46 (good), Syd Shores from 55 (um, well...) and Tom Palmer from 76 cementing a classic 1970s art partnership. After Thomas there are few high points for several years. In 81 Daredevil begins sharing his life and comic with the Black Widow, who is title featured on 92-107. It's an interesting idea that rarely gels, although the pair are gorgeously drawn by Al Weiss and Bill Everett in 83. They move to San Francisco in 87, but a few establishing shots and splash pages apart, there seems little point. Some life returns with writer Steve Gerber's arrival on 98, and his introduction of a memorable villain in the hallucination inducing Angar the Screamer. Colan and Palmer are away by this point, and Gerber's longest running penciller is the very ordinary Bob Brown from 107. Oddly, though, it's with Brown's arrival that Gerber makes a breakthrough, continuing plots from the short lived *Shanna the She-Devil* comic and an audacious pair of villains to 112 for his best issues. It's a brief blip in the general indifference, though, as numerous following creators go through the motions. Marv Wolfman does supply moments, but never a completely good story from first page to last. The introduction of family man hero The Torpedo leads to good portions of 126, 127 and 134, and without credits you'd assume the strangely poignant 128 to be a Gerber effort. An astronaut creates solid light steps to the stars, while Daredevil battles a villain called Death Stalker (introduced in 114) whose touch kills. 129 characterises the previously ludicrous Man-Bull while getting him into a china shop. Wolfman should also be given credit for hanging a plot with the Jester on the basis of video manipulation, technology then still a decade away, in a story pencilled by John Buscema in 136 and 137. 131 introduces Bullseye, the lethal assassin who'd have a lasting effect on the title, but it's a mediocre comic. As is almost everything else until Jim Shooter arrives to write with 144.

In the wake of succeeding material, issues between 144 and 158 have been unjustly forgotten. By this point Daredevil was hovering on the verge of cancellation, and Shooter's start is shaky, but when Gil Kane arrives to pencil 146 he takes off, with Kane co-plotting later issues he pencils (147, 148, 151). The run starts with a simple, but well crafted story of Daredevil, bereft of his heightened senses, facing Bullseye, and he's then involved in the machinations of an old villain. Killgrave the Purple Man was as daft a piece of whimsy as he sounds, yet able to control others with their having no memory of it. This ability is put to excellent use over the following issues, which also introduce a charming mercenary Paladin (150), and the ongoing threat of Death Stalker. It's with the soap opera elements that Shooter, and his successor Roger McKenzie from 152, excel. Murdock is courting another secretary, Heather Glenn, whose father appears a complete rogue. She discovers the truth of Daredevil, while well-plotted circumstances lead to a schism between Foggy Nelson and Murdock. The tension is cranked up issue by issue until an excellently worked finale with several villains in 154, by which time the comforting slanted panels and confident pencils of Gene Colan are back. A collection is long overdue. 155-158 solve the mystery of Death Stalker, return both the Ani-Men and Black Widow, and guest star the Avengers, but aren't as memorable. 159-161, 163 and 164 are best sampled via the 'Marked For Death' collection, as the paper Marvel used for their comics at the time was almost transparent, and their printing muddy. They include the best Bullseye effort to that point, and Daredevil facing off against the Hulk, another of those stories where he's hopelessly out of his depth it would seem, but excellently handled. Almost as good are battles against standard Marvel villains Dr Octopus in 165 and Gladiator in 166. A fill-in takes us up to the landmark 168.

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* Available in a collected edition

Despite the number of top rank creators who've provided *Daredevil* material there's one whose name is indelibly stamped all over the first series. Frank Miller contributed to less than ten percent of the run, starting by drawing McKenzie's stories in 158 and co-plotting from 165, yet his effect on both the title and the wider sphere of superhero comics was immense. Artistically he was strongly influenced by Gil Kane, but developed a grittier style played up by the accomplished inking of Klaus Janson. Miller wrote alone from 168, introducing mysterious female assassin Elektra, revealed via continuity implant, to have been Matt Murdock's college love. Miller kept returning to Daredevil's earlier days, explaining away illogical aspects of his emergence via the introduction of surly mentor Stick, but most prominently in re-establishing him as a street level superhero dealing with thugs and gangsters. Gang boss The Kingpin, his assorted minions, Bullseye and Elektra all play through a story broken into chapters, but essentially occupying 169 to a glorious conclusion in the justly renowned 181, with a coda in 182. Bullseye had been transformed by Shooter, but Miller unleashes the full potential of a callous killer able to turn any object into a lethal weapon. He also transforms the previously forgettable Kingpin into a formidable opponent who rarely dirties his own hands, takes relish in tormenting Heather Glenn, and creates middle-aged reporter Ben Urich who discovers Murdock's secret and has to live with that knowledge. The 1990s reprint collections of this material rather callously scythed through and separated stories, but the current series of *Daredevil* books bearing Miller's name restores the chronological order.

183-184* is a teaming with The Punisher written by Miller two years previously, when spotlighting drugs in schools was considered too controversial for publication. Miller had upped the ante considerably since then. With his plots pulled together Miller drifts for a little, filling the comic with ninjas, and Klaus Janson is promoted to pencilling Miller's layouts. The next major plot runs to 190, but there's a nagging feeling of recycling until Miller ends his run with the top notch 191 featuring a very different encounter with Bullseye. Janson stays to 197, with 192, a forgotten gem written by Alan Brennert in which Ben Urich deals with the moral implications of his career.

Former *Batman* writer and *Daredevil* editor Denny O'Neil was a logical choice for the next writer, but despite his reputation and experience, sandwiched between two runs of Frank Miller's writing he's second best. He doesn't shy from controversial issues, and while his dabbling with Irish politics is ill-advised, O'Neil has moments of note. The final appearance of Heather Glenn in 220 being one, although the story descends into silly Venetian villains from there. The best aspect of O'Neil's issues is the gradual emergence of David Mazzucchelli into the top tier of comic artists. Starting as a strong action artist in 209, he merges the fluidity and grace of Colan with Kane's instinctive storytelling, incorporating many of Miller's visual standbys. He's extremely adept at producing interesting panels just using figures on a white background, and his sepia-toned Two-Gun Kid sequence in 215 is stunning. It looks even better in the collection 'Love's Labor's Lost' incorporating all non-crossover issues between 215 and 226. Miller writes the passable 219 and 226, but 227 on was a different proposition. Karen Page's Hollywood dreams disintegrated into an existence as a crack whore, and through her the Kingpin learns Daredevil's identity. Collected as 'Born Again', other elements of the story include Catholicism, an insane patriot, a great teaming with Captain America, and the introduction of Matt Murdock's mother. Mazzucchelli, now inking his own work, deliberately modifies his style to ape Miller's art, and both depart after 233.

Oddly, it's Mazzucchelli who's initially missed the more, with a succession of artists illustrating Ann Nocenti's stories from 235. Until the arrival of John Romita Jr on 250 the only art of note is from Barry Windsor-Smith in 236 and Todd McFarlane in 241. Nocenti attempts to move Daredevil on a little, relentlessly hammering broad themes such as redemption, and the empowerment of the self, and expands on Miller's introduction of Catholicism. These are murky grounds, though, and Nocenti's scripts descend into muddled philosophy and belly-flop far more often than they succeed. A mistake is restoring the relationship between Murdock and Karen Page only to rehash in protracted fashion the same issues Thomas dealt with concisely twenty years previously. Of course, it's unlikely they shared many readers. Another mistake is seizing on people referring to Daredevil as "Devil" as an excuse for strained investigations of satanic connections and motivations, leading to Daredevil wandering through hell. Nocenti is better in more straightforward costumed adventurer territory, introducing the schizoid killer Typhoid Mary in 254, and turning in a comic battle with The Blob for 269. Her relentless moralising wears very thin, with a script in 288-290 attempting to contrast Daredevil and Bullseye as two peas from the same pod a step too far. Her last few issues, though, introduce another good new artist in Lee Weeks, helped by inker Al Williamson, in place since 248.

Dan Chichester is an intelligent writer, but the quality of his stories varies. He's in place until 332, but never tops 'Last Rites' in 297-300*, ending, for some considerable while, the Kingpin's stature as an untouchable crimelord. It's a powerful and affecting story, well drawn by Weeks and Williamson. 304 is a decent night in the life tale, but thereafter Chichester concentrates on devising clever methods to tell a story, relegating clarity to an afterthought. He's best remembered for 'Fall From Grace' in 319-325*, but this is an overblown failure. By now Chichester has found his artistic match in Scott McDaniel, who prioritises visual innovation over telling the story. At the end Daredevil has a new armoured costume, and the wider world believes Matt Murdock dead. Chichester's departure highlights that at least he attempted to avoid retreading the familiar paths, as Daredevil sinks back into the morass of ho-hum comics, although if you want to see how bad Warren Ellis once was, try 343. Matt Murdock returns. The red costume returns. Even Gene Colan returns (in 363, 366-368, 370). The best return is Murdock and Nelson's law firm, a dramatic springboard unique in superhero comics, now with an added twist of a formidable new senior partner. The best art in later issues is from Cary Nord and Matt Ryan (most of 348-365), depicting Murdock very much in the Wally Wood style, and at least he finally comes clean about his other identity to Foggy Nelson, killing one old plot stone dead. The first series ends disappointingly with Chichester and Weeks returning for a humdrum final issue.

It's a damning comment on the creators involved with the assorted annuals that the first in 1967 by Stan Lee and Gene Colan has never been topped. It's an enjoyable romp that has Electro gathering Daredevil's then most prominent villains, every one of them stupid, to gang-up on him. Second best is Joe Kelly and Bernard Chang's teaming with eccentric mercenary Deadpool in 1997. This run is well-served by

* Available in a collected edition

collections, with two *Marvel Masterworks* editions covering 1-21, while the cheaper black and white *Essential* paperback runs to 25. All Miller's issues are available, and many since.

Notwithstanding reservations about negating a historic run for the few extra readers who'd sample a new number one issue, the second series has largely been a triumph, presenting the best *Daredevil* seen in fifteen years. In 1-8* Kevin Smith writes a top class page-turner that pushes all the right buttons. It finally resolves the Karen Page problem in controversial fashion, lands Daredevil with a baby, and redefines him for a new generation through a manipulative old villain, mysterious for much of the story. The art is dazzling, the best since Mazzucchelli, as Joe Quesada and Jimmy Palmiotti pull Daredevil out of the darkness, and they even write a perfectly acceptable fill-in to cover someone blowing a deadline between 11 and 13. At this point David Mack is writing, and he delivers a viable, if prolonged story pitting a deaf assassin against the blind Daredevil, which works better than it sounds, and delving into the Kingpin's background while he's on trial. The ending leaves the Kingpin with his own disability. Mack makes a good fine artist, but a wretched comic artist on 16-19, stubbornly refusing to compromise his art for the benefit of the story. A shame, because new writer Brian Michael Bendis hits the ground running, focussing on Ben Urich's assignment being to cover the Kingpin's trial, while his instincts pull him back to the psychiatric treatment of the son of an old villain.

Bob Gale with pencillers Phil Winslade (drawing on Colan) and David Ross, produce the excellent 20-25. Part courtroom drama, part mystery, Matt Murdock is asked to prosecute Daredevil for criminal damage. He knows he's innocent, yet takes the case to investigate further as he also knows his accuser is telling the truth. The tension is superbly played, and the eventual revelations match it. Bendis has written every issue since, easily adapting the type of crime dramas he was known for to *Daredevil*. He stretches his plots, but at the heart they generally contain interesting moral dilemmas, and his penchant for entertaining, yet naturalistic dialogue, via Tarantino films, goes a long way. 26-37 play on a rising gangster discovering the Kingpin knows Daredevil's true identity, yet hasn't dealt with Murdock, leading to that knowledge being splashed across the newspapers, while in 38-40 Murdock must defend a fellow superhero accused of murder. Alex Maleev's stylised art might not be to all tastes, being dark and scratchy, but the occasional problem with storytelling apart, he is very good, and with high expectations for the Daredevil movie in 2003, the parent comic is in good shape.~WJ

Recommended: 37, 38, 44-46, 147, 151, 160, 161, 163, 165, 166, 168-173, 179-182, 191, 192, 227-233, 297-300, series two 1-8, 20-26, 32, 36, 38-41

DAREDEVIL COMICS

Lev Gleason: *134 issues 1941-1956*

First *Daredevil Battles Hitler*, this title received a more orthodox name after its debut issue, in which all the heroes from *Silver Streak Comics* teamed against the Leader of the Reich. Daredevil himself was Bart Hill, orphaned in infancy when his parents were slaughtered by rogue aborigines (!), Bart was raised by 'the savages', and developed expert skills with the boomerang. The adult Bart wins, in combat, the title of chief of the tribe, and the distinctive, red & blue quartered costume it entails. By a series of contrivances too ludicrous to be detailed, he travels to civilisation, discovers that his evil uncle was behind the attack on his parents, avenges their deaths, and decides to stay on an use his newly-inherited fortune, boomerang skills and funny costume to fight for justice!

Although *Daredevil Comics* was initially an anthology, with several lesser heroes – Nightro, Pat Patriot, 13 and Jinx – sharing with the eponymous hero, the lesser features rapidly fell away to leave Daredevil as a solo feature. Daredevil, like most heroes of the 1940's, acquired a sidekick early in his career... in his case, four. In 13, he encountered a kid gang, 'The Little Wise Guys', Pee Wee, Scarecrow, Meatball and Jock. No sooner does DD take them under his wing, than in the very next issue, Meatball dies. Hardly an auspicious beginning. Nonetheless, the Wise Guys, with the luckless Meatball promptly replaced by Curly, proved a huge hit; not the first kid gang in comics, but certainly the most successful, they rapidly made Daredevil a supporting character in what was his own title. By 42, after an unscrupulous newspaperman exposed his identity, Bart Hill ditched the costume briefly, solving the dilemma by faking his own demise so that a 'new' Daredevil could appear. His role in the story dwindled, however, and by 69 he was completely gone, leaving the Little Wise Guys in charge. Under Charles Biro and Norm Maurer, the Wise Guys' morality-play stories, an amalgam of the traditional boy's adventure tale and the crime stories with which Gleason were making their fortunes, were hugely popular at the time, but, despite an appealing art style, look very dated today.~HS

DAREDEVIL Miniseries and One-shots

Marvel: *Graphic Novel ('Love and War') 1986, 5 issue miniseries (Man Without Fear) 1993-1994*, one-shot (Daredevil/Black Widow) 1995, one-shot (Daredevil/Batman) 1997, 2 issue microseries (Daredevil/Shi) 1997, one-shot (Daredevil/Ka-Zar) 1998, 3 issue miniseries ('Ninja') 2000, 4 issue miniseries (Daredevil/Spider-Man) 2001, 6 issue miniseries ('Yellow') 2001-2002*, 1 issue + (Daredevil Bullseye) 2003 to date*

Despite a rich tradition extending back to the early days of Marvel, Daredevil took a while to get in on the miniseries act. The earliest excursion from the monthly title is the oversized graphic novel 'Love and War' by Frank Miller and Bill Sienkiewicz. Very much a product of its time, its painted art by then-darling of the fans Sienkiewicz shows off how printing technology could now deal with something more than traditional linework and flat colours. Its plot, dealing with 'adult' themes of abuse and violence as Daredevil rescues a helpless woman from a perverted sadist, verges too close to voyerism in places to be comfortable. Daredevil/Black Widow: 'Abattoir' by Jim Starlin and Joe Chiodo has the title characters on the trail of a serial abuser. It's an example of structured storytelling and the need to actually be able to tell what's going on in the art coming a poor second to style as Marvel try to convince the masses that graphic novels aren't for kids.

Many of the miniseries are simply gratuitous cross-company team-ups. Neither the pairing with Elektra-alike ninja babe Shi (second issue published as Shi/Daredevil), and DC's fellow urban roof-and-alley worrier Batman add anything to either character. Team-ups with Marvel's own characters have been better. His romp with Spider-Man by Paul Jenkins and Phil Winslade made the most of the two heroes' long friendship, shared history and equal dislike of the Kingpin. It was, though, like its near-contemporary 'Ninja' a weak attempt to divert attention from the fact that the regular title was going through a three year stretch in which it was woefully incapable of hitting anything like a regular schedule. *Daredevil/Ka-Zar* on the other hand, works as well as you'd expect it to.

The best of the bunch have been the miniseries that aimed to expand and flesh out Daredevil's past. *Man Without Fear* is by Frank Miller and John Romita Jr, both of whom presided over long and important runs on the regular title. Miller uses the series to expand on some themes he introduced to the character during his tenure on the title, including Daredevil's links with ninja tradition, and especially his relationship with his Miller-created mentor Stick and the nature of his powers. Romita Jr's art is never the same again, taking on an obvious debt to Miller that no doubt came from working with him so closely. 'Yellow' is by fellow retro-continuity maestroes Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale. The latter's narrative trick of telling the story of DD's early years through diary entries written to his recently deceased lover Karen Page makes for a particularly nice insight into a long ago, more innocent period. It's an ideal read for long-term readers of the character and those completely new to the mythos.~JC

Recommended: Man Without Fear 1-5, 'Yellow' 1-6

DARING ESCAPES

Image: *4 issues 1998*

Houdini, now that he's dead, bases himself in a place called The Overlap. He transforms a demon into a decorative bust made out of a substance called hellite, which corrupts morally the same way plutonium does physically. This mistake earns Houdini a mission of retrieval from his boss "9". What follows includes time travel, his card-playing pal Judas, Pope Cesare Borgia and a cute trainee angel named Kimiel. If this sounds at all incoherent, please bear in mind this is a spin-off from *Spawn* 19-20. Writers Tom Orzechowski and Andy Grossberg indulge their inexperience with over-writing. Their peppering of period characters' speech with contemporary idioms is particularly clumsy. The artwork by Alan Weiss is lush and beautifully rendered by Art Nichols in 1 and Jim Fern in 2-3. Utter codswallop.~SW

DARK AGES

Alternate Concepts: *1 issue 1998*

A mixed bag of burly barbarian tales with the humorous back-up strips outshining the lead. 'Swords of Charahad' is dull and meandering with word balloons obscuring literally entire pages of art, whilst pages with no words at all are so poorly designed that there is no idea of what's happening. Not recommended.~WW

Phoenix Resurrection: DARK ANGEL

Image: *4 issue miniseries 2000-2001*

More of the Dark Angel mythos from creator Kia Asamiya. Kyo and Sekiha are winged Spirit Guides to Junior Saints Dark Yokuo and Susa Saiga respectively. The junior saints aspire to being the next Phantom Saint of the Red Phoenix, currently their master Sou-Sama. When Dark is promoted he is set the task of travelling across the land of Toi with Kyo. They encounter Toi's ruler Leen, The Phantom Saint of Blue Dragon, and her Spirit Guide Shiki who recognises Kyo. A mighty conflict ensues despite combat between Saints being forbidden. The first two issues really crawl and Asamiya's script, full of challenges and exposition, is dull – something lost in translation perhaps. The lovely colour work by Jonathan D. Smith lends considerable body to this slight package.~SW

DARK BLUE

Avatar: *4 issue miniseries 2001**

Frank Christchurch is a cop who has truly gone over the edge. Savage, compulsive and psychotic, Frank hunts for a murderer in a world that doesn't seem to care. A bleak and twisted take on an old, old story from Warren Ellis and Jacen Burrows with the now mandatory Ellis twist in the tail. An acquired taste.~WW

Strange Tales DARK CORNERS

Marvel: *One-shot 1998*

Inconsequential anthology of three features under Marvel's short lived *Strange Tales* horror imprint. Cloak and Dagger retread familiar ground. Morbius wallows in reminiscences of his fiancée prior to his vampiric affliction. An elemental goddess provides a morose Gargoyle with a purpose in a prelude to *Silver Surfer* 139. All three stories suffer from insufficient space to permit any substance.~APS

DARK CROSSINGS

Image/Top Cow: *One-shot ('Dark Clouds Rising') 2000, one-shot ('Dark Clouds Overhead') 2000*

Teaming of Top Cow's mainstays Tomb Raider Lara Croft, Witchblade Sara Pezzini and Jackie Estacado who controls The Darkness. Serving largely as a way of introducing short-run series Butcher Knight, also previewed in both issues, it's a shoddy, incoherent story stretching the ages. More fool anyone who paid $5.95 per issue for this rubbish.~WJ

DARK DOMINION

Defiant: *10 issues 1993-1994*

Michael Alexander has learned how to shift to the "Quantum Field", where he fights demons that feed off the fear that permeates New York. An idea with potential, and a good evocation of urban paranoia, but the rules governing the Field and the demons are never spelled out, reducing the fights to random splatterings. Sometimes the demons are used well as metaphors for madness or interior struggle, but too often they're treated as entirely external, so that Alexander can make someone happier simply by shooing off their anxiety-demon, and this makes a nonsense of any characterisation.~FC

DARK FANTASY

Apple: *1 issue 1992*

Three horror stories by Kevin Schnaper. If they have any merit, it's as tribute to pulp science fiction, but taken on their own, they're feeble ideas, poorly told.~FC

DARK GUARD

Marvel UK: *3 issue miniseries 1993*

The more popular of Marvel UK's early 1990s superheroes are pulled out of time and united to fight a threat to the future. Death's Head, Killpower, Motormouth and Dark Guard all feature, but apart from the occasional piece of nice art from Carlos Pacheco it's poor stuff.~FP

DARK HORSE COMICS

Dark Horse: *25 issues 1992-1994*

This anthology title from Dark Horse contains serialised tales of licensed properties alongside features owned by Dark Horse. Robocop, Predator, Indiana Jones, Aliens, Star Wars and James Bond share the pages with the lacklustre Time Cop (1-3), the introduction of X (and consequently *Comics Greatest World*) in 8-10, and other Dark Horse heroes.

Predator and Aliens features come to dominate the title; best of the Aliens tales is 'Horror Show' by Sarah Byam and David Roach in 3-5. The Predators generally come off better, switching times and locations. A group of paintballers get theirs in the prelude to Bad Blood in 12-14, there's a good Chuck Dixon and Alcatena tale in 10-12 and Howard Cobb's art in 21-22 is excellent. From 19 -24 there are segments of Comics Greatest World characters each issue. Reducing from four to three features per issue with 12 is an improvement, but there's still a real feeling of inconsequential filler material throughout. From 20 it's two features per issue, but the final issues are the worst of the run, with a very poor Mecha effort, an over-the-top cartoon-style Aliens and a daft James Bond story.~WJ

DARK HORSE Graphic Novels

This review covers material published by Dark Horse either as a new graphic novel for the American market or as a differently formatted edition of material published elsewhere. Text and illustration books are not covered, nor are straight collections of stories serialised elsewhere. In the second category, *Art Adams' Creature Features* collects his 'Creature from the Black Lagoon' one-shot (part of the *Universal Monsters* series), the *Godzilla Color Special* and a couple of short stories, including one featuring Monkeyman and O'Brien. *The Collected Short Stories of P. Craig Russell* samples work from throughout Russell's career, including early pieces like 'Dance on the Razor's Edge' and 'The Starship Remembrance', and his more recent adaptations of H.P. Lovecraft's 'From Beyond' and O. Henry's 'Gift of the Magi' *Al Williamson: Hidden Lands* reprints strips he produced during the 1950s for Atlas, Charlton, Dell and E.C., most of which have not been reprinted before, plus sketches and photographs from Williamson's scrapbooks.

Flood! (reprinted in 2002), was originally published in 1992 by Eric Drooker, whose artwork, in black, white and blue, has a non-realistic style, blocky almost like woodcuts, varying from stunning single image pages to ones containing sixty-four and even one-hundred-and-twenty-eight panels. Such as it is, the story is an examination of life in New York, through dream logic, from its simple pleasures to its inhumanity, drawing ever closer to an apocalyptic ending. Somewhat lacking in substance, this is nonetheless, visually impressive. The two volume *Little Annie Fanny* is a collection of the Harvey Kurtzman and Will Elder strip from *Playboy* (with additional artistic contributions from Jack Davis, Frank Frazetta, Russ Heath, Arnold Roth, Al Jaffe, William Stout and Sarah Downs and additional writig from Larry Siegel). The strip is a social and political satire of America between 1962 and 1988, presented through the adventures of the sexy, eponymous heroine, whose adventures in the film industry provide the plots (such as they are). The humour has dated somewhat, but there's still a great deal of pleasure to be had here. *Mac Raboy's Flash Gordon* begins a reprint of the artist's run on the *Flash Gordon* newspaper strip, and fans of his work will not be disappointed.

Dark Horse issued two volumes collecting Moebius strips, many of which first appeared in English in *Heavy Metal*. Exotics (including 'The Horny Goof') and *H. P.'s Rock City* (including 'The Long Tomorrow') are tidy colour editions, nearer paperback than comic, and though the artwork has been reduced in size, the print quality is excellent. A third volume collects 'Madwoman of the Sacred Heart' from *Dark Horse Presents* whilst also completing the series. Though none of these strips can be described as major, Moebius' imagination and the beautiful artwork are captivating. *Rocco Vargas* collects four stories about the square-jawed science fiction adventurer into one volume, three of which were previously been published by Catalan. A fifth album, 'The Dark Forest' was then published separately. Daniel Torres' style changes through the series with the early tales more stylised and reminiscent of Joost Swarte, but later adding heavier lines, bearing some comparison to Charles Burns. There are two *Aquablue* volumes by Olivier Vatine and Thierry Cailleteau, the story of Tumu-Nao, who, as a baby, was the only survivor, apart from a robot nanny, of a collision with asteroids. After eight years in space, he lands on Aquablue, a planet that is ninety-seven percent water. The first volume covers his coming of age and first clash with representatives of Unitec, which plans to exploit the planet, leaving it uninhabitable. In the second volume, Tumu-Nao travels to Earth to claim an inheritance that may help save the planet. Unfortunately, although Aquablue is visually impressive, writer, Cailleteau fails to make Tumu-Nao an engaging character.

Dark Horse also picked up the U.S. rights to five 'adult' graphic novels, first published by Victor Gollancz in the U.K. *Kling Klang Klatch* is a hardboiled, cyberpunk, anthropomorphic tale in which Inspector McBear, antagonistic towards the sentient machines around him, tries to unravel the mystery of the death of a pregnant Panda, encountering racism and other socially corrupt forces along the way. Ian McDonald and David Lyttleton's otherwise telling, black comedy is marred by the latter's distorted figures and confused storytelling. After suffering a beating at the hands of thugs while living on the streets, Banshee is rescued by a young woman, Etty, who takes him in and gives him a book she wrote as a child. This starts *The Minotaur's Tale* by Al Davison, and Etty's book re-tells the myth of the Minotaur in terms of deformity and social outcasts, giving Banshee hope and a different perception of his own worth. This is a terrific album, fiercely composed and rendered in a number of styles by Davison. In *The Luck in the Head*, poet Ardwick Crome is inspired by dreams of a ritual of the same name that involves women chasing a lamb. The woman with the insect's head gives him a sword and tells him he must kill Mammy Vooley, queen of the city. It's written by John M. Harrison, based on his own short story from *Viriconium Nights*, about a decadent and ever-shifting fantasy world. Individually, some of the panels and pages are interesting, even beautiful, but otherwise Ian Miller's artwork is an incoherent mess. *Signal to Noise*, by Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean and *A Small Killing* by Alan Moore and Oscar Zarate garnered critical approval, but neither are high points in their writer's career and in both cases are let down by the hollow, unsympathetic artwork. The former concerns a dying director's final movie about the Apocalypse as feared by villagers at the end of 999, initially composed only in his head. Gaiman's story is poignant and philosophical and McKean provides some fine illustrations, even narrative in places, but deliberately or not, too much of what McKean does is 'noise', obscuring the slight story, reminiscences and film-making. The latter is a heavy-handed condemnation of the advertising industry as Timothy Hole suffers a slow mental breakdown because of the compromises made during his life.

Cyberantics is ostensibly a children's book about ants, in which a cybernetic ant, Ari, is sent to investigate an ant's nest by author, Stanislaw Mayakovsky (a.k.a. Jerry Prosser), and saves its workers from subjugation by a rival species, as well as finding a new queen to ensure the nest's survival. With illustrations by Rick Geary, it's well produced and informative, though not compelling. Story elements were used later in Prosser's *Aliens* 'Hive' series. Dead To Rights, by Mike Kennedy and Francisco Paronzini (with Randy Emberlin inks), is based on a video game blending action cinema and film noir. The graphic novel provides some background to the game, whilst remaining essentially separate as the lead character, Jack Slate, remains unseen. It's a twisted tale of death and treachery, with good artwork similar in style to that of Eduardo Risso. Released from Mad magazine, *Don Martin's Droll Book* contains single page gag-strips as well as several longer stories, including 'The Nutheads' (in newspaper strip format) and a story featuring private eye, Fester Bestertester. Martin's humorous-in-themselves, large-footed characters with their elongated chins and droopy noses are much in evidence and this is a lot of fun.

In *Fax From Sarajevo*, Joe Kubert illustrates the events told in faxes from Ervin Rustemagic, trapped in war-torn Bosnia during the conflict that began in 1992. The novel describes how Rustemagic and his family lose their home and eventually come to escape the city with the help of his foreign friends, interspersed with the stories brought to them by friends, family and strangers of the horrors visited upon the Bosnians by the Serbs. This is a vividly illustrated, moving account of the real nature of war and of courage and desperation in the face of everyday danger. Will Eisner's *Last Day In Vietnam* contains five short stories of reminiscences from his days in Vietnam, each told by a different soldier he met. Eisner captures a sense of fear despite the bravado behind each story, while perfectly illustrating each as comedy or tragedy. Murder Mysteries is the adaptation of a Neil Gaiman story by P. Craig Russell. It's a beautifully rendered, but ultimately illogical and unfulfilling fantasy, its narrative set in Heaven, with the angels assigned to designing such things as 'love' and 'death', involved in a murder.

Happy Endings is a 2002 replacement for the annual *Dark Horse Maverick* one-shot. Editor Diana Schutz asked contributors to follow the theme of the title. Of the fifteen strips, few are particularly praiseworthy, the best coming from Bernie Mireault (funny story about rescuing a cat from the vet), Katie and Mike Mignola (odd, well-drawn story by Mignola's seven-year-old daughter about a magician whose best friend is a snake), Jim Mahfood (his Grrl Scouts have just another day in the city), Tony Millionaire (Sock Monkey learns about home) and Frank Miller (mad panels and single-page strips, very blackly humorous). *Tales of the Slayers* is based on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and is a history of sorts of the various Slayers, beginning and ending with chapters by creator, Joss Whedon, featuring the first and last (so far) Slayer. The chapters in between are written by Amber Benson (revolutionary France), Jane Espenson (Regency England), David Fury (wild west), Rebecca Rand Kirshner (Nazi Germany) and Doug Petrie. In such contexts, these have been turned into thoughtful and agreeable tales, with good artwork from Leinil Francis Yu, Ted Naifeh, Steve Lieber, Mira Friedmann and Karl Moline and standout work by Tim Sale, P. Craig Russell and Gene Colan.

Pete and Moe Visit Professor Swizzle's Robots by Vincent Giarrano, is pretty much what the title says, other than an accidental minor rampage by a runaway giant robot. Short and slight, it's aimed at younger readers, but does have some charm. In the year 2020, Freeman Jackson is given the power of truth by Those B4 (including Geronimo and Bruce Lee), who want him to fight Toxen, the spirit of racism in America. Racist organisations such as Original Man, the National Church of the Holy Originators, the Indigenous Revolutionary Party, the Asian Persuasion Coalition and the White Right Militia are led by puppets of Those in Power, the true corporate rules of America. *The Truth*, by Jimmy R. Smith and Nolan Woodard, is therefore a somewhat simplistic, wish-fulfilment, superhero tale, though it does manage to pass on the message that racial divisions serve only those who want to exploit them for money or power. It comes with a CD soundtrack.

Finally, 'Vampires' is a collection of pin-ups and short strips about vampires, by a variety of American and European creators. The finest illustrations come from David Lloyd, Bryan Talbot and Claire Wendling, but the best story is by Yoann and Sfar, whose 'Nosferatu meets Super-Bat', is a very funny pastiche on the differences (or similarities) of life for vampires and superheroes.~NF

Recommended: Al Williamson: Hidden Lands, Exotics, Fax From Sarajevo, H. P.'s Rock City, The Minotaur's Tale

DARK HORSE MAVERICK 2000

Dark Horse: *One-shot 2000, one-shot 2001*

Annual one-shots showcasing the talents of Dark Horse's Maverick imprint. This includes Paul Chadwick, Will Eisner, Frank Miller and Matt Wagner, but despite the dream team line-up, no-one turns in anything that's the slightest bit memorable. Don't be fooled by the names: these comics are not worth your money.~DB

DARK HORSE PRESENTS

Dark Horse: *157 issues (1-152, 5 x 100), 4 Annuals, 1 Special 1986-2000*

Randy Stradley, editor until 87, worked hard to create an anthology that was both willing to be experimental, but also capable of drawing on the work of established creators. At first it previewed new series like *Boris the Bear* or *Trekker* (although the only real success of this period was Concrete) or published an eclectic mix of series that were unlikely to fit elsewhere. They included 'Mindwalk', by Stradley himself (1-4, 20), Roma by John Workman (5, 6, 8, 9, 11) and the forerunner to The Mask, The Masque by Mark Badger (10-15, 18-21). Later previews include Aliens (24, 34, 42, 43, 56, 101, 102), Predator (35, 46, 67-69), Aliens vs. Predator (36), Next Men (54-57), Monkeyman and O'Brien (80, 100-5), Hellboy (88-91,100-102, 151, Annuals 1998 & 1999), Too Much Coffee Man (92-95) and *Cud*'s Eno and Plum (93-95). Homeless creations such as Roachmill (17, 28, 139), Kings In Disguise (42), Crash Ryan (44-46), Mr. Monster (14, 20, 28, 33) and Alien Fire (57-59) were given the opportunity to gain a new audience when their own titles failed.

Throughout, Stradley tried to match known quantities with more difficult or less populist work such as that of Rick Geary (19, 20, 22-24, 44, 53, 56, 57, 59, 60, 82, 87, 92, 100-104, 109), Leopoldo Duranona's 'Race of Scorpions' (23-27, 30-34), Gary Davis' 'Paleolove' (16, 20, 21, 25, 26, 32, 36-39, 43, 68-70, 77-79, 88), Matt Wagner's 'Aerialist' (40, 45), Jodorowsky and Moebius' 'Madwoman of the Sacred Heart' (70-76), Robert Boyd and F. Solano Lopez' 'Buoy' (77, 81-84), Harvey Pekar and Joe Sacco (99, 100-1, 100-3, 100-4, 101,102, 104) and Ivan Brunetti (100-3).

Though the concentration was primarily on writer/artists, teams of creators weren't unknown. John Arcudi's 'Homicide' and 'Creep' employed a number of artists including Gray Morrow (53-55), and other artists of note include Stefano Gaudiano on 'Harlequin' (48-51) and 'Here and Now' (96-98), Jo Duffy's Manga-influenced 'Nestrobber' with Maya Sakamoto (67-69) or the sublimely detailed artwork of Frank Quitely (91-93).

Several longer-running series deserve special mention, whether confined to the title, continuations of other series or preludes to greater things. 'Bob The Alien' by Rich Rice (18-20, 29-32, 39, 40) is a delightfully downbeat series of episodes of an alien adapting himself to big city life. Eddie Campbell's brilliant Bacchus, later self-published, proved itself to a US audience here (32, 37, 40, 44, 46, 52, 57, 71, 76-84, 94-99), while 'Picture of Doreen Grey' (66-70) and 100-2 gave space to his semi-autobiographical Alec. Frank Miller's noir 'Sin City' first appeared in the Fifth Anniversary special and continued in 50-61, with 62 being entirely devoted to it. Dave Cooper produced short stories in 98 and 106 before Dan & Larry's very weird, sweaty, semi-anthropomorphic antics popped up in 128-132. Paul Pope's quirky science fiction saga 'The One-Trick Rip-Off' (101-112*) was an example of the title's urge to promote newer talent and its willingness to give it plenty of space. Steve Niles and Casey Jones' Cal McDonald Monster Mystery, 'Hairball' (102-105), is a sharp, cynical, well-drawn horror story, later released as a one-shot, and Ed Brubaker and Jason Lutes teamed up for 'The Fall' (131-135), a more traditional, murder mystery later collected by Drawn & Quarterly.

Bob Schreck became editor with 88, promoting a higher proportion of less well known creators: Jim Alexander and Robert McCallum's 'Baden' (93-95), Renee French (100-1, 107-112), Jon Lewis (100-1, 124), Robert Loren Fleming and Bill Wray's 'Big Blown Baby' (106), Jack Pollock (100-2, 107-109), mixed in with only slightly better known ones with their own titles (Roberta Gregory, Shannon Wheeler, Terry LaBan, Evan Dorkin, Jason Lutes, Andi Watson, Chynna Clugston-Major). Of particular note, Steven Weissman's 'Bookshelf Phantom' appears in 126, 130 and Annual 1998, Gilbert Hernandez' 'Girl Crazy' in 131 and Stan Sakai's Usagi Yojimbo in 140.

By 124 new editor Jamie S. Rich was attempting to attract to new readers with established characters such as Predator (124, 137), Dan Brereton's Nocturnals (125-127), Kelley Jones' The Hammer (129), Adam Warren's The Dirty Pair (132-134), The Mask (134), Terminator (138) and Aliens (140). Stradley returned to edit with 136, emphasising some self-contained stories each time, but a brief attempt at themed issues (Buffy the Vampire Slayer in 141, H.P. Lovecraft in 142 and Tarzan in 143), left the editorial direction largely unchanged as sales obviously continued to fall. From 140, the Dark Horse Presents title was smaller than that of whichever strip was being promoted. Ghost appeared in 145-147 while Aliens vs. Predator was wheeled out again for 146-147 and even Xena got to visit (148). Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Concrete and Fish Police were the main attractions of the forty-eight page 150 and Angel of 153-155.

20, 32 and 56 are sixty-four page annuals after which the annual became a separate issue. The 1997 annual includes Jason Pearson's Body Bags, Aliens (drawn by Gray Morrow), Jay Stephens and Mike Allred on 'The Stiff', and 'Four Cats' by Paul Pope. Annual 1998 features the first comics appearance of Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Annual 1999's theme is stories of youth including Xena, Hellboy, Usagi Yojimbo, Ghost, Groo, Concrete, Luke Skywalker and the Mask. 'Girls Rule' in the 2000 annual with Buffy the Vampire Slayer and supporting characters from Xena, Ghost, Spyboy and Star Wars. The Fifth Anniversary Special was over a hundred pages of Give Me Liberty, Concrete, Aliens, The American, Roachmill, Black Cross, The Aerialist and Sin City amongst others. So much material was gathered for Issue 100 that it spread over five issues, numbered 100-1 on. Few anthologies lasted as long, fewer still could boast such a large proportion of high quality creators.~NF

Recommended: 1-6, 20, 32, 51-62, 76-84, 91-93, 125-127, Annual 1997, Annual 1999

Batman: Legends of the DARK KNIGHT

DC: *160 issues +, 8 Annuals, 3 Specials 1989 to date*

This was conceived as a vehicle for Batman stories without creators having to compromise by adherence to the continuity of regular Batman comics. It's since also become a home for individual artistic interpretation of the character. It's impossible to conceive Mike McMahon's brilliant, almost cubist, styling in 55-57 gracing a regular Batman title, yet that it appeared one issue after Arthur Ranson's near-photo-realism speaks volumes for editorial catholicity.

1-20 comprise four stories of five chapters apiece set early in Batman's career, each available collected. Opening with the type of decent but unmemorable Batman story Denny

O'Neil can probably write in his sleep, the best of the early quartet is by Grant Morrison and Klaus Janson. More than fulfilling its title, 'Gothic' (6-10*) is a disturbing brew of public-school brutality, mad monks and compacts with the devil, showing the début of the bat-signal along the way. The O'Neil written 'Venom' in 16-20* initially portrays a Batman out of control, having sampled powerful steroids, but the conclusion doesn't live up to the premise. Doug Moench and Paul Gulacy provide 'Prey' in 11-15, and follow it up in 137-141, but while not bad, they don't approach the highspots of the series. After 20 it would be over a hundred issues until another story longer than four issues, and the first single instalment was 27, establishing a look for Gotham City based on stunning illustrations by Anton Furst (included), and concluding in *Detective Comics* 641.

'Faces' by Matt Wagner in 28-30* is a dense, complex tale of freaks, freedom and finance, and among the best stories to have appeared here. Other contenders are James Robinson and Tim Sale's 'Blades' (32-34*), introducing a new defender for Gotham, and 'Masks', written and drawn by Bryan Talbot in 39-40*, with an utterly convincing portrayal of Bruce Wayne as a deluded alcoholic with a costumed fantasy life. By contrast 'Turf', by Steven Grant and Shawn McManus, in 44-45 falls just short, yet is still a compelling story, taking the video footage of Rodney King as inspiration. Grant and Mike Zeck's 'Criminals' in 69-70 is another fine effort.

There have been few really poor issues, and plenty of artistic legends work on well-crafted stories, including Gil Kane (24-26), P. Craig Russell (42-43*), Russ Heath (46-49), Mike Mignola (54) and Scott Hampton (76-78). Steve Englehart tackles the Riddler, a major Batman villain omitted from his acclaimed 1970s *Detective Comics* run in 109-111, but Dusty Abell's art is blocky and unappealling. The best of the single issue stories are 'Mercy' (37) by Dan Abnett, Andy Lanning and Colin MacNeil, Alan Grant and Kev O'Neill's hallucinogenic return of Bat-Mite in 38*, 'Storm' by Graham Brand, Andrew Donkin and John Higgins (58), and Chris Bachalo and Mark Pennington illustrating Jamie Delano's bleak 'Terminus' in 64 (although it's not as depressing as 'Engines' by Ted McKeever in 74-75). Also worthy of mention is Michael Gilbert's 94, a fond recollection of and homage to past Batman stories. The best annuals are 2, with Commissioner Gordon's unconventional wedding, and the 'Elseworlds' (alternate non-canonical Batman) story in 4, with remarkable art from the team of Joe Staton and Horacio Ottolini. Staton also illustrates J.M. DeMatteis' look into the Joker's psyche in 65-68. Believing he's killed Batman, the Joker settles into an ordinary life and relationship. Also of note, and often forgotten, is James Vance's deftly plotted 'Idols' in 80-82, with good action art from Dougie Braithwaite and Sean Hardy. Set early in Batman's career, a serial killer arrives in Gotham at the same time as a Batman fad hits the city; an intense FBI agent is also on hand to complicate the nascent relationship between Commissioner Gordon and Batman.

83 begins a run of British writers monopolising the title, with almost all falling well short of their best work elsewhere. Of the better efforts Anthony Williams is surprisingly good illustrating an engrossing Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning story in 95-97 and James Robinson's overlong locked room murder mystery in 102-104 is well drawn by Paul Johnson. Robinson turns in a far better tale in the noteworthy 7th annual with good art from Steve Yeowell and Russ Heath, but the artistic highlight of this period is Quique Alcatena's stunningly drawn origin of Clayface in 89-90, after which his 6th annual disappoints. A dull 100th issue largely concentrates on Robin.

Editor to 115, Archie Goodwin maintained the unique nature of *Legends* by resisting crossovers with other Batman titles. With his departure, though, the sanctity was breached. Between 116 and 126 'No Man's Land' treated ongoing *Batman* comics as a single title published weekly, so stories are started here, continued here or concluded here, with under half complete in the issue. The best by far is little but an air-clearing conversation between Batman and Police Commissioner Gordon in 125. As individual chapters 'No Man's Land' rarely shines, and while it works as a whole, a ludicrous amount of money was required to discover this. Presumably people didn't bother, as the previous editorial policy was reinstated with 127, and if to emphasise it *Legends* ran mainly four or five part stories until 153 starting with a sprightly teaming of Batman with Green Arrow by Denny O'Neil and Sergio Cariello. It's not a patch, though, on 'Siege' in 132-136, plotted by Archie Goodwin, and largely scripted by James Robinson after Goodwin's death. It's a dense thriller revealing the Wayne family history, returning Bruce Wayne's most effective love interest, and involving a plan to loot Gotham City. Marshall Rogers' art prioritises style over technique, but the addition of Dannyl Vozzo's well-chosen colours makes for an appealing combination. 'Siege' is as good a story as the title's seen.

There are interesting moments in Doug Moench's psychological study of human nature in 146-148, and a decent concluding issue, but overall the necessary discussion meshes awkwardly with the remainder. 156-161, though are very entertaining. The first three have Dwayne McDuffie concocting a fine, almost Eisneresque, gimmick about a man who can see through the eyes of others, a good plot to hang it round, and then cranking up the tension. The art by Val Semeiks showcases very small bat-ears, but his storytelling is great. John Ostrander's story of James Gordon's past among the crooked police in Chicago returning in spades is also good, and has a part for his niece Barbara as well.

The specials are all by Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale, preceding their *Long Halloween* series, but all with a Halloween theme. They're all good, with Frank Miller an obvious stylistic influence on the art and storytelling, but also more subtly on the writing. It's the first, 'Fears', that's the best, with Bruce Wayne falling in love, and the Scarecrow on the loose to terrorise the city. Sale imbues his frankly stupid costume with a gaunt terror, and this is perhaps the only occasion he appears the master of fear he's supposed to be. The Mad Hatter's appearance the next year falls short, but the psychological profiling of Batman introduced here predominates the third in which Bruce Wayne is visited by ghosts of past, present and future.~FP

Recommended: 6-10, 27-30, 37-40, 52, 53, 55-58, 66, 80-82, 132-136, 156-158, Annuals 4, 7, Halloween Special 1

THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1986*, 3 issue miniseries (DK2) 2001-2002**

The Dark Knight Returns is a pivotal series responsible for several key developments in American comics, although at the time DC were taking a chance. Lauded for his Daredevil, Frank Miller's succeeding project *Ronin* had received a lukewarm reception. It took a confident editor (Denny O'Neil) to say "Okay" when given a proposal for a wholesale and uncharacteristic reworking of the company's most popular character in a pricey and untested format. Miller repaid the faith by turning in what remains a career peak. From the well-considered title pun to the extraordinary subtle, unusual and effective colouring of Lynn Varley, *The Dark Knight Returns* is stunning.

It's set ten years after Batman has last been sighted in public. Commissioner Gordon is due to retire and Gotham is plagued by marauding gangs pillaging at will. Batman's old enemy Two-Face has been released, seemingly a reformed man, and certainly a repaired one thanks to plastic surgery, and resumes his former legal career. Events reach a point where Batman can no longer remain a bystander, but this is a different Batman. He's in tune with the times, realising that to deal with society's ills at his age extreme measures are required. That alone is interesting, but Miller counterpoints the re-emergence of Batman and his actions with incessant flashes of public opinion and commentary through TV (a narrative technique pioneered by Howard Chaykin in *American Flagg*), making for an extremely dense read. The use of numerous small panels on each page jumping to a full-page illustration emphasises the iconic effect of the character, and when fellow-icons Superman and The Joker turn up for the second half of the series they receive similar resonant treatment. Miller explores all kinds of opinions pertaining to the concept of the vigilante without reaching a conclusion, but still providing food for thought fifteen years on. Plot, dialogue and art are all well considered, effective and top notch.

It's astonishingly rare that a legitimate claim can be made that anyone has changed the face of their artform, but consider what followed in the wake of *The Dark Knight Returns*. There was a plethora of 'radical' reworkings of established characters, some more successful than others. The miniseries had been popularised and *Dark Knight* had proved that there was a market for a high-priced package. Designers became key personnel at leading publishers, more talented creators were given greater freedom with regard to individual interpretations of characters and concepts, and the collected edition seeped into wider public consciousness. Most important was the return of respect for the creator. Tangentially it also wiped away the final vestiges of the 1960s *Batman* TV show, re-establishing the property as a desirable licensing option. That all of these can be attributed to a single series is remarkable, and that there was a serious and rapid dilution of its strengths and influence shouldn't detract from the achievement. None of the above could ever have been foreseen by Miller, though, who set out to produce a thought-provoking superhero story and succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. In addition to the expected collections, Longmeadow Press produced rather a nice vinyl hardbound edition that also includes Miller's *Batman: Year One* and the story he turned out for the *DC Super-Star Holiday Spectacular*.

In 1986 the expectation line was raised, and DC got what they paid for in 2001: a dashed-off sequel from an uninterested Miller who, after fifteen years, was seemingly finally offered a sum he couldn't turn down. The few moments of wit and style might pass muster from someone else, but Miller is capable of so much more. His spartan and blocky art is at times plain ugly, lacking grace and backgrounds, and the story amounts to Batman, a barely seen manipulative figure, organising the Justice League to battle Lex Luthor, and a farcical conclusion. With dollar signs lighting up the eyes of everyone at DC, Miller forgot the Spider-Man adage that with great power comes great responsibility, and with reader expectation high he failed to deliver.~WJ

Recommended: 1-4

DARK MANSION OF FORBIDDEN LOVE

DC: *4 issues 1971-1972*

One of several experiments with Gothic romance comics, this featured lengthy stories best remembered for their artwork. Typically the writing, by the likes of Dorothy Manning and Jack Oleck, leant more heavily on the romance than the mystery, with the horror element usually confined to creepy-looking houses. Artistically, Tony DeZuniga excelled in the first two issues, with 3 and 4 pencilled less impressively by Ernie Chua. In some respects, though, the comic's visual highpoint was its beautiful painted covers. From 5 the comic was renamed *Forbidden Tales of Dark Mansion*.~DAR

DARK REALM

Image: *3 issues 2000-2001*

Detective Shannon discovers that she is the chosen one of the Dark Realm. Only a rebel lord of hell stands between her and her terrible fate. OK read, all the plot devices used are well-worn so one wonders why they bothered. Buyers probably thought the same, and the series was never concluded.~DB

DARK SHADOWS

Gold Key: *35 issues 1969-1976*

The arcane atmosphere of the cult TV series is reduced to trite soap opera and supernatural clichés at the hands of journeymen creators. The saving grace is the occasional nice cover painting.~FP

DARK SHADOWS

Innovation: *4 issue miniseries 1992-1993, 4 issue miniseries 1993, one-shot 1993*

Based on the 1991 TV series, itself a spin-off from the long-running 1960s series, *Dark Shadows* is primarily the story of the vampire Barnabas Collins and his relationship with Victoria Winters. More psychological than physical horror, the painted artwork, heavily photo-referenced, makes the whole thing seem very wooden and lifeless.~NF

DARK SHRINE

Antarctic: *2 issues 1999*

The title and a glance at the horribly misproportioned woman on the covers reveals everything about what's on offer here. Inside it's all poorly drawn pin-up pages instead of storytelling, and what story exists is ridiculous. 1 was mistakenly run without credits, and most would have considered it better that way, but Shelby Robertson takes the blame in 2. His only excuse would be as a pre-pubescent prodigy, but one suspects he wasn't.~FP

The Pirates of DARK WATER

Marvel: *6 issue miniseries 1991-1992*

Dwight Zimmerman, Bruce Zick and Rick Magyar produce creditable adaptations from the children's fantasy-cartoon adventure series. Elf-like Ren has to locate the thirteen treasures of Rule, but it wouldn't be any kind of quest if he could pick them up in Tesco, would it? So pirate king Bloth is there to complicate matters.~WJ

DARK WOLF

Malibu: *4 issue miniseries 1987**
Malibu/Eternity: *14 issues, 1 Annual 1988-1989*
Comax: *One-shot ('Halloween Special') 1991*

The miniseries introduces Father Michael Tremaine, who unknowingly takes on the role of Dark Wolf at night, hunting down the evil Lords of Life and their leader, Abraxis. The origin of their conflict lies a thousand years in the past as Abraxis sought eternal life at the expense of werewolf, Wulfgar and his girlfriend, Dhyana, whose spirits now possess Tremaine. In the continuing series, Tremaine becomes aware of his role as Dark Wolf while his battles include aliens (4-5), the IRA (7-9), the murder of a mime (10) and Satanic child abuse (13-14). In the annual, a witch and novelist, Diana Tregarde, seeks Dark Wolf's aid in tracking down a she-demon that has been killing men across the city. Writer, R. A. Jones, starts well, but loses direction once the regular series starts, with little context and few supporting characters, despite defining Tremaine's family in 11. Here Butch Burcham's artwork is noticeably cruder and the 'Halloween Special' is Burcham on his own, with Dark Wolf seemingly back to his roots, tracking down and killing minions of the Evil One.~NF

DARKCHYLDE

Maximum Press: *3 issues 1996*
Image: *2 issues (4-5) 1997*, 3 issue miniseries ('Remastered') 1997, one-shot ('The Diary') 1997*
Image/Homage: *One-shot ('Swimsuit Illustrated') 1998, one-shot ('0') 1998, one-shot ('Preview Special') 1998*
Image/WildStorm: *2 issues ('The Legacy') 1998*
WildStorm: *1 issue (3) ('The Legacy') 1998, one-shot ('Summer Swimsuit Spectacular') 1998*
Darkchylde Entertainment: *6 issue miniseries ('Dreams of the...') 2000-2001, one-shot ('0 Remastered') 2001, 2 issues ('Redemption') 2001, one-shot ('Last Issue Special') 2002*

Ariel Chylde is a young woman who reacts instinctively to an assault by her father, killing him and burning the house down. She's actually been transformed into a nightmare demon, which, when she returns to human form, is now loose in the world. This appears to be at the instigation of Kauldron, who is attempting to use her to extract all of nightmare's demons for his own ends. At the end of the miniseries, the threat of Kauldron is over, but Ariel leaves Salem in the company of friendly monsters Piece and War, longing for a way to cure herself.

* Available in a collected edition

'Remastered' reprints the three Maximum Press issues. The 'Swimsuit' issues are collections of pin-ups, while 'The Diary' differs only in having captions about Ariel's past in the form of a diary. The '0' issue is drawn by Keu Cha, but is simply one long conversation between Ariel, Piece and War on her eighteenth birthday. The two previews contain sketches and discussion about 'The Legacy' series, in which Ariel is attacked by Pennance and joins a Carnival to pay off the costs of the destruction caused by their battle. 'Redemption' picks up from the unfinished 'The Legacy', but is itself unfinished. 'Dreams of the Darkchylde' starts promisingly with art by Brandon Peterson and Richard Bennett (1), but goes downhill from there, with a story set in Ariel's nightmares.

Creator Randy Queen overwrites all Ariel's stories and though his artwork can be detailed and tightly inked, the frequent shots of Ariel bursting out of her clothes along with a tendency towards full page illustrations are off-putting and severely limit any real storytelling.~NF

DARKER IMAGE

Image: *1 issue 1993*

This was supposed to be a series but was inexplicably discontinued. It was intended as a showcase for new ideas, which should have automatically disqualified Rob Liefeld's contribution, Bloodwulf – a Lobo look-a-like with a big gun. Much more interesting are the first appearances of The Maxx by Sam Kieth and Deathblow by Brandon Choi and Jim Lee, the latter doing his best Frank Miller impersonation. All three characters were promoted into their own titles though the Deathblow story wasn't completed until *Deathblow* 0.~NF

DARKHAWK

Marvel: *50 issues 1991-1995*

Sticking religiously to the Marvel template of a teenager unexpectedly receiving mysterious superpowers that constantly complicate their social life, *Darkhawk* confirms the principles of diminishing returns. Acknowledging creative redundancy, Marvel pump guest appearances by Spider-Man, Daredevil, Captain America and the Punisher into the first nine issues, but even characters with a following can't transform this into anything above mediocre. Ironically, issues where Darkhawk carries the comic on his own are marginally better. The mystery behind the power amulet found in the first issue is strung out to 25, and 42 makes a good sample with Chris Powell intending to reveal his other identity to his parents.~FP

DARKHOLD

Marvel: *16 issues 1992-1993*

Individual pages from The Darkhold, an ancient book of incredible evil, are offered to people who, once they read the mystic incantations thereon, set off demonic forces beyond their control. A group calling themselves The Redeemers seek to put matters right. Old hero/villain Modred is a regular and guest-stars aplenty seek to boost sales, but serve only to further confuse already muddled plots. Much was made of one of the characters being lesbian. Of course, she's a male fantasy figure. If you must read more, *Marvel Comics Presents* 146 concludes their story.~WJ

DARKLIGHT Prelude

Sirius: *3 issue miniseries 2000*

Two sisters, escaping the confines of their family, rent a house recently vacant after the death of Samual, son of the immortal Clairese. She's planning her suicide, causing much anguish to her friend and her werewolf, Devon. Teri Sue Wood's themes are the mysteries of life and death, and she intends *Darklight* to be a scary read. Perhaps this is true of the main series to come rather than here because this is charming, funny and pleasingly drawn.~NF

DARKLON The Mystic

Pacific: *One-shot 1983*

Sword-and-sorcery by Jim Starlin reprinted from *Eerie*. A peculiar tale, almost deliberately handicapped by the choice of claustrophobic small panels and the decision to relate most of the story as first-person flashback narrative. It all seems an experiment, and doesn't gel at all, with the supposedly mystical Darklon manifesting little in the way of arcane talent.~FP

DARKMAN

Marvel: *One-shot 1990, 3 issue miniseries 1990, 6 issue miniseries 1993*

Darkman originated as by the numbers movie revenge hokum updating *The Phantom of the Opera*. A disfigured scientist manufactures accurate flesh disguises, the drawback being they're only stable for 99 minutes. Cue plenty of face melting scenes. The one-shot and first series are different format presentations of the same mundane adaptation. There's a tad more dynamism about the art of Javier Saltares and Andrew Pepoy for the second attempt, but writer Kurt Busiek hardly stretches himself. There are innumerable scenes of self-pitying introspection for Darkman among bizarre whimsy such as the city's chief of police being the reincarnation of a 17th century witchfinder who likes to bring his past personality into the present. For Darkman completists only, should such a beast exist.~WJ

DARKMINDS

Image: *8 issue limited series 1998-1999*, one-shot (1/2) 1999, 11 issue limited series (1-10, 0) 2000-2001, one-shot (Darkminds Witchblade) 2000, 2 issues ('Macropolis') 2002*
Dreamwave: *2 issues + (3-4) 2002 to date*

Clueless about a serial killer, Agent Nagawa is introduced to his new partner, the cybernetically enhanced Nakiko. She's the thrust of the first story, a thriller set in 2032, the year permitting technological trickery. There are predictable elements, but this is an extremely confident work from youthful creators, writer Adrian Tsang and particularly artist Pat Lee, who also created the series. His application of traditional American storytelling to anime sensibilities is assured and successful, and while overly fond of shades of green, the colours establish a mood and a distinct look for the city. *Neon Cyber*, set before this series, offers further background on some characters.

The first one-shot is largely preparatory sketches, accompanied by a brief glance at Nakiko immediately prior to the events of volume 1. Lee only co-plots volume 2 in the company of writer Ken Siu-Chong and penciller Omar Dogan. Cyborg technology is again to the forefront when the pattern of serial murders is repeated, although this is lighter in tone and heavier on the action. New character Mia is engaging, and while falling a little short of its predecessor, it's an altogether decent follow-up. *Darkminds/Witchblade* is thankfully more the former than the latter, so there's a story. It concentrates on Nakiko, as drawn and co-plotted by Lee and written by David Wohl. As crossovers go, it's better than most with Witchblade. 'Macropolis' concerns two races against time, with Nagawa taunted by a particularly unpleasant killer and Nakiko discovering she has an inbuilt obsolescence. Written by Chris Sarracini and drawn by sisters Jo and Christina Chen, the transition is seamless, and tension high. The only problem is the rate of release.~FP

The DARKNESS

Image/Top Cow: *Series one 41 issues (½, 1-40), 1 special 1996-2001, one-shot ('Infinity') 2001, series two 1 issue + 2002 to date*

Creator Marc Silvestri claimed he'd been pondering the idea behind The Darkness for months, years even. A glance at the first couple of issues will tell you something about the quality of his thought processes. Fortunately he swiftly brought in Garth Ennis to flesh out his creation. A bit. Unfortunately Ennis jumps ship periodically, leaving with 6, returning on 11 to co-script with Malachy Coney, and finally turning over the writing chores to Coney alone with 15, then to Scott Lobdell with 23. So sometimes the strip is pretty mind candy under Ennis' light touch, and at other times it's ponderous drek, but the writing hoopla is nothing compared to the many changes in pencillers and inkers. Silvestri does some of the pencilling some of the time and Joe Benitez does quite a bit, but it's rare for there to be less than three or four pencillers and inkers involved in an issue. So it's no wonder the story rarely seems to advance. There is lots of narrative, lots of stuff going on, but very little actual plot.

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* Available in a collected edition

Ah yes, the plot. Jackie's a pretty young Mafioso hitman who discovers, on his 21st birthday, that he's the heir to (drum roll and thunderous organ music) The Darkness! The Darkness is an all-consuming force that allows him to do very nasty things to people, but only in the dark, so he can be rendered helpless by opening the curtains or turning on the light. Opposing The Darkness is The Angelus, a sexy babe in not very much. Who's the good guy... well that's the big gimmick, you're not really sure. Jackie's very sweet, but he did have this habit of offing people without a second thought even before his heritage caught up with him. They attack each other a lot, do a bit of sexy torture, he kills her, she gets reborn, he learns about some family secrets, she takes over a member of the family and turns the mafia against him, he kills a lot of mafia guys... and so on. Oh, and Hitler and his Spear of Destiny turn up in 15 for those excited by Nazi mysticism.

After the first series ended the story continued in *Witchblade*. It's started again, but so far Paul Jenkins and Dale Keown have concentrated on recapping what's gone before and have already become bogged down. Any sensible scripter could have summed up what's gone before in three or four pages because fundamentally nothing changes.~FJ

Tales of the DARKNESS

Image/Top Cow: *4 issues 1998, one-shot (1/2) 2001*

This spin-off offers a view of other characters powered by the Darkness. An emperor in the far future toys with Sela, on a mission to kill him and avenge her mother, all the while being manipulated by his own servant, Vassal (1-2). An ancestor of Jackie Estacado facing the Spanish Inquisition provides an alternate version of Don Quixote in 3-4, but the story is left incomplete. Neither is particularly worthwhile though Malachy Coney is obviously having fun with his Cervantes turn, and Whilce Portacio pencils 1-2. The one-shot includes an introduction to the character by Garth Ennis, a second strip by Coney and some pinups, but it's very tedious.~NF

DARKSIDE

Maximum Press: *One-shot 1996*

Infantile Halloween crossover tripe as hot 'n' busty semi-clad, sword-toting amazon Avengelyne squares off against masked 'n' bloodthirsty gangster-slaughtering vigilante, Priest. Don't be tricked, this is no treat.~WW

DARKSEID VS GALACTUS: THE HUNGER

DC/Marvel: *One-shot 1995*

It's no secret that John Byrne loves Jack Kirby characters. Here he pits Marvel's world devourer, Galactus, against DC's despot dictator of Apokolips, Darkseid. Galactus is feeling peckish so what more could satisfy his hunger pains than the fiery pits of Apokolips? Besides seeing these two demi-gods battle it out, we're also treated to a punch-up with Galactus' herald, the Silver Surfer (still full of angst) and Darkseid's wayward son, Orion (still full of angst). Nice idea, nicely done.~HY

Recommended

DARKSTARS

DC: *39 issues (0-38) 1992-1996*

Offshoot of Green Lantern continuity as the professional rivals of the intergalactic peacekeeping force, created by a dissident faction of the Guardians of the Universe move to fill the vacuum left by the destruction of the GL Corps. Maverick Darkstar Colos is assigned to earth where he promptly recruits human deputies to help him police the planet with or without our consent. Chockful of guest stars, tightly written by Michael Jan Friedman and illustrated by Larry Stroman (1-3), Travis Charest (4-8) and latterly Mike Collins, it presents an entertaining blend of procedural crime drama, hard science fiction and super heroics.~WW

Recommended: 1-8

DARQUE PASSAGES

Acclaim: *4 issue miniseries 1997*

Embedded deeply in the continuity of the Acclaim Universe, this follows the events of the Master Darque and Man of the Atom: Revelations one-shots, as the mystical favour-broker becomes embroiled in the imminent destruction of the world. The enigmatic Roses is a psychiatrist who has infiltrated Sandria Darque's debauched circle of friends and clients in an attempt to get close to the man of mystery. She is in fact a pawn of the Epoch twins who plan to hasten the end of the world by destroying Darque and stealing the souls he has embezzled, and which give him his powers. After an anti-climactic battle, Darque's ever-wilder attempts to re-empower himself result in his becoming a soul addict. As alliances are made and broken, moment by moment, Alexandre Darque finds himself in the novel position of fighting to save the world. A distressingly confused story stylishly illustrated by Leonardo Manco.~WW

DART

Image: *3 issue miniseries 1996*

In a prequel story to her *Savage Dragon* and *Freak Force* appearances, our novice heroine meets the appalling Kill-Cat for the first time and is embroiled with rogue toy manufacturers who try to steal her likeness for commercial exploitation, and their superpowered minions. A peculiar tale with some interesting plot elements, dreadful script, and weird art by Joseph Szekeres, who from the evidence here has the desire, but not the skill, to be a fetish artist when he grows up.~HS

Star Wars DARTH MAUL

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 2000**

This above average *Star Wars* item is a single issue Phantom Menace prequel stretched to fill four by Ron Marz's no more than adequate script, but Jan Duursema's able art, excellently coloured by Dave McCaig, whips you through the ample sabre play. The funny names are well up to the usual Lucas standard e.g. Vigo Whee Tillatch or Mon Calamari and the whole thing benefits from this massacring Maul blighter favouring action over words.~GK

DATE WITH DEBBI

DC: *18 issues 1969-1972.*

This freckle-faced, red-haired teenage klutz looks even more like a female clone of Archie than Archie's own distaff counterpart Josie did. Stories inevitably revolved around love-hungry Debbi's social and physical clumsiness ruining her chances for happiness, with allegedly hilarious results. Briefly popular, a spin-off, *Debbi's Dates*, ran for eleven issues from 1969 to 1971.~HS

DAVID CHELSEA IN LOVE

Eclipse: *4 issue miniseries 1990**

This is presented as an accurate reflection of the author's life, but it's so well-rounded, so circular in plot, so ironically well-structured that it reads more like a Woody Allen film, minus the screamingly funny slapstick humour part. New York illustrator 'David Chelsea' falls, headlong and hopelessly, for the gawky, polygamous, indecisive Minnie on a visit to his family in Portland, Oregon. Author David Chelsea carefully analyses every euphoric up and pathetic down of his obsession, including the many many false starts of other relationships. He draws in a variety of styles, each one differently mannered and too twinky for some tastes. There are many aspects of the book that you may find annoying, but Chelsea can undoubtedly write and draw to a high standard. If his filtering of experience is a little too neat for some, others will find it strikes a neurotic chord.~FJ

DAWN

Sirius: *6 issues ('Lucifer's Halo') 1995-1997*, 4 issue miniseries ('Return of the Goddess') 1999-2000**

In an alternative New York, Darrian Ashoka meets an enigmatic woman during the regular Times Square Battle To The Death. An aspect of the Goddess of Death and Rebirth, she involves him in her quest to steal Lucifer's halo. It's a gift from God, which, after a lover's spat, God wants back. Artist and writer Joseph Michael Linsner has something going on here. It's all very wispy and irritatingly mysterious, and there are certainly too many panels of our resident goddess strutting and posing in lingerie, but there's still a creeping suspicion that there's an actual plot somewhere. And it's awful pretty to look at. Taking two years to loiter to a conclusion, the ending was unsatisfactory, but if you encounter it cheap, it's worth a read. The second series has a stronger plot, and makes some telling, if occasionally naively expressed, points about prejudice, media manipulation, and the ultimate futility of romance and orthodox religion. In befriending and protecting Mary, a young witch and single mother, Dawn exposes her to a world, and a set of dangers, far beyond her comprehension. The artwork is quite stunning, with a lush, decorative style that some dismiss as 'chocolate-boxey' and incongruous, but which is equally capable of depicting horror and squalor as the story demands. Linsner's greatest work is still in his future. Given the time it takes him to complete a project, one can only hope he makes it. These two series, steps along the way to that destination, while not justifying an unqualified recommendation, are still worthy of attention.~HS

DAY BROTHERS PRESENT

Caliber: *4 issue miniseries 1990*

A continuation of sorts for the Renegade anthology, *Black Zeppelin*, that showcased the work of Gene Day posthumously. Mostly short stories written by Gene and illustrated by brothers Dan or David, there's an interesting mix of war and science fiction strips, densely illustrated and though not to all tastes, a tribute to the skills of all the Day brothers.~NF

DAY OF JUDGEMENT

DC: *5 issue miniseries, 1 Secret Files 1999*

After the last Spectre, who'd been doing the job since the 1940s, had popped off to heaven for some peace and quiet, DC needed a replacement. The catalyst for this story has the Spectre, the physical manifestation of God's vengeance, bound with an unsuitable host: in this case, a fallen angel who wishes ill on humanity. Superheroes, both magical and not, join forces to stop him. This is enjoyable stuff, with genuine tension between the main players, and a real story taking place rather than the usual superhero non-event get-together. Matt Smith's good art has a Mike Mignola feel to it, while Geoff Johns' writing here shows why he is one of comics' rising stars. The Secret Files, on the other hand, mainly features other writers and artists in what seems to be some sort of pad-athon. Only for completists.~DB

Recommended: 1-5

DAYDREAMERS

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 1997*

Escaping from a story in *Generation X*, Franklin Richards, Leech, Artie Maddicks, Tana Nile, Man-Thing and Howard the Duck find themselves lost between dimensions after entering the Nexus of All Realities through Man-Thing. Narrated like a fairy tale, it would initially seem aimed to appeal to younger readers as there's no consistency of characterisation in any of the last three named above. Then again, the in-jokes and Dr Seuss references would seem to be aimed at older readers. Plotted by Marc DeMatteis, scripted by various and prettily drawn by Martin Egeland (everything smooth, rounded and cute) this is really horrible.~NF

DAYS OF DARKNESS

Apple: *6 issue miniseries 1992-1993**

Wayne Vansant tells the story of the extended Cahill family and their involvement in aspects of World War II, beginning with the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour. It's an odd comic, attempting to merge TV-style generational fiction sagas with war action. Although meticulously researched and drawn, it falls short because Vansant is seemingly far more interested in the battles than the family. Characterisation has never been Vansant's strongpoint, but here it matters for once, and there's little point in introducing a large cast only to sideline most of them. That said, there are portions of the series that are powerful and affecting, particularly the first half of issue 5. It depicts the brutality of the Japanese towards captured Filipinos (ironically duplicating American behaviour forty-five years previously) and the conditions endured by captured Americans. If you like pages of authentic-looking, lovingly depicted air and naval battles, only George Evans betters *Days of Darkness*, but for a story try elsewhere.~FP

DAYS OF WRATH

Apple: *4 issues 1993-1994*

Wayne Vansant continues his saga of the Cahill family during World War II, showing battles through the eyes of ordinary American conscripts. Always excellent art from Vansant can't compensate for his very dry storytelling methods. It was planned as a six-issue series, but the final two issues were never published.~WJ

DAZZLER

Marvel: *42 issues 1981-1986, Graphic Novel 1984*

Originally conceived as The Disco Dazzler, a rapid re-think was in order as the disco backlash hit with full force. Instead of scrapping the idea of a mutant disco singer able to generate light blasts as too late to cash in on a passing fad, Marvel flew in the face of fashion to publish a total turkey listing no less than eleven people in the credits of the first issue. That enough people bought this to keep it going over three years is astounding. Ironically, cancellation came as then writer Archie Goodwin, from 38, was actually injecting some life into issues drawn, probably to his eternal shame, by Paul Chadwick, who was to go on to better things. Dazzler later ended up in *X-Men* (where she'd made her début in 130).~FP

DC CHALLENGE

DC: *12 issue limited series 1985-1986*

A mystery starring dozens of characters was set up in 1, and had to be solved and concluded in 12. Each issue had a different set of creators, who ended their segment on a cliffhanger for the next creative team to solve. A nice idea, with lots of good creators and characters, but proving to be a fundamentally flawed, fussy fable that festered and failed to impress with force-fed plots. The whole thing turned into a feeble mess – a flamboyant fraud that flaked at the seams. Fundamentally, a farce. The finale was a godsend. A fatwa on the instigator! So are there any more words beginning with 'f' to describe this series? Why, yes... ~HY

DC COMICS PRESENTS

DC: *97 issues, 4 Annuals 1978-1986*

Well, Batman had a monthly team-up title introduced when he was DC's most popular hero in the 1960s, so with the Superman films having elevated him to that position in the late 1970s it was only fair he also got a team-up title. As one might expect, there's a lot of average stuff punctuating the occasional good issues, but the series began well with José Luis Garcia-Lopez drawing 1-4, teaming Superman with Flash, Adam Strange and the Metal Men. The next story that really stands out is in 26-29: Len Wein with Jim Starlin art featuring team-ups with Martian Manhunter, Supergirl and the Spectre in a connected story introducing Mongul, who'd later play a devastating part in Green Lantern's history. 26 is also of note for a free insert introducing DC's hit of the early 1980s, *New Teen Titans*. Roy Thomas returned the unlikely Hoppy The Marvel Bunny from limbo in 33-34, teaming Superman with Captain Marvel and his extended family, and in 36 Paul Levitz concluded the Starman feature that had been running in *Adventure Comics*, again with Jim Starlin art. Martin Pasko and Joe Staton offered a very unusual Plastic Man team-up in 39, and 41 contained the first sighting of Roy Thomas' 1982 revising of Wonder Woman. 1982's first annual featured the unlikely teaming of Superman and Superman (from an alternate Earth) combating their evil counterpart from yet another Earth.

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* Available in a collected edition

Paul Levitz and Keith Giffen produced two very stylised team-ups featuring the Doom Patrol in 52, and the Legion of Substitute Heroes in 59. The latter failed to take the second - string legionnaires seriously at all, and launched a period of ridicule for them as foul-ups in the Legion's own title. The second annual is a charming, quirky time-travel story of the type DC once managed so easily, introducing the long-since-forgotten Superwoman, conceived by Elliot Maggin. She returns in the fourth annual, nicely drawn by Eduardo Barreto, but repetition dulls the charm. 65-67 are notable for their art with, respectively, Gray Morrow drawing a Madame Xanadu team-up, Joe Kubert illustrating the Demon, and the classic 1960s Superman art team of Curt Swan and Murphy Anderson drawing a teaming with Santa Claus!

77's 'Forgotten Heroes' revives and teams a number of obscurities, of whom Animal Man went on to greater glories, and 78's 'Forgotten Villains' brings back even more recondite characters. Keith Giffen returns for a quirky Ambush Bug story in 81, and 85 has Alan Moore delivering a Swamp Thing team-up. It's a highlight of the run, but doesn't match Moore's work on Swamp Thing's own title, but then he was writing for a different audience. 87 is the interesting idea of Superman arriving as a baby on our Earth, and growing to adolescence as the only superhero on the planet. If that sounds creatively redundant, it towers over the final few issues, after which point the title was cancelled to make way for John Byrne's revision of Superman.

A back-up feature asking 'Whatever Happened To...' débuted in 26, and continued in most issues until 42, the best of them spotlighting Star Hawkins (33), Rex The Wonder Dog (drawn by Gil Kane in 35) and The Crimson Avenger (38).~HY

Recommended: 26-29, 37, 39, 52, 59, 66, 85, annual 2

DC 1ST

DC: *4 One-shots 2002*

Four tellings, or retellings of first encounters or occurrences in DC characters' history. The best is the first race between the original Flash and Superman, a contemporary story tying into the continuity of the regular Flash title and featuring a fine treatment of perennial villain Abra Kadabra by Geoff Johns and Rick Burchett. Bill Sienkiewicz and Terry Moore contribute pencils to the first encounter of both Batgirls with The Joker, but it's the Kevin Nowlan cover that's the highlight. The first meeting of Superman and Lobo is decently enough handled by Keith Giffen and Cliff Rathburn, while the first meeting of the 1940s and 1960s Green Lanterns is the weakest of the quartet.~WJ

DC GRAPHIC NOVELS

DC's graphic novels can be divided into four categories: stories based on established comics characters; good science fiction stories; bad or indifferent science fiction stories; and *Tell Me Dark*. The two stories dealing with established comics characters are not compulsive reading. Viking Glory is about the problems and adventures that the young *Viking Prince* has when he leaves his clan to be married. It could have been interesting but the delivery is deadening. *Hunger Dogs* concludes Jack Kirby's New Gods, written and pencilled by Kirby ten years on. The panels seem to be taken from ten different stories, mixed at random – not so much bad, as baffling.

On to the good science fiction stories. *Frost and Fire* is an adaptation of a Ray Bradbury story about the survivors of a crash on a planet with a brutal, quickly-changing climate. Their metabolism is accelerated so that they managed to survive, but their lifecycle was reduced to eight days. Sim is convinced that he can win himself enough time to escape. Fascinating, and beautifully done. *Merchants of Venus* is a good, old-fashioned prospectors' yarn, but with a setting of Venus instead of Alaska. The ending is weak, but it's still worth a look. The Robert Silverberg adaptation *Nightwings* is set in a future society that has reverted to a medieval technology and social structure. The narrator is a member of the Guild of Watchers, who scan the skies to give warning of the predicted alien invasion. A rich, absorbing story, with exceptionally complex characterisation, and not even the perfunctory artwork can break the mood. *Space Clusters* has the art-lover on the run as a murder suspect, pursued for a hundred years by the art-censor turned cop. A refreshingly tongue-in-cheek start, and then the two of them fall into a black hole and it's non-stop psychedelia right to the end. A romp. Finally, *Warlords*, in which Dwayne, the resourceful troll, becomes embroiled in the conflicts between four Warlord brothers. Told with a light touch, and with careful, affectionate artwork.

The bad or indifferent science-fiction stories make for a longer list. *Demon with a Glass Hand* features Trent, who appeared in the city ten days previously devoid of memories, and wonders who he is, and why all these men are trying to kill him – very ordinary. *Generation Zero* is set after a nuclear war, and Juan Falcon and two friends are given a mission: to fly around the world and contact other groups of survivors. The ideas just aren't there, and the writing is leaden. *Hell on Earth* concerns a horror writer who is involved in an experiment to summon the devil, and it becomes grindingly predictable within pages. *The Magic Goes Away* is set in a sword-and-sorcery world in which the magic is nearly exhausted, with a group on a last-chance mission to replenish the supply. Memorable for incoherent story-telling that leaves you flicking back and forth wondering if the pages are in the wrong order. *Me and Joe Priest* is set in a future where all men have become sterile, yet one man (who happens to be a priest, and the son of a priest) is on a divine mission to reseed the planet. It's witless. *The Medusa Chain*...well, who knows what Ernie Colón thought he was producing here? Space-going prison drama, or romance, or corporate conspiracy, or war story? It's a mess. *Metalzoic* is an African wildlife documentary with fearsomely-armed robots instead of animals, and with the traditional struggle for leadership of the tribe. Great imagination from both writer Pat Mills and artist Kevin O'Neill in the details and atmosphere of the machine-based ecology, but with some clumsy dialogue and near-incomprehensible fight scenes. *Sandkings* is an adaptation of George R.R.Martin's simple but powerful morality tale, and you'd do better to read the non-graphic version since the illustrator here seems to have missed the point of the story completely. Last and least, Star Raiders, which has a bunch of freedom fighters up against the Zylon hive-mind – many flashes and bangs and funny kid-animals, and not a story in sight.

In a category of its own is *Tell Me Dark*. According to the jacket-blurb, the genre is Femme Fatale Story, and as such the words and the painted artwork combine for an unusually good example of the genre. But need the story be taken literally? Is it actually about a man having a nervous breakdown far from home? Or about the torment of being emotionally involved with someone who's far from sane? Or simply about the end of an affair? The story (maybe despite itself?) allows all of these readings, and more.

Since the early 1990s DC have largely forsaken graphic novels unless they star the top of the line characters, preferring instead to tailor the content of their monthly comics into stories easily repackaged as collections, and to mine their extensive history. There have been exceptions, though. When the bankruptcy of Kitchen Sink reverted the rights of Will Eisner's graphic novels back to him, DC lost no time coming to an arrangement. While still dealt with under the Kitchen Sink entry, most are now available via DC, who also now publish his new work. *The Name of the Game* is an excellent character study of a family and associates over three generations. The themes are how snobbery and sustaining an appearance over-rides all practical considerations for some, the hollow centre of what's perceived to be a good name point, and how a desire for social acceptance is a motivating force. The central character, stockbroker Conrad Arnheim is a monstrous creation, a selfish monolith towering over the story. With this work Eisner can finally lay to rest the (minor) criticism of being unable to produce work not spliced with a broad sentimental centre. Those seeking ammunition for that comment need look no further than *Minor Miracles,* four entertaining stories, the first of which provides a comic treatment of the ideas in *The Name of the Game.* While Eisner grounds his work in Jewish culture, it's successful because when the trappings are swept away it's essentially about the perennials of human nature.

Bizarro Comics is fa antastic idea: giving accomplished creators who've selected not to work with superhero material, or entirely unsuited to it, one chance in the DC playground without compromising their styles. Those with entrenched views of how DC superheroes should be portrayed won't like this, but many whose fondness for Superman and Batman departed with their youth should dive in. The most prominent inclusion is Kyle Baker's notorious, and funny, story of the infant Superman's babysitter, allegedly deemed unsuitable for a mainstream DC comic, and an editorial misjudgement resulting in the entire run of the Elseworlds 80-Page Giant being pulped. While not everything is an unqualified success, highlights include Chris Perry and Stephen DeStefano's hilarious sixty-page framing sequence, contributions throughout from Evan Dorkin, and Bob Fingerman and Dave Cooper's Wonder Woman story. It's available as a paperback or a beautifully designed, hardcover.~FC/WJ

Recommended: *Bizarro Comics, Frost and Fire, Minor Miracles, The Name of the Game, Nightwings, Space Clusters, Tell Me Dark*

DC ONE MILLION

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1998, 80-Page Giant 1999*

Well...the covers were nicely designed. When will DC get the message and give up on these messy crossover failures? Below par writer Grant Morrison wasn't helped by below par storytelling from penciller Val Semeiks. The plot involves the future version of the JLA in the 853rd Century – Justice Legion A, who travel back to the 20th Century to ask the JLA to help celebrate the return to Earth of the first Superman. DC's immortal bad-guy, Vandal Savage and a tyrant sentient sun, Solaris plan to spoil the party. The 80-page giant is much better, with more interesting and well drawn tales featuring 853rd Century characters by various creators, such as Morrison (now on form), Chuck Dixon, Dusty Abell, and Norm Breyfoyle. Mark Schultz gives us Krypto-9, whose ancestor was of course a member of the legendary Legion of Super-Pets making this a must-have for any DC old-fart fan.~HY

Recommended: 80-Page Giant

DC SPECIAL

DC: *29 issues 1968-1971 (1-15), 1975-1977 (16-29)*

This began life as an oversized reprint title and over the course of the second run gradually switched to all new material. Archivists will be interested in 3's Black Canary and Wonder Woman stories, produced in the 1940s, but never previously published, and other highlights of the initial run were entire issues devoted to the art of Carmine Infantino (1) and Joe Kubert (5). Towering above the run, though, is issue 15, offering one of the few relatively cheap opportunities to sample the comedic genius of Jack Cole's Plastic Man strips. They're so off the wall that the term 'wacky' doesn't begin to do them justice: Cole was way ahead of his time with this stretchable superhero. Despite nicely drawn Gil Kane Green Lantern reprints in 20, the second run is largely lacklustre, with the only standout being the final issue. In 29 Paul Levitz and Joe Staton construct a marvellous story explaining exactly why the Justice Society Of America were unable to win World War II on their own.~HY

Recommended: 1, 5, 15, 29

DC SUPER-STAR HOLIDAY SPECIAL

DC: *One-shot 1980*

This Christmas Special contains stories from across DC's range. A House of Mystery story features DC horror-title hosts of the period and a Legion of Superheroes tale has the advantage of José Luis Garcia-Lopez pencils inked by Dick Giordano, but is a hopelessly sentimental tale of alien races working in harmony. Robert Kanigher's Sgt Rock is a simple parable in which the horror of war is contrasted with the hopefulness of little children, but Dick Ayers and Romeo Tanghal art does it no favours. They also illustrate the Michael Fleisher's Jonah Hex story in which Hex helps a poor family find food for Christmas Day, his reasons explained in a flashback to his childhood. Finally Denny O'Neil provides another Christmas Batman story, drawn by Frank Miller. Hardly essential, Miller completists may want to track this down.~NF

DC SUPERSTARS

DC: *18 issues 1976-1978*

1-11 are reprints, largely from the 1960s, and largely unmemorable, although there's Infantino Flash in 5, and Legion of Super-Heroes in 3. From 12, though, it's all new material, starting with Superboy. Sergio Aragonés providing a wealth of short strips is the focus of 13, then not as well known to comic readers in general, but none the less talented for that. The Star Hunters débuted in 16 before moving into their own title, and Paul Levitz and Joe Staton supply the origin of the Huntress in her first appearance in 17, an issue also reprinting Green Arrow's origin and the first recorded case of The Legion of Super-Heroes. The series bows out with a teaming of Deadman and the Phantom Stranger.~HY

Recommended: 13, 17

DC versus MARVEL/MARVEL versus DC

DC/Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1996*

The involved collaboration uniting the Marvel and DC superheroes is inevitably contrived and cosmically scaled, yet is still superior to previous crossovers. This time, rationale for the meeting of their universes is supplied as dozens of cross-company heroes and villains clash. The *Green Lantern/Silver Surfer:* 'Unholy Alliances' one-shot serves as a prequel (not required reading) and the Amalgam universe spins off from the conclusion. Light, tender moments of character development preserve us from an endless barrage of brain battering and although no lasting effects on each universe linger, genuine suspense is generated by having five major battles decided by readers' votes. Thus one company wins. Writers Ron Marz and Peter David are to be commended for their handiwork considering the daunting constraints; Claudio Castellini and Dan Jurgens ably assist on pencils. A great series if you're 14.~APS

DCU Holiday Bash

DC: *One-shot ('1997'), 1997, one-shot ('1998') 1998, one-shot ('1999') 1999*

A successor to *Christmas with the Super-Heroes,* these anthologies feature festive vignettes, which, given the theme, tend inexorably towards the maudlin and soft-centred. Ty Templeton's two-page humour contributions, to 1997 starring the Demon, and 1998 starring Darkseid are inventive and amusing, and Mark Waid and Brian Augustyn's Flash story from 1997, rises above the mediocre as a charming relationship story that steers clear of being too cloying. 1998 also has gorgeous Russ Heath art on a dialogue-free Sgt. Rock story, and 'I Left My Heart at the Justice Society Canteen' by Howard Chaykin and Rick Burchett, a WWII homefront set piece disclosing a previously unknown episode in the life of a supporting cast member. Fun, festive and heart-warming, it's a standout in a melee of well-intentioned tales that regrettably tend to sag under their own syrup.~HS

DEAD AGAIN

DC: *5 issue miniseries 2001*

In a story that serves as a prelude to a new *Deadman* series, Steve Vance re-tells Deadman's origin whilst revisiting the deaths of other DC heroes. The Flash, Robin, Superman, Green Lantern and the Spectre guest star as Deadman seeks to stop Neron capturing their souls and altering time. Vance's script is largely uninteresting and has nothing new to say about Deadman. With Leonard Kirk on the art for 1, 3 and 5, Jim Aparo guests on 2 and M.D. Bright on 4, working against any sense of consistency or atmosphere and only Aparo does anything like a good job.~NF

The Sandman Presents THE DEAD BOY DETECTIVES

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 2001*

These two pre-pubescent boys first appeared in *Sandman* 24. Their appearances since have been sparing, and with good reason. They originally enabled Neil Gaiman to make a few jokes about public school education within a whimsical story. Transplanted into modern society and shovelled together with other characters of Gaiman's devising they lack the depth to sustain Ed Brubaker's already weak plot. There is the benefit of art from Bryan Talbot and Steve Leialoha, but neither would consider this a career highlight.~FP

DEAD CLOWN

Malibu: *3 issue miniseries 1993-1994*

Imagine *The Mask* crossed with *The Tick*, along with an extra side-order of Lobo style violence on the side. That's the idea, but it doesn't begin to approach any of the above.~WJ

THE DEAD HEAT

All-American: *1 issue 1990*

Big eyes, speed lines, exaggerated reactions, shorthand global crises, young girls in improbable jobs... Yes, it's all the conventions of Japanese kids comics making an early trip across the Pacific. Worthy of a footnote as an early appropriation of the manga style, but otherwise unremarkable.~WJ

DEAD IN THE WEST

Dark Horse: *2 issue microseries 1994*

Joe R. Lansdale, best known for horror fiction, almost single-handedly reinvented the Western comic with this and his work on *Jonah Hex*. Whether that's a good thing or not depends on your appreciation of what is, in effect, a zombie story in a Western setting. Adapted by Neal Barrett Jr from Lansdale's novel, *Dead in the West* is the story of a dying man's curse on the town that killed him. With an incestuous preacher as a hero and the sense that the townspeople only get what they deserve, there's more than a nod to *Pale Rider* and *High Plains Drifter*. With artwork by Jack Jackson (Jaxon) and covers by Tim Truman, Dark Horse managed to bring together the best of the new Western creators for this story.~NF

DEAD KILLER

Caliber: *One-shot 1992*

Collected episodes of a zombie-hunter originally seen in Deadworld 19-21 under a new cover. Ron McCain's moody artwork is full of the energy of immediacy and is superficially influenced by Bill Sienkiewicz, but the stretched common factors lead to recognition becoming detective work. Meanwhile Kyle Garrett's pretentious script litters the pages in easily skipped captions. Rot.~SW

DEAD KING

Chaos!: *4 issue miniseries 1998*

Rick Young, killed by Evil Ernie, is reborn as the ghoul, Homicide. In the Pentagon, General Powell plots with the Council of Six, to whom he's planning to sacrifice thousands of souls in return for world control. Powell decides Homicide would make a good leader for an army of the undead and sets about capturing and training him – with predictably deadly results (for Powell and some Israeli commandos that happen to be in the area). Written by Hart Fisher and drawn by David Brewer, this is an extremely violent and gory story that almost pulls off the trick of being a horrific read, except that the artwork is too loose to be realistic, blunting the effect.~NF

THE DEAD MUSE

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1990*

Don't read this when you're feeling down. Ostensibly a collection, edited by Eddie Campbell, of various Australian comic talents, it's actually a series of annoying short stories that interrupt Campbell's gripping account of one of the most depressing periods in his life, interspersed with how he met various of the contributors. Actually the stories aren't that bad – Phil Bentley and M. Pena adapt an amusing episode from 'The Wilder Shores Of Love', and Kupe's piece is rough but charming – only they become less memorable when faced with the editorial itself, tragic yet funny, brooding dolefully on the short life of the Tenth Muse, the muse of comics.~FJ

DEAD OF NIGHT

Marvel: *11 issues 1973-1975*

Staple reprint diet of 1950's weird/horror shorts. 11 contains the only original feature, the first appearance of the supernatural Scarecrow by Scott Edelman. The subject of a painting forming a gateway to a demoniacal dimension, Scarecrow came to life to combat demon worshippers on Earth. Uninspired, as were subsequent roles in *Marvel Spotlight* (first series) 26 and *Marvel Two-In-One* 18.~APS

DEAD OR ALIVE A Cyberpunk Western

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1998*

A baby butcher, a psychotic clown, aliens, samurais, an old movie style tribe of red indians, a giant fire-breathing monster, busty babes on bikes, a chainsaw, guns galore and tons of gore. Sounds interesting, no? And the whole lot's drawn by Alberto Ponticelli ripping off Bisley from the days when he used to give a damn, complete with artistic asides and amazing detail. And the story is... Doh! While stoned it'll be amazing.~WJ

DEADBEATS

Claypool: *54 issues + 1993 to date*

Four centuries old, but seemingly youthful, vampires terrorise a small American town. Opposing them are a rag-tag-and-bobtail bunch of townies and, separately, a local youth whom the self-styled Deadbeats converted to vampirism and set up as a puppet leader. Now with an agenda of his own, he's their deadliest enemy. Decadence, an underlying perverse sensuality and loquaciousness are the keynotes of the title. All of writer/artist Richard Howell's characters, good or evil, are oratorical to a degree seldom seen in today's comics, and that's not a complaint. A particularly pleasing aspect is that moral values – of the genuine sort, not the twisted and bigoted evangelical type – are presented in a positive and affirming way. It's ironic that this eerie and horrific merger of grand opera and soap opera also presents virtually the only cool and sane Christians ever seen in comics, side by side with a degree of nudity and sensuality unknown in most pure adventure series. Howell has gone on record that he'd much rather draw bodies than clothes, and several tastefully salacious covers (19, 27, 33, 40) amply demonstrate this preference.

1-25 comprised an extended story that was sexy, spooky and able to keep the reader genuinely off balance and disturbed. After that, the series fell into a bit of rut, most issues being entertaining enough, but the underlying text to art ratio becoming a little crowded even given the skills of the creators. In addition, there were a couple of serious misfires: 28, in which the two female Deadbeats carry a deceased comrade around town looking for a way to dispose of him, is tasteless and repetitive rather than funny, and 34, where some of our heroes encounter a bunch of Cockney Wild-Boy vamps in Quainte Olde Englande, is notable chiefly for its truly arse-puckering interpretation of British accents. If anyone ever offers that issue as a sample, flee in terror! Run! Hide! Nevertheless, generally it remains a good read, and there are hopeful signs in recent issues that the old vigour is returning.~HS

Recommended: 1-25

DEADENDERS

DC/Vertigo: *16 issues 2000-2001*

Ed Brubaker and Warren Pleece tell the tale of Beezer, a disaffected teen in a post-cataclysmic city. A mysterious event created a nuclear winter, and the human race divided into the rich, who occupy the central sectors of the metropolis, complete with all mod cons, including artificial weather, and the rest, who scrabble for existence in the twilit outer sectors. It's a dystopian soap-opera and mystery tale as drug-dealer Beezer tries to eke out the best life he can whilst plagued by time-warping hallucinations and on the run from sector police and outworld criminals. An intriguing concept looking like a cross between *Quadrophenia* and *Blade Runner* that starts well but loses itself by trying to be too clever. Superficial and unsatisfying. 1-4 are collected.~WW

DEADFACE

Harrier: *8 issues 1987-1988**

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries (Doing the Islands with Bacchus) 1991*, 4 issue miniseries ('Earth, Water, Air and Fire') 1992**

If you were 4000 years old and suffering from a lifetime of dissolution, wine, women and song, mightn't you look a bit battered? The Greek god Bacchus now spends his time in bars spinning tales of the old days, accompanied by faithful companion Simpson, and a few dog-eared Maenads. Joe Theseus, however, has reason to fear Bacchus and sends a hitman after him, but finds himself pursued by The Eyeball Kid, who stole his father Zeus' thunderbolt and killed most of the gods of Olympus. The Kid wants to know the whereabouts of Poseidon's skull, which grants longevity. Together Theseus and the Kid return to pick up the pieces of Joe's criminal empire but find themselves the target of some other mythological throwbacks, Chalcon, Chryson and Argyson, the Telchines. The Eyeball Kid's powers are sucked away by the Stygian Leech and although Theseus saves him they are forced to retreat. This is the plot in simple terms, but Eddie Campbell's strip is much more than a simple adventure fantasy. His carefully researched retelling of myths complements the action and his artwork, rough and scratchy but always expressive and textural, is full of life and imagination.

Doing the Islands with Bacchus is actually a collection of sixteen short stories that appeared in a number of different anthologies for a variety of publishers. Bacchus strikes out from the Deadface storyline to wander around the Aegean Islands, telling a different, suitable story on each. These issues are pure Campbell magic, thoughtful, playful scripts that aren't afraid of the darker side of mythology, and are matched by delicate artwork. In 'Earth, Water, Air and Fire', Theseus is tempted back into human affairs with a bargain that would gain him 'The Eye of Fate' which once belonged to the Eyeball Kid. Seduced by his own daughter, he finds himself in the middle of a Mob war and his troubles are compounded when the Kid comes looking for his lost orb. All this and police violence too. Though there's humour in Campbell's stories there's also an understanding of the nature of mythology and oral storytelling patterns.~NF

Recommended: *Doing the Islands* 1-3

DEADFISH BEDEVILED

All-American: *1 issue 1990*

Writer David Gomien's private detective Harry Carlson finds himself involved in a case of demonic posession that spans two decades. The subject is old friend and psychologist Salamander Deadfish. In the course of the investigation we also meet the doctor's former lover Alicia Swann and a cult headed by corporate executive D. Howard Damone. The art is fair, if unspectacular, and would be greatly improved by colour. A promising introduction to a series that never happened.~SW

DEADFORCE

Antarctic: *2 issues 1999*

A promising first effort from Roy Burdine, featuring a giant creature whose touch kills, targeting the criminal community, sometimes in the company of Joker-alike vigilante Crazyface. It's influenced throughout by Frank Miller, but is nonetheless entertaining for being derivative.~FP

DEADLANDS

Image: *One-shot 1999*

Truly wretchedly written horror-western based on a role-playing card game. Bizarrely the art has a Saturday morning adventure cartoon gloss, but it's not so good it's worth anyone's while picking this up, particularly not at $6.95.~WJ

DEADLINE

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 2002**

Good solid mystery yarn as rookie reporter Kat Farrell goes about her job, and dreams of the big break that will promote her from the *Daily Bugle*'s worst position, covering the local superhero news. She wants to be a real journalist and handle "real people" stories but becomes enmeshed in a seeming mystery as a succession of minor supervillains turn up dead of what looks like natural causes. A very palatable blend of journalistic thriller and murder mystery set up on the fringes of the Marvel Universe. A treat worth sampling from Bill Roseman and Guy Davis.~WW

Recommended: 1-4

DEADLINE U.S.A.

Dark Horse: *Series one 3 issues 1991-1992, series two 8 issues 1992-1993*

British anthology comic *Deadline* was a late 1980s success story, combining irreverent self-indulgence with genuine innovation and talent. The most successful graduate was Jamie Hewlett and Alan Martin's Tank Girl, but it wasn't the only good strip, and there are enough good reprints from the British edition to make each issue worth a glance. The likes of Philip Bond's 'Wired World' (*Love and Rockets* in Clapham), Pete Milligan and Brett Ewins' hard-boiled Johnny Nemo, Evan Dorkin's Milk and Cheese, and Beryl the Bitch from Julie Hollings shine, and a fine supporting line-up includes strips from Nick Abadzis, Rachael Ball and D'Israeli. Dark Horse did make the mistake of adding new strips by off-beat American creators like Richard Sala and Alec Stevens, whose po-faced introspection misses the point entirely. The second run halves the page-count and loses Tank Girl (moved to her own title), but gets better as it progresses, phasing out Sala and Stevens with new US contributors Dave Cooper and Scott Musgrove mixing more easily. There's always some utter tosh in *Deadline*, but there's always some essential reading as well.~FP

Recommended: Series two 8

THE DEADLY DUO

Image: *4 issue miniseries 1994, 4 issue miniseries 1995*

Comedy superheroics from Erik Larson's universe. A thick time-traveller, Kid Avenger, teams up with Kill Cat and the two get into some scrapes, usually involving lots of fighting. Don't expect subtlety but it is better amusement than most parody titles. Issue 3 of the second series features a guest appearance by Grunge of Gen^{13}.~NF

DEADLY HANDS OF KUNG-FU

Marvel: *33 issues 1974-1977*

Marvel put a lot of effort into its black and white magazines in the 1970s. Unfortunately they didn't always have the talent to go with it. *Deadly Hands* sells itself as a general martial arts magazine with articles on Bruce Lee, the *Kung-Fu* TV series and the many martial arts. The two regular comic strips suffered from fluctuating standards in artwork (usually the inking). The Shang-Chi strip runs parallel to his own series and has the advantage of Doug Moench scripts, but Mike Vosburg (inked by Al Milgrom and Jack Abel) is seriously unsuited to an action strip of this kind, while Rudy Nebres' artwork is fluid during the fights but terribly stiff otherwise. 'The Sons of the Tiger', running throughout the series, is a deadly dull story, though Bill Mantlo does try to redeem it with characters like The White Tiger and Jack of Hearts. Iron Fist replaced Shang-Chi for 19-24, bringing with him his regular writer Chris Claremont, with artwork again by Nebres. A multi-part story-line featuring all of the above ran from 29-31 after a Bruce Lee special in 28. For completists only.~NF

DEADMAN

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1985-1986, 2 issue microseries ('Love After Death') 1989*, 2 issue microseries ('Exorcism') 1992*, 7 issue limited series 1995, 9 issues 2002*

Introduced in the 1970s with runs in *Strange Adventures* and *The Brave and the Bold*, reprinted as the limited series, Boston Brand is Deadman, a ghost returned to Earth able to temporarily possess the bodies of others. Andy Helfer and José Luis Garcia-Lopez's miniseries attempts to redefine the character after the guest appearances and short stories since his run in Strange Adventures. Tying up the loose ends of the original storyline that saw Boston's killer still head of the League of Assassins, Helfer kills a few characters and sets Deadman up as a hero with a mission. Lopez's artwork bears similarities to Adams, or Ross Andru, but has a European influence that keeps it fresh and a delight to read. Mike Baron presents a more traditional horror story in 'Love After Death', as Brand meets an undead circus troupe. Kelley Jones, a knobbly Berni Wrightson, provides suitably atmospheric artwork but the whole is a characterless affair. The sequel by Baron and Jones has an insane Deadman confronting various denizens of hell, aided by the Phantom Stranger, and the stories are collected as 'Lost Souls'. Whilst tying in with DC's attempt to create a more 'mature' set of horror characters, the shifts in personality and behaviour are forced. The 2002 series picks up where *Dead Again* leaves off, with Deadman on a mission to recapture escaped evil souls. Using detective Max Loomis as a supporting character gives Deadman a relationship with the normal world, and the fact that he can't possess the bodies of the escapees does make the adventures more demanding, but the best issues are a two-part mystery (5-6), drawn by Garcia-Lopez. Deadman romances the ghost of a murdered woman, delaying his investigation into her death. The artwork by Shawn McManus (7-9) helps makes the final storyline more interesting, but the quick cancellation can't have been a surprise.~NF

DEADPOOL

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries ('The Circle Chase') 1993*, 4 issue miniseries ('Sins of the Past') 1994, 70 issues (0, 1-69), 2 Annuals, 2 one-shots 1997-2002*

Introduced in the dying days of the *New Mutants* (98), Deadpool, the indestructible assassin, was first dry-runned in two miniseries. Both are tolerable, but unexceptional adventures involving leftover members of the X-Men cast; Black Tom and his non-romantic life-partner, the Juggernaut, and Banshee and his daughter, Siryn. The only character or plotline held over from the minis to the ongoing series was Siryn and Deadpool's mutual, if seemingly doomed, attraction. Joe Kelly introduced a different take on Deadpool with the first issue of the ongoing title. Repentant of his past life, and striving to make amends in his own demented way, our anti-hero surrounds himself with a bizarre supporting cast and seeks redemption. Of course, given his skewed perspective on the world, he has to kill a lot of people along the way.

Deadpool's... awfully hard to describe. He's an agent for Landau, Luckman and Lake, an international dimension-spanning evil organisation with vast resources and power, who for some reason entrust their most crucial operations to a deranged assassin, a skinless psychic and a woman in skintight latex with a serious stick up her arse. Deadpool's trying to atone for his past, but keeps a blind old lady prisoner and tortures her periodically. Other Marvel characters visit frequently, but rather than the cynical, money-spinning team-ups in other series, the po-faced do-gooders are often caught with their metaphorical pants down. It's grim, hilarious, occasionally scary, and often more than slightly oblique. You wonder who Kelly had help from, since he hasn't achieved anything resembling this quality since. Check out 10-11, introducing the Lightning Rods (the artists formerly known as the Great Lakes Avengers), and sending Deadpool back into the past to interact, Forrest Gump like, with the actual reprinted pages from Amazing Spider-Man 47. If you don't like that story, then you just won't 'get' any of the series, and should pass it by. Ed McGuinness and then Walter McDaniel pencil most Kelly issues, both adept at big cartoony figures, and both shirkers when it comes to backgrounds. December 1998 was designated "Deadpool Month" and two one-shots were released in the hope of attracting new readers. *Deadpool and Widdle Wade*, pitting him against a miniature Japanese clone, is unlikely to have appealed to anyone new (or many regular readers, one suspects), but with assorted artists parodying children's books and features, Baby's First *Deadpool Book* is very much Kelly on form. There was also the text based Encyclopaedia Deadpoolica providing detailed summaries of all issues to 22.

With 34, Christopher Priest took over the scripting, and did... well, much of the same thing. For someone who, ordinarily, is one of the more creative scripters, his run on Deadpool, though amusing, showed little actual invention. Jimmy Palmiotti wrote 46-56, and despite making the tone of the book a whole lot grimmer, he did introduce Kid Deadpool, the son of someone Deadpool inadvertently killed, as our hero's kid sidekick, for which he should be appropriately thanked. 57-60 were labelled 'Agent of Weapon X' 1-4, and 61-64 'Funeral for a Freak' 1-4, faux miniseries scripted by Frank Tieri to trick new readers into picking up the comic. Resuming with 65, Gail Simone (scripter) and Udon Studio (art) involved Deadpool's gradual loss of his abilities – and possibly his life – while throwing third-string marvel characters like Dazzler and the Rhino into the mix. By now, however, the riffs were tired. The comic's comparative originality, the very thing that had given it appeal, was working against the series as most replacement writers tried to ring variations on the same theme, and, although doing much inventive work, rapidly found themselves in a tighter straitjacket than expected. Most issues of *Deadpool* are at least mildly amusing, but you need to go to the first 33 for 'the real deal'; anything else is a dilution and repetition of the concept. After cancellation Simone, Udon, and some variation of the character went straight into *Agent X*.~HS

Recommended: 1-33

DEADSHOT

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1988-1989*

Batman foe Deadshot was a core member of Suicide Squad, and has been diagnosed as a hitman with a death wish. While Floyd Lawton attempts to locate his kidnapped son, his therapist, harbouring feelings for Lawton, checks into his past. It's a gloomy, depressing story of a fractured family from the team of John Ostrander, Kim Yale and artist Luke McDonnell, but excellently plotted and executed. Deadshot's fatalism and the desperate optimism of therapist Marnie Herrs are well contrasted, particularly in an epilogue scene. Not a laugh to be had, and all the better for it.~FP

Recommended: 1-4

DEADSIDE

Acclaim: *3 issues 1999*

A half-hearted attempt to jumpstart Acclaim's comic line for the launch of the *Shadowman* computer game, Deadside is the place where all the dead people go. There are Heavens and Hells within, but mostly it involves the dead just standing in mud, being bored or screaming or trying to escape. If they do Shadowman kills them again. Some more. Whatever. Paul Jenkins, Ashley Wood and Dennis Calero flounder with the concept, trying for everyday tales of the departed but it lacks a central narrative to drive it. The planned fourth issue was never published.~WW

DEADWORLD

Arrow: *9 issues 1986-1988*

Caliber: *Series one 17 issues (10-26) 1988-1992, series two 15 issues 1993-1995*

Off-putting, gratuitously gory covers disguise this initially quite enjoyable Troma-style romp (although Arrow wised up and provided retailer-friendly alternative covers from 6). A black- magic ceremony gone wrong turns almost the entire population into zombies. The few survivors, initially a group of typical Troma teenagers, struggle in a world gone very wrong. Stuart Kerr and Vincent Locke produced the original issues (reprinted in the collections and as Deadworld Archives 1-3), and after they left it all began to go pear-shaped. The humour disappeared and grim and gory was the order of the day. A Punisher-style character called Deadkiller is introduced in 19, and that and the two succeeding issues are also available as a reprint one-shot titled Deadkiller. 1-16 are collected over two volumes.

A miniseries titled *To Kill a King* separates the first and second Caliber series. Dead Killer decides it's time to finish King Zombie, who's able to unite the otherwise mindless dead under his control. By series two the cast had grown to massive proportions, and there are myriad sub-plots, but they're competently handled, which makes it a shame the artwork is never more than mediocre, with 6-11 appalling. 12 and 13 are flip-books doubling up as *The Realm* 9 and *Beck and Caul* 6 respectively. Storyines conclude in disappointing fashion with 15, as further issues are promised.~FP

DEAR JULIA

Black Eye: *4 issue miniseries 1996-1998**

Boyd Soloman stands on a window ledge about to throw himself off in an attempt to fly. How he arrived there is related in largely epistolary fashion, reviewing past events to explain his present situation. The first impression of *Dear Julia* is unsettling, with Brian Biggs' art imparting loneliness and isolation, and although the pace is occasionally only a notch above static there's enough atmosphere to compensate. The works of David Lynch come to mind in comparison, with significant detail concealed in small moments, and as such *Dear Julia* is best read via the Top Shelf collection.~WJ

DEATH

DC/Vertigo: *3 issue miniseries ('The High Cost of Living') 1993*, 3 issue miniseries ('The Time of your Life') 1996*, 4 issue miniseries ('The Girl Who Would Be Death') 1998-1999*

As introduced in Sandman 8, Death is whimsically personified as a pallid young woman in a black vest and tight black trousers. Although largely sympathetic and somewhat capricious, Death was never particularly strongly characterised in Sandman, and her popularity would seem to lie in her appealing appearance.

For her first miniseries Death remains somewhat the cipher, tossing out Zen remarks as a reactive rather than instigative presence. 'The High Cost of Living' takes as its premise that once every century Death becomes human for a single day in order to retain a feeling for humanity. In 1993 she appears in New York to alter the life of Sexton Furnival, precocious, self-absorbed and self-pitying teenager, unwittingly involving him in a search for a missing heart and an encounter with a demon. This slim plot works as Furnival's perceptions of life are subtly altered through experience, and Death holding a mirror to him. Writer Neil Gaiman's particularly good ear for naturalistic dialogue and skilful humorous touches go a long way. There's the odd twee moment, particularly the song lyrics in 2 (pandering to a perceived audience, one hopes), but overall 'The High Cost of Living' is a triumph.

'The Time of Your Life' is even better, with Death's participation minimal and enigmatic, as the story concentrates on lesbian couple Foxglove and Hazel. Since their début in *Sandman* 32 (and cameo in the previous Death series) they have a child and Foxglove has become a successful singer on a global scale. All is well, so it would seem, but that's not the case. By the end of the third issue both have learned something about themselves on a journey that's had plenty of surprises along the way.

Of course, good comics writing is forever jeopardised by unsympathetic artists, but penciller Chris Bachalo is distinguished at conveying small moments of characterisation, while smart enough to ensure dialogue-heavy sequences remain visually interesting. When he departs midway through the second issue of the second series, former inker Mark Buckingham seamlessly continues, proving equally adept. The irritating fantasy stylings that occasionally prompt groans of disbelief in *Sandman* are largely missing here, so those who find that title too mannered should still enjoy the *Death* stories. Those who love *Sandman* will enjoy them anyway, and those who've never read either ought to sample.

The third series concerns the romantic attraction of death, with its personification but a hovering presence. Untouched by previous contributors, it falls far short of their efforts, as shallow characters populate a grim narrative lacking any redeeming self-mocking qualities. The jagged art of Dean Ormston is impressively bleak, and serves well in further distancing readers. Alienated teenagers will be seduced, but adults should stay clear. Those who do enjoy it, though, might want to investigate the sequel in *The Dreaming* 36-38.~WJ

Recommended: 'The High Cost of Living' 1-3, 'The Time of Your Life' 1-3

DEATH & CANDY

Fantagraphics: *3 issues + 1999 to date*

Max Andersson is a Swedish creator whose surreal tales have a punk sensibility, reminiscent of Chester Brown's *Yummy Fur* and stylistically similar to Julie Doucet in his decorative inking. These issues feature separate strips about Death on the road with Candy and six kids, as well as Car-Boy, Wreck-Boy and Tractor-Girl, and a continuing strip about what appears to be a young man's nightmare relationship with his parents (possibly autobiographical). Another continuing story, 'Bosnian Flat Dogs' (from 2), is written by Lars Sjunnesson, featuring himself and Max on an adventure in Sarajevo.~NF

Recommended: 1-3

DEATH BY CHOCOLATE

Sleeping Giant: *2 issues 1996*

Very silly for the first few pages, as a chocolate-shop owner is transformed into living chocolate by an alien enslaved in a chocolate factory. David Yurkovich's captions are a tortured first-person narrative, heightening the ridiculous situation, and his pages are drawn in deadpan, starkly contrasting black and white with no hint of parody, giving the entire comic a *Twilight Zone* feel. Unfortunately, what would have been a good short story is dragged on through a standard mad-scientist plot. The second issue, subtitled 'The Metabolators', sees our man return to his home town and transform everything and everyone into chocolate. Luckily the authorities have the Metabolators on hand. Yurkovich later learned how not to flog an idea to death.~FP

DEATH DEALER

Verotik: *4 issue miniseries 1997*

Goth metal screamer Glenn Danzig wrote and published this tawdry adult barbarian comic, 'inspired' by a Frank Frazetta painting. Danzig's puerile script merely provides an excuse for artists Simon Bisley and Liam Sharp to draw endless, anatomically exaggerated pin-ups of either naked Amazonian warriors or the gut-ripping, axe-wielding Death Dealer, who seeks bloody revenge against a bunch of evil lords and kings. The rather tired sword and sorcery genre certainly needs refreshing and updating, but this silly piece of gory trash only adds extra metalhead 'outrage' to the usual generic hokum.~AL

DEATH METAL Vs GENETIX

Marvel UK: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

Robotic psycho-killer desperate to end murderous sprees tries to dupe superteens into offing him. A bit more plot than most Marvel UK stuff.~HS

DEATH RACE 2020

Cosmic Comics: *8 issues 1995-1996*

It's always nice to see Pat Mills and Kev O'Neill working together, even if the script does have a 'helping hand' from the less talented Tony Skinner. 1-3, if not completely satisfying, are an enjoyable and bloody romp. Based on the cult movie *Death Race 2000*, the strip continues the story of Frankenstein, the genetically altered driver who becomes President of the US after killing the incumbent during the violent cross-continental race. In the early issues Frankenstein, who's banned the Death Race, despairs of a populace who've made death into a religion and calls a free election. When he loses he returns to the race and the strip becomes nothing but a formularised carnage, which coincides with O'Neill bowing out and handing the art chores to Trevor Goring. Goring does his best, but the less angular, less exciting art, and the predictability of the plot, make the rest of the series lacklustre.~FJ

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* Available in a collected edition

DEATH RATTLE

Kitchen Sink: *Series one 18 issues 1985-1988, series two 5 issues 1995-1996*

The freshest thing about *Death Rattle* is its experimental covers. Many don't work, but at least it shows there's a spark of life in the old corpse yet. It's the comic-book equivalent of *Friday the 13th*, a vaguely competent horror anthology tending towards figurative art and straightforward narrative, frequently in the EC mould but told with less economy. Don't look to this title for subtlety because you'll be sorely disappointed. A number of good people have turned up in its pages (Mark Schultz's popular *Xenozoic Tales* previewed in 8, and indeed he produced the lead story for the second-series opener), but rarely at their best. Jaxon fans will delight in Bulto, his long-winded tale of morally-soured monks vs Indians and squidgy Cuthulu-type monsters in 17th-century Central America; the rest of us will find it interminable and be forced to skip large chunks of issues where it constitutes the main attraction.

If you don't like predictable gore, look at issue 18. Behind a pedestrian Frank Miller cover is a neat Gerard Jones-scripted story, probably the most clever piece of writing the title's ever seen. 'When I Grow Up', illustrated by Doug Potter, concerns a little girl who, out playing with her friends, wishes she could find out what becomes of them. They proceed to act out all the everyday traumas and tragedies of adulthood. Potter's drawings of pre-pubescent children kissing, getting pissed, rowing etc. make particularly unsettling images. Also of note are a couple of early Charles Burns stories and some Basil Wolverton reprints.~FJ

Recommended: 18

DEATH'S HEAD

Marvel UK: *10 issues 1989*

An eccentric cyborg starts a career as a "freelance peacekeeper". The peculiarly homemade look of the title character gives the strip a certain visual charm, but the joke quickly wears thin. If you must sample go for the Dr Who guest appearance in 8, which was quite fun. With the popularity of Death's Head's successor this series was reprinted and completed as *The Incomplete Death's Head* in 1993.~HS

DEATH'S HEAD II

Marvel UK: *4 issue miniseries 1992, 16 issues 1992-1994*

This is new, improved, sleekly redesigned version of the original Death's Head, complete with a multi-morphing weapons arm. This was fleetingly popular in the early 1990s, and served as springboard for artist Liam Sharp to more lucrative gigs. His art aside, it's all carnage by numbers, and he left after issue 4 of the ongoing series, which then rapidly followed the usual Marvel UK path of decline into rotating creators and pointless mutant guest stars.~HS

DEATH'S HEAD II & The Origin of Die Cut

Marvel UK: *2 issue microseries 1993*

Well now, it's the origin of Die Cut and it's got Death's Head II in it. John Royle's art is quite nice. That's all.~HS

DEATHBLOW

Image/WildStorm: *30 issues (1-29, 0) 1993-1996, 2 issue microseries (Deathblow and Wolverine) 1996-1997*, one-shot ('Wild Times') 1999, 3 issue miniseries ('Byblows') 1999-2000*

Deathblow is Michael Cray, a government operative, part of the original Team 7, except that he hasn't manifested super powers like the others. 1-12* form a single non-stop action thriller concerning an attempt to awaken Lucifer and bring Hell to Earth. Believing he's dying of cancer, Deathblow is aided by his ex-wife, Gaby, the Order of the Cross and various members of Team 7. In 13 Deathblow takes employment with Executive Protection Services running into some werewolves and a vampire on his first job (13-14). Apart from the *WildStorm Rising* crossover (16), the rest of the series is in effect a single story leading to Deathblow's funeral in 29. He teams with Gen^{13} (20-21) and individual members of Team 7 against Kaizen Gamorra and Miles Craven who want to steal the team's powers before everyone is caught in WildStorm's 'Fire From Heaven' crossover (26-28). Created by Brandon Choi and Jim Lee, the latter only manages two issues before handing over the art to Tim Sale (3-12) who continues to use Lee's 'homage to Frank Miller' style for a while before lapsing into his own. Trevor Scott is then the major penciller (13-14, 20-22, 25-29), initially aping Lee but, like Sale, soon just being himself. Choi manages to stick with the series until the end, but by then Tom Joyner's been co-plotting and scripting (from 21). Despite all the action, Choi works hard to characterise Deathblow as a man driven to avenge the death of his parents, aware of the contradictions in his acceptance of orders to kill, guilty over the loss of his wife and other friends and afraid that he's not good enough to defeat the enemy. The quality isn't consistent, but the series succeeds in being more than a simple showcase for big guns and violent action. *Deathblow* 0 was published in 1996, finally completing the story begun in *Darker Image* by Choi and Lee (with Scott doing most of the finishing on the artwork).

In 'Byblows', Alan Moore and Jim Baikie tell the story of Geneveive Cray, one of many clones of Michael Cray who have been left to kill one another until only the best is left alive. It's less wordy than almost anything else Moore's written, but very enjoyable. Deathblow saves Wolverine from an attack by ninjas and then has to help him prevent the dead souls in an ancient urn from being released. Set in San Francisco while Wolverine is still a member of Department H, Aron Wiesenfeld's story has less time for Deathblow, but the detailed artwork, by Wiesenfeld and Richard Bennett with washed-out colours by Monica Bennett keeps it interesting.~NF

DEATH HAWK

Adventure: *3 issues 1998*

"He's got a beautiful girl in one hand, a really big gun in the other and an intelligent blob of goo for a best friend." This was the slogan for the comic and tells you all you really need to know, except for the fact that Death Hawk is a space adventurer for hire, and that 1 has early pencils by Adam Hughes.~DB

DEATHLOK

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1990, 34 issues, 2 Annuals 1991-1994*

Despite appearances, this doesn't follow on from the cybernetic psychopath's mid-1970s adventures in *Astonishing Tales*. Instead of soldier Luther Manning, the new Deathlok is a pacifist scientist who believed he was working on developing cybernetic limbs for the disabled but was in fact creating a killing machine, into which his brain is placed and programmed to kill. Oh, the angst and irony. Writer Dwayne McDuffie takes him through cyborg conspiracy adventures and team-ups with everyone from Misty Knight to Doctor Doom a little too often for the series' own good. In between all the guest stars there's not quite enough space left for Deathlok himself, although overall it's not too bad a read. 31-34 try to tie up the continuity between the 1970s series and the later ones, which pretty much boils down to alternate worlds and time paradoxes that could have been left to the simple explanation of "it's a new series, it doesn't have to be the same guy". To make it even more complicated, the original Deathlok turns up in a Captain America short story in the first issue of the 1996 Marvel Fanfare (having hung around with him in the late 280s of his own comic) and it seems as if the Dwayne McDuffie issues have been forgotten completely. Even if it is all explained somewhere, you don't really want to know.~JC

DEATHLOK

Marvel: *11 issues 1999-2000*

Deathlok was pulled off the shelf, dusted down and reworked as part of Marvel's 'Tech' line, and certainly never looked better than when drawn by Leonardo Manco. This time S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Jack Truman is transformed into a cyborg as the only means of saving his life after he sustains horrific injuries. Written by Joe Casey, almost the entire series pits Deathlok against the previously lightweight Clown from the Circus of Crime, and former allies, now convincingly depicted as viable threats. There are moments that could have been trimmed, and the fill-in artist on 4 and 7 is disappointing, but overall it's a decent stab at the idea.~WJ

DEATHMATE

Valiant/Image: *6 issues (Prologue, Yellow, Black, Blue, Red, Epilogue) 1993-1994*

Shoddy and inept teaming of the Valiant and Image comics characters that sees energy being Solar merge with the equally non-corporeal Void from *WildC.A.T.s* to create a warped and foredoomed blending of their respective universes. Only one hero from each Earth knows the truth and together they must go back in time to prevent the cosmic union from occurring before all reality is destroyed. What story there is only occurs in the Prologue and Epilogue issues whilst the series itself concentrates on improbable pairings of heroes and villains with plenty of gratuitous and irrelevant slaughter. Mindless rubbish.~WW

DEATHSTROKE THE TERMINATOR

DC: *60 issues, 4 Annuals 1991-1995*

Marv Wolfman created this villain, a mildly interesting assassin with a conscience, for his successful *New Teen Titans* in the early 1980s. In the aftermath of the Punisher phenomenon, there was clearly potential in a Deathstroke comic, and Wolfman started shoehorning Slade Wilson into the *Titans* at every opportunity, as antagonist, as reluctant ally, and most conspicuously as father of Jericho. DC were eventually bludgeoned into publishing a *Deathstroke* title, but almost from day one it was a serious misfire, oscillating between espionage plotlines, superhero stories and 'Men's Sweat' adventure tales, while uneasy in all genres. 1-5 were collected. 10 introduced the new female holder of the Vigilante title, a rehash of a similar character Wolfman had already spun off from *Titans*, who became a semi-regular supporting cast member and romantic interest. 13 is the second half of a crossover from Superman 68, and 14-16 tie in with the 'Total Chaos' story in *New Titans* and *Team Titans*. The series kept trying to break away from guest appearances and stand on its own, but clearly sales flagged every time, and the bulk of the readers, one suspects, were simply *Titans* completists who bought the title grudgingly. It eventually staggered to a close a year or so before Wolfman finally wore out his welcome on *Titans* itself.~HS

DEATHWATCH

Harrier: *One-shot 1987*

A collection of short stories from Art Wetherell featuring an immortal being created to destroy the monsters that prey on humanity. Enjoyable enough but by no means special.~WW

DEATHWISH

Milestone: *4 issue miniseries 1995*

A series of murders with transsexuals the victims is investigated by a detective who is herself transsexual. This oddball premise could have been interesting, but strayed and rambled, eventually stuttering to the inevitable halt.~HS

DEATHWRECK

Marvel UK: *2 issues 1994*

The inventor of Death's Head II, short of a few spare parts, cobbles together yet another cyborg assassin, this one composed in equal parts of an old motor car, a wino and an armoury. The resultant mess then falls through a time gap and starts shooting up and drinking dry various bits of history. Pathetic and embarrassing.~WW

A DECADE OF DARK HORSE

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1996**

A something-for-everyone collection of ten years of Dark Horse comics, with new material from their most successful publications. The best is rather obvious but consists of Frank Miller's 'Sin City' (1), Matt Wagner's Grendel (1), Eric Luke and Scott Benefiel on Ghost (2), Mike Baron and Steve Rude's Nexus (3), Paul Chadwick's Concrete (4) and Masamune Shirow's 'Exon Depot' (4). The other features are either good examples of the series – Predator (1) by Henry Gilroy and Igor Kordey, Trekker (2) by Ron Randall and Chris Warner's 'Black Cross' (3), or competent if unappealing, Star Wars (2), Aliens (3), Outlanders sketches (3), The Mask (3), Godzilla (4).~NF

Recommended: 1, 4

THE DECEPTION featuring Jordan Risk

Image: *3 issue miniseries 1999*

Jordan Risk, maverick magician, comes out of early retirement to perform at his best buddy's new casino. Sounds nice, except on opening night, one of the showgirls dies on stage and Risk is the main suspect. Unsurprisingly, he sets out to solve the mystery using his wits and stage magic. OK yarn, but unengaging, with Risk, who we are meant to believe is an exciting daredevil, seeming dull and flat.~DB

DECOY

Penny Farthing: *4 issue miniseries 2001*, 4 issue miniseries ('Storm of the Century') 2002*

The first miniseries is a readable yarn with an old plot as Dolphin City rookie cop Bobby Luck encounters and bonds with an alien entity marooned on Earth when the other E.T.s in his hunting party have a falling out. Its an unchallenging piece of fluff which grows more readable when taken in context of the second outing when Luck, his partner Moreno, and Decoy the shape-changing alien find themselves opposing a mysteriously antagonistic police department whilst hunting for monsters in the sewers.~WW

DEE VEE

DeeVee: *14 issues 1996-2000, one-shot (2001) 2001*

An Australian anthology title that had the good sense to find a place for immigrant Eddie Campbell, as his strips are by far the best items on offer. Returning to his alter-ego Alec, Campbell details the growth of the British small press comics publishing during the 1980s, the parallel blossoming of the relationship with his wife, and the rise of the graphic novel. As ever, he proffers philosophical insights amid the usual Campbell mixture of arrogance, wonder and insecurity, occasionally throwing in diversions (discussing the history of comedy in art in 6). In short segments these strips aren't enough to recommend *Dee Vee* alone, but they're a master at work, collected as *Alec: How To Be An Artist*, heartily commended. Sadly the remaining content, although sometimes amusing, falls well behind. Other noteworthy items include the art of Christopher Brunton and Pete Mullins, the strips of Bruce Mutard (1, 8, 12), and Linzee Arnold in 6 is always welcome, but it's puzzling how the hollow pontifications of co-editor Michael Evans induce such letters page praise. The best issue is the 2001 one-shot. Evans reins in his pretensions for a brilliantly written appreciation of Francis Bacon, Campbell and Daren White provide an amusing character dissection, and Amber Carvan details her nightmare school year in Switzerland. Additionally Gary

Chaloner turns in an odd story about Jack Cole and Mutard provides another of his glimpses of Hitler as an art student. Why weren't all the issues this good?~FP
Recommended: 2001

DEFCON 4

Image: *4 issue miniseries 1996*

The Patron has sent four assassins back through time to prevent his past self from creating the technology that he now feels has ruined the future. Unfortunately for his plans, the assassins choose to complete their mission by killing him. The four assassins have not been transported through time physically but in essence, into bodies chosen to match their abilities. Well written and drawn by Matt Broome and Jeff Mariotte, this is a fast-paced science-fiction story that creates an intriguing situation but spends too much time on fight scenes instead of exploring either the Patron's future or his present. Intended to be ongoing, the first part ends with the assassins free but having to regroup after failing in their first attempt to kill the Patron. There's no indication when it will restart.~NF

The DEFENDERS

Marvel: *152 issues, 1 Annual, 5 Giant-Size 1972-1986, series two 12 issues 2001-2002*

The Defenders first appeared as a try-out in *Marvel Feature* 1-3. Their raison d'être, in contrast to the Avengers, was a loosely knit band of heroes with no permanent members and no formal structure who rallied when necessary. They were often referred to as a 'non-team' in view of their reluctant, uneasy bonding. The team experienced two distinct incarnations, separated by issue 125. During the first phase the most lasting participants were Dr Strange, Sub-Mariner, Hulk, Valkyrie, Nighthawk and Hellcat. Lesser roles were played by Silver Surfer, Son of Satan, Gargoyle and Beast. *The Defenders* never found a comfortable niche. Dr Strange fitted poorly with the more conventional heroes owing to his ability to whisk rabbits out of hats whenever the plot was stuck for a device.

Steve Englehart, Len Wein and Sal Buscema crafted a respectable nineteen issues with 8-11* chronicling half of the 'Avengers-Defenders War'. Steve Gerber's reign from 20-41 produced the most consistently excellent run. The Sons of the Serpent story in 22-25 explores social and racial problems, delivering a thesis strong on message albeit short on subtlety. The final issue's shrewd revelation produces a shock for Nighthawk. This was in addition to the trauma of Giant-Size 4, a delightful single issue story sporting fine Don Heck art. 26-29 co-star the Guardians of the Galaxy and introduce intriguing new character Starhawk in an involved plotline wherein the Defenders to the Guardians' future. The pace and weirdness step up a gear with Gerber's Headmen saga (31-40, Annual 1); wonderfully bizarre yet contrasting with the touchingly realistic sub-plot detailing Valkyrie's quest to discover the past of her human host Barbara Norriss. Brain and mind transplants abound, Nebulon the Celestial Man instigates a programme of mass mind control, the Red Guardian is introduced, Valkyrie endures a spell in prison and hosts of guest stars and villains combine to great effect. With 35 Klaus Janson replaced Jim Mooney inking Sal Buscema's pencils, imparting a grittier look to the title, which continued all the way to the finale (Annual 1) in which the team must deal with four separate threats simultaneously.

Dave Kraft took over and soon hit form with the 'Who Remembers Scorpio?' tale in 46-51. His character study of this morose, introspective villain recommends these issues to any collection. Keith Giffen aided and abetted with quality pencilling in a title admittedly well short of artistic highlights. Kraft maintained solidity until 61, but fell into a decline, which was accelerated by Ed Hannigan until Marc DeMatteis assumed penmanship from 92. Don Perlin ousted the musical artists and pencilled on to the final issue. DeMatteis' frustrating run comprised interesting, well-knitted plots encompassed in patchily written stories. His most notable issue is 111, delving into Hellcat's past.

The Defenders' second incarnation manifests in 124-125, in which the Beast reforms the team as himself, Angel, Iceman, Valkyrie, Gargoyle, Moondragon and Cloud (from 127). They gain a recognised structure and headquarters in Angel's Rocky Mountain retreat. These issues also resolve the sub-plot of the enigmatic Elf, who first appeared a hundred issues earlier, and supply a lame rationale as to why the old Defenders had to disband. 125 also heralds the title change to *New Defenders* and classy covers abound through to 152.

Peter Gillis' scripts from 131 mainly revolve around Moondragon's battles against the limits on her powers imposed by Odin. Inevitably, she is thrown into conflict with most of the rest of the team. In an inappropriate cosmic finale, she contests a nebulous entity, The Dragon of the Moon. All the Defenders bar the ex-X-Men apparently die, with Angel, Iceman and Beast subsequently forming X-Factor.

'"The Worst Comic Ever Produced" — Comics International ' proclaims the cover to second series 8. And it's not far wrong. Marketing strategies have changed a touch since the 1960s. Kurt Busiek and Erik Larsen go back to basics from 1 as the mainstays (Dr Strange, Sub-Mariner, Silver Surfer, Hulk) fight Yandroth, the villain they battled in their first appearance in 1971. The problem is that the big four have no intention of forming a team. The plot device enabling them to appear together every month is to have Yandroth curse them into having no choice about it. Plot strings dangle from thin air as both story and art deteriorate into infantile farce whilst the creators play the comic for laughs. Fill-in pencils in 8 and 9 by Ron Frenz look good in comparison to Larsen. The storyline continues in *The Order*.~APS
Recommended: 31-40, 46-51, Annual 1, Giant-Size 4

DEFIANCE

Image: *5 issues + 2002 to date*

Two factions are fighting for control of Hell, with a task on Earth of great strategic importance. All the imagination here is within the artwork of Kanno Kang and Zack Suh. Seemingly a computer enhanced airbrush story, there's considerable style without the technique overwhelming the talent.~WJ

DEITY

Hyperwerks: *6 issue miniseries 1997-1998**
Awesome: *5 issue miniseries ('Darkness and Light') 1998**
Image: *4 issue miniseries ('Revelations') 1999*

Deity charts the progress of Jamie, destined from birth in 2010 to become an interplanetary saviour. What works well is the contrast between the day to day preoccupations of teenage Jamie with the fallout from an intergalactic conflict occurring around her (in the first series without her knowledge), a theme common to manga. The characters are far better conceived than most manga, though, possibly the work of co-writer Robert Napton. Japanese influence is also visible in Karl Altstaetter's pencils, but combined with a modern Image style. It's a flashy, and likeable mix. Oh yes, and Altstaetter wins a hypocrisy gold medal for his editorial comment that content is worth any amount of gimmickry. This is from a man who's managed to issue 15 comics under 34 different covers without even counting foil stamped variants. Deity is next seen in *Saint Angel*.~WJ

Richard Moore's DÉJÀ VU

Radio Comix: *2 issue microseries 2000-2001, one-shot ('The Pond') 2001*

"Post-modern vampire slut, isn't it" says it all nearly. That and "inept". Similar to, but nowhere near as good as, Moore's *Far West*.~GK

DELERIUM

Metro: *2 issues 1987*

Mixed bag anthology title with Keith Giffen and Robert Loren Fleming's alternate Ambush Bug March Hare in 2 being the standout. There's also nice art from the undersung Chuck Roblin in 1, but otherwise ordinary is the watchword.~FP

DEMENTED: Scorpion Child

DMF Comics: *5 issue miniseries 2000-2001*

Under arrest for the murder of Red Thunder, McVain is helped to escape after his arraignment, triggering riots between heroes and villains. He's pursued by the remaining members of Red's team, the Justice Keepers, as well as Victor, who had been training to kill Red himself, and now feels that he needs to kill McVain. This is violent and brutal, but colourful, superheroics, with wildly inconsistent artwork.~NF

The DEMON

DC: *Series one 16 issues 1972-1974, 4 issue miniseries 1987, series two 59 issues (0-58), 2 Annuals 1990-1995*

At first this looked a poor replacement for Jack Kirby's cancelled *New Gods* saga, but Kirby came though, taking the legend of Camelot one stage further. The opening pages of Demon 1 resemble nothing so much as a space battle set in medieval Britain. Merlin summons Etrigan the Demon to do his bidding and protect Camelot from the clutches of the evil Morgaine Le Fey, but to no avail. After the fall of Camelot, Etrigan is given human form, and is left to wander the world for aeons. In modern-day Gotham, we're introduced to Jason Blood, Demonologist, who is unaware that he's the human guise of the demon. Not for long, though, as the ageing Morgaine Le Fey drops by looking for Merlin and the scene is set for supernatural encounters in true Kirby spirit. The supporting cast played a major role. There was Randu Singh, a turbanned telepathic UN delegate, the cigar-smoking advertising executive Harry Mathews, and the lovely Glenda Mark, Jason's romantic interest. The most endearing of the many unusual adversaries was Klarion the Witch Boy, a young fugitive sorcerer from another dimension, who was up to a lot of mischief in 7, and caused more havoc in 14-15, accompanied by his cat Teekl, who could turn into a beautiful human female. *The Demon* isn't Kirby's greatest achievement, with a few stories stretched beyond interest, but his imagery was flawless.

The character survived as a guest star in various titles, particularly *Swamp Thing*, which inspired the Matt Wagner miniseries. This has a very positive role for Glenda Mark trying to cure exorcise Jason Blood, and is steeped in rituals and mysticism rather than superheroics. We meet Etrigan's father and learn more about his relationship to Merlin. It's well executed, but Wagner tries to stress the eldritch mood of the series too strongly, which makes for laborious reading at times, particularly as Etrigan's speech patterns all rhyme.

The fate of Harry Mathews, only hinted at in the Wagner series, sets the mood for the next ongoing series, written by Alan Grant. Mathews is now a seat cushion. His face is there, but he lacks a soul. Tongue firmly in cheek best describes the mood, with the Demon now more a character of mirth and mischief. There's much demonic imagery from artist Val Semeiks, with a ghastly Hell, and some really outrageous scenes of black humour, well conceived by Grant. When not in Hell, the setting is Gotham, so a few Batman appearances were to be expected, but it's guest stars galore in 9-15. These involve Klarion, who's out to destroy Etrigan, the Phantom Stranger and Lobo, the mad hitman hired to drop a nuclear bomb. It's a frantic tale nicely produced. 19 offers the secret origin of Etrigan (and a free Lobo poster), while Matt Wagner returns to write and illustrate 22. Kirby villain The Howler returns in 23-24, also starring Batman and Robin with a gruesome ending initiated by the usually passive Glenda. Superman takes on Etrigan in 'Political Asylum' (26-29), in which the Demon runs for President. 31-37 has a janitor finding Merlin's long-lost Eternity Book, with unusual consequences and lots of fun and games with Wonder Woman and Lobo, who Grant can't keep away from this title.

Possessing a warped imagination equal to Grant's, Garth Ennis wrote from 40, along with ace illustrator John McCrea. Ennis' Etrigan was just as mischievous, but more brutal. 41 offers a one-off by Kevin Altieri about the Crusades, and 42-45 features Hitman (introduced in Annual 2) as Etrigan hires the assassin to see off fellow-demon Asteroth. Meanwhile Jason and Glenda are going through bad patch, even though she's carrying his child. 50 is an extra-long, amusing pirate tale, but there's nothing funny about issue 0, where Jason Blood's memory of the last thousand years is restored. It seems he's not the innocent he thought he was, which leads well into the story of Glenda giving birth and Etrigan kidnapping the child. Appalled by his past, Jason Blood hires Hitman to destroy Etrigan and be rid of his curse. Overall this run is a thoroughly entertaining series that does justice to the Kirby character. if you like your humour silly or black, you can't go wrong. Both annuals are also well done. The first had Klarion possessed by the evil Eclipso, while 2 introduces Hitman, the most successful character to emerge from the annuals introducing new heroes that year.~HY

Recommended: Series one 1, 2, 7, 14-16, series two 0, 9-15, 19, 23, 24, 40-44, Annual 2

DEMON DREAMS

Pacific: *2 issue microseries 1984*

Short stories by Arthur Suydam reprinted from various sources. The first issue contains a couple of good horror stories, 'Christmas Carol' and 'Bad Breath' while the second has more of a fantasy tone with 'The Toll Bridge', 'Mudwog', 'Heads', 'Mama's Place' and 'Food for the Children'. The latter are more self-indulgent but show a greater maturity while the horror strips take a more serious approach to storytelling. All are drawn in Suydam's fluid style, which is influenced by Frazetta but like a cross between Michael Ploog and Bernie Wrightson.~NF

DEMON DREAMS OF DOCTOR DREW

Horror House: *1 issue 1994*

Reprints of Jerry Grandenetti's 1950s strips. Lovely Eisner-style artwork, but the stories have a disregard for logic and consistency to rival the dumbest porn 'plot'.~FC

DEMON HUNTER

Atlas: *1 issue 1975*

Rich Buckler turned out one of the better Atlas comics with his story of Demon Hunter preventing the birth of a demon race on Earth. Buckler later re-named the character Devil Slayer and the story was concluded at Marvel in *Defenders* 58-60.~FP

DEMONGATE

Sirius: *10 issues 1996-1997*

A substandard fantasy adventure peopled with a cast of off-the-peg characters such as cute kids, a sexy chick and an old professor who stumble from crisis to crisis in the land beyond the Demongate. Complete rubbish.~WW

DEMONIC TOYS

Eternity: *4 issue miniseries 1992*

As this adapts a straight to video horror cheapie film, award nominations were few. The plot is basically *Toy Story* gone wrong, following all the horror clichés, but lacking any wit or real scary moments.~WJ

DEMONSLAYER

Image: *3 issue miniseries 1999*, 3 issue miniseries ('Into Hell') 2000**
Avatar: *One-shot 2000 ('Prophecy'), one-shot ('Rave') 2001, two issue microseries ('Vengeance') 2001*

Marat Mychaels is seemingly so concerned with drawing tits, arse and monsters, the first two badly, that the possibilities of his plot to move beyond completely elude him. This is a witless product of little imagination harkening back to the worst of the early Image material. Each issue comes with a variety of covers to bilk the suckers.~WJ

DEN

Fantagor: *10 issues 1988-1989*

Richard Corben's first two Den stories, 'Neverwhere' and 'Muvovum', appeared in *Heavy Metal*. Den is an Earthman who finds himself stranded on a barbaric fantasy world full of monsters and wizards. This self-published series presents part three of the Den saga, which runs through to 7. In it Den searches for his missing lover, Kath, meeting characters from the previous stories in a tale which also encompasses a parallel quest for magical stones of power owned by an evil wizard. There's an almost photographic feel to Corben's drawing, which is strangely at odds with the grotesques that populate his strips. The strong colouring and lettering styles play an important role, producing an unsettling overall effect on the artwork. His scripts, however, often fail to impress. Apart from Den itself there is usually at least one back-up strip, including interesting examples of Corben's early work, short horror strips by Bruce Jones (6-8) and two collaborations between Jan Strnad and Alex Niño (9, 10).~NF

Doug Potter's DENIZENS Of Deep City

Kitchen Sink: *8 issues 1988-1990*

A spotlight shone on the citizens of Deep City, spread over all levels of the community. The first issue, with its obsessions about the trivialities of life, paints rather a false picture of the series, although the full regular quotient of charm and despair is present. Later issues encase the capricious aspects more fully in a rounded story, but all suffer somewhat from being bitty, due in part to the ambitious scope of the series, and occasionally difficult to follow. Doug Potter's art is consistently appealing in an Eisneresque fashion, and when he successfully combines the whimsy with a strong narrative the effect is heart-warming. The best sampler is 5, which recaps the characters featured to date, focuses on the kid gang, and ends with a reclusive figure once able to be anywhere just by wishing it so.~WJ

The DESERT PEACH

Thoughts & Images: *3 issues 1988-1990*
MU Press: *15 issues (4-18) 1990-1992*
Aeon: *7 issues (19-25) 1993-1996*
A Fine Line: *5 issues + (26-30) 1997 to date*

Donna Barr's most famous creation owes his existence to a chance remark made by one of her former fellow-employees following the repainting of a file room. According to Barr, the all-female staff, unnerved by the nameless, effeminate colour, try to identify it: "It's not really pink, is it?" "No, sort of a peachy orange tan." "Desert tan." "Desert Peach?" The obvious pun on 'Desert Fox', Erwin Rommel, World War II's famous Field-Marshal, bloomed full-blown from her Barr's root-bound mind.

The Desert Fox's (fictitious) gay younger brother, Pfirsich Rommel, commands the 469th Support and Gravedigging Battalion, a ragged-arsed accumulation of dregs and misfits unsuitable for combat, in Africa during World War II. Initially a one-note joke character, and never without humour, the Peach and his associates – long-suffering batman Udo Schmidt, Pfirsich's dashing but shallow fiancé Rosen Kavalier, and the battalion under Pfirsich's command – swiftly evolved into multifaceted and often disturbing characters. Politically astute, and gleefully politically incorrect, Barr's work is characterised by a delight in shaking the reader's complacency and a splendid indifference to "what the neighbours will think". Most issues are good self-contained introductions to the series, though the first three, concentrating mainly on the comedy aspects, aren't a true taste of the title's sweet-and-sour sharpness.

Two paperbacks should be distinguished from the run reprinting the series; *Peach Slices* presents older but unpublished or small-circulation Peach stories, while *The Ersatz Peach* is not reprints from the series, but features interpretations of the character by creators other than Barr, some of which are very true to form, while others make you wonder if the people concerned had ever actually read an issue before contributing!~HS

Recommended: 4, 6-17, 19-22, 25-28

DESERT STORM JOURNAL

Apple: *8 issues 1991-1992*

Scott 'Journal' Neithammer, the journalist hero of Don Lomax's previous war comic *Vietnam Journal*, here emerges from retirement to cover the Gulf War, after learning that his estranged daughter is living in a threatened Israeli kibbutz. This is a curiously schizophrenic series, perhaps foreshadowed by the variant covers to the first issue, one featuring Norman Schwarzkopf, the other Saddam Hussein. The action divides between thoughtful human interludes, where mouthpiece characters 'explain' some of the background to the conflict, and page after page of military hardware fetishism. Tellingly, Vietnam vet Lomax is better at drawing tanks than he is at human beings, and although he's honest enough to admit that "EVERYTHING in the Middle East has to do with oil" his sympathies obviously belong with the American military – the 82nd Airborne are "the best of the best", while anti-war protesters "recycle tired slogans". Dismayingly, the comics themselves are full of ads for books and videos called things like 'Battles and Weapons of War!' and 'Vietnam Home Movies'.~AL

DESERT STORM: SEND HUSSAIN TO HELL

Innovation: *1 issue 1991*

Never let it be said that Innovation weren't behind our boys in the Gulf War. Oh no, they did their bit by grubbing around the depths of their warehouse to pull out some festering unsold comics that they then rebound under a new cover, adding a short new piece of jingoistic claptrap. Strangely, there's no record of anyone at Innovation receiving a medal of honor for their patriotic services. With war against Iraq looming once again, and this unlikely to have sold any better than the comics it rebound, perhaps the warehouse is due another visit.~FP

DESIREE

Millennium: *1 issue 1997*

One of the more distressing trends of 1990s comics has been the repeated association of sexual allure with violence through a succession of scantily clad female assassins. Desiree is another. Writer and artist Naser Subashi will probably improve his promising art, but here it's the interspersed pages by Rudy Nebres that save the comic from being totally without merit. As for the plot, you've read it a dozen times before and Subashi has no new wrinkles.~WJ

Plunge into the Depths of DESPAIR

Print Mint: *1 issue 1969*

As the cover legend has it, 'Plunge into the depths of despair' with R. Crumb at his inventive best. The lead strip, 'It's Really Too Bad', is a nihilistic masterpiece and about as far from the hippy idealism of Crumb's earlier material as you could get.~DAR

Recommended

DESPERADOES

Image/Homage: *5 issue miniseries 1997-1998**
Homage: *One-shot ('Epidemic!') 1999, 5 issue miniseries ('Quiet of the Grave') 2001**

The Desperadoes are Race Kennedy, Gideon Brood, Jerome Alexander Betts and Abby Degrazia. Kennedy is initially a Pinkerton detective on the trail of the other three, but they are themselves tracking a supernaturally-powered serial killer, Leander Peik who murdered Brood's wife and son amongst others. 1-4 comprise the story of Peik and explain how the four come to be on the wrong side of the law. 5 is a gruesome ghost story centring on the Civil War memories of a dying man. 'Epidemic' sees the group trapped in a quarantined town with a demon-summoning priest. In 'Quiet of the Grave', Brood seems about to leave the others, but is drawn back by a vengeance-seeking zombie. Jeff Mariotte's scripts gives the title an authentic western feel, building on the reinvention of the genre in comics by such as Joe R. Lansdale. This is closer to a traditional western series with just enough of a horror backdrop to make the plots different from what has gone before, and 'Quiet of the Grave' is as concerned with the dynamics of the group as with the gunfights. The artwork by John Cassaday stands out on the first miniseries, but he's reduced to layouts (for John Lucas) on the one-shot and replaced by John Severin for the second miniseries.~NF

Recommended: Image/Homage miniseries 1-5, 'Quiet of the Grave' 1-5

DESPERATE TIMES

Image: *4 issues 1998*

Aaaargh Comics/After Hours Press: *4 issues + 2000 to date*

Savage Dragon 42 began a selection of four panel gag strips by letterer Chris Eliopoulos. Given the chance to expand, he increases the panel size, but not the pacing, leading to a particularly stilted first issue lacking in substance beneath a deliberately misleading cover. One hopes Eliopoulos' excellent cartooning retained buyers since subsequent issues contain a high proportion of good gags, and are all worth investigating. Toad and Marty are your average slobby guys, Marty's sister Linda has a troubled romantic life, with occasional boyfriend Doofus perpetually in his theme park mascot costume, and there's the troublesome drunken sloth Kennedy. A collection includes the strips from Savage Dragon and 11 pages of new material.~FP

DESTINY: A Chronicle of Deaths Foretold

DC/Vertigo: *3 issue miniseries 1997*

A mysterious stranger arriving in one of the small pockets of humanity that has survived a global plague provides the framing sequence for three stories of strong women surmounting their circumstances in days gone by. There is a classical romanticism to Alisa Kwitney's scripts, but also an emotional detachment that fails to engage. Kent Williams' ugly paintings provide the framing sequences with Michael Zulli and Scott Hampton drawing the remainder of 1 and 2, and making Rebecca Guay look very out of her depth in such company for 3.~WJ

DESTROY!

Eclipse: One-shot *1986, one-shot 1987*

Scott McCloud produces a treasury-size one-shot featuring two musclebound superheroes beating the crap out of each other and inadvertently invents Extreme Studios comics six years early. *Destroy!* was created with tongue positively glued to cheek (there's a route map of the destruction in the back), and the artwork is great. It was reissued in 3-D a year later.~FP

Recommended

THE DESTROYER

Marvel: *10 issues 1989-1990, One-shot 1991*

The series adapts the best-selling stories of Remo Williams, the ironically named Destroyer who's a reluctant extra-legal problem solver for a top-secret government department. The real star character, though, is Williams' irascible Korean teacher Chiun, master of the ancient bodily ideal of sinanju. Mainly written by Will Murray, the stories capture the tongue-in-cheek flavour of the novels. The first series is a black and white magazine, 1-3 of which are collected, while the one-shot is a traditional comic.~WJ

DESTROYER DUCK

Pacific: *7 issues 1982-1984*

Begun as a benefit comic to raise funds for Steve Gerber's court case against Marvel concerning ownership of Howard the Duck, the polemic soon becomes tiresome, but Gerber mistakenly believed there was life beyond a one-shot for this G.I.Duck. Illustrated for five issues by Jack Kirby, also with a legitimate axe to grind concerning Marvel, there's a great irony in that the first issue's back-up feature became more successful than either fowl. Sergio Aragonés' Groo began his wandering here.~FP

THE DESTRUCTOR

Atlas: *4 issues 1975*

Writer Archie Goodwin is working from the Spider-Man template of teenager suddenly acquiring powers beyond his dreams, so it helps to have Steve Ditko aboard as pencil artist (inked by Wally Wood in 1 and 2, and inking himself in 3). The twist is that teenager Jay Hunter was a budding gangster before seeing the error of his ways. Not a masterpiece, but certainly one of the better Atlas titles.~WJ

DETECTIVE COMICS

DC: *775 issues +, 10 Annuals 1937 to date*

As the longest-running ongoing American comic and the title from which DC takes its name, early issues are almost impossible to find and command prices concomitant with their rarity. An anthology with a theme, it featured characters called Slam Bradley, Speed Saunders and Larry Steele, hard men with hard names, and it can be taken for granted that the early content is as crude as most of its contemporaries, although Sven Elven's Cosmo The Phantom of Disguise in 1-37 displays some style. The Crimson Avenger, a masked and strongly pulp-influenced hero, arrived in 20, and is now seen as DC's oldest superhero, despite not actually putting on a costume until 44. *Detective* would probably be long dead by now had it not been for the 1939 début of Batman in 27. Showcased amid the company of Slam Bradley and his ilk, it's small surprise he captured the reading public's imagination in a way only Superman had before. A grim and silent crimebuster, the visual impact of the character is there from the beginning, and it took just over a year for Batman to edge all other features off the cover.

By today's standards the initial Batman stories are crudely illustrated and written, by Bob Kane and Bill Finger. Jerry Robinson's gradual elevation from assistant to pencil artist over the first three years instituted greater fluidity in the art, and after the first year Batman is developing a personality, albeit a slim one. The emphasis of the early strips is detection, with most adversaries meeting a brutal demise. Robin's arrival in 38 initiates a lighter tone, but he's often merely a convenient infiltrator of groups playboy Bruce Wayne is too prominent to join. An early landmark is 43, when Batman combats his first 'dealer of habit forming drugs'. By this point plots are acquiring a veneer of sophistication, and colourful foes are escaping to plague Batman another day. The Penguin débuts in 58, and with Clayface (40), Hugo Strange (36) and most importantly the Joker (*Batman* 1) already introduced, exotic recurring villains become the norm. Despite his appearance the Joker was originally merely a gang boss and thief, his characterisation as a madman developing in the 1970s. His *Detective* début is 45, and he's a frequent foe throughout the 1940s, with his best appearance being 64, when he's actually electrocuted in gruesome fashion. He's not given an origin, though, until 168. Two-Face débuts in 66, and returns in 68 for an uncharacteristically touching story as he attempts to repair his relationship with his girlfriend.

Batman saw out World War II in good shape, with nary a nod to the Nazis. Pulp writer Don Cameron was the best of the regular writing staff, submitting scripts a cut above the norm, with decent gimmicks, and from 84 artist Dick Sprang began developing a distinctive look for Batman. The Batman stories to 119 are available in five hardbound editions of *Batman Archives*. Sprang's became the definitive style for almost two decades, but it coincided with the humanising of Batman. By the 1950s the once grim and feared dark knight had been reduced to an all-round genial guy who starred in largely light-hearted adventures and fought on giant typewriters. And that was the good stuff. There were also ill-advised science-fiction elements, encounters with robots and a plethora of inane Bat-associates and accessories. The 1950s were not classic years for Batman either here or in his own title, although he was well drawn by Sprang, Sheldon Moldoff and Lew Sayre among others (although only Kane was ever credited).

Oddly, given the success of Batman, Detective remained relatively free of other costumed types populating the back-up features, although they certainly proliferated elsewhere. Slam Bradley, created by a pre-Superman Siegel and Shuster, had astonishing longevity, only surrendering his slot in 152 to dull TV detective Roy Raymond (often nicely illustrated by Ruben Moreira). Air Wave had a long and ordinary run between 60 and 137 before being replaced by the only slightly more engaging Robotman, a human brain in a robot body. Both he and Native American detective Pow Wow Smith (patronising name but nice Infantino art) bowed out with 202. The best early back-up was Boy Commandos from 64, a multinational kid gang overseen by Captain Rip Carter. They foiled a remarkable amount of Nazi plots in occupied Europe, and lasted way beyond the end of World War II both in their own title and here, with 150 their final issue (although creators Simon and Kirby left with 83). The Martian Manhunter arrived in 225, accidentally transported from Mars with an ever-increasing array of abilities initially subsumed by his assumed identity as a police officer. His stories became ever more outlandish, and his demise was hastened by the addition of irritating alien companion Zook in 311, but he lasted until 326 before being bumped to *House of Mystery* from 143. At least he had a tenuous link to the theme of the comic, though. What Aquaman, however nicely drawn by Nick Cardy, was doing in 293-300 is anyone's guess. The back-ups decreased in number as the page-count shrank, with Batman remaining consistent at twelve pages from the mid-1940s. It wasn't until the 1970s that he evicted all other tenants, and even then they often sneaked back in.

327 is a landmark. The rot was unmistakably established, so Batman was revamped, marking the change by the addition of a yellow oval surrounding the bat emblem on his chest. The previous Batman was ascribed to an alternate Earth and destined to become a slate on which stories unsuitable for the hidebound, now 'proper' Batman were written. The new art team of Carmine Infantino and Sid Greene (later Joe Giella) signalled a clean step away from the past, and writer Gardner Fox introduced shock and suspense, beginning with the apparent death of Wayne's butler Alfred and a recurring new villain called the Outsider. The same team also produced the light and fun Elongated Man back-ups. The revamp was partially successful, although gimmickry still abounded, but the Batman TV show was in the works, drawing on the sillier aspects of the previous incarnation. When it hit, the camp humour transferred back to comics, bringing Batgirl with it in 359, emblematic of the era. It wasn't until the end of the 1960s that a gradual change introduced a far more realistic Batman. He once again became the brooding creature of the night, and mysteries supplanted the costumed villains, making their rare appearances special. Although sometimes straining too hard to be contemporary, and no masterpieces, these are the earliest *Detective* Batman stories to withstand a modicum of critical scrutiny as anything other than fun curiosities, but don't be suckered in by the generally excellent covers. The writing of Denny O'Neil and Frank Robbins has a greater sophistication than previous plots, and the artwork is well suited to the tone of the character, particularly the illustrative commercial style of Neal Adams (although his greatest triumphs were in Batman). In 400 Robbins and Adams introduce Man-Bat.

A feature of the 1970s *Detective* was numerous attempts to return to an extended format. 414-424 feature Batgirl back-ups alongside reprinted detective fillers, and 438-445, at a hundred pages, are uniformly excellent. Editor Archie Goodwin wrote a fine selection of Batman tales, drawn by artists new to the character, with a spirited Howard Chaykin job in 441 and Alex Toth's 'Death Flies the Haunted Skies' in 442 a standout. In 439 Steve Englehart, a writer who'd have a later impact on *Detective*, turned in his first Batman story. Goodwin filled the remainder of the hundred pages with an oddball, varied selection of reprint material, largely from the 1940s, and another strip of his, 'Manhunter', which débuted in 437. Illustrated by the then little known Walt Simonson, it's a fascinating blend of mystery, martial arts and action with ties back to the previous DC Manhunter, varied storytelling, and complete over six short episodes and one longer concluding team-up with Batman in 443. By far the best back-up feature to see print here, Manhunter has been reprinted both as a one-shot in 1984, a black and white book and in a 1990s edition with a new chapter. The next attempt at an oversize title, between 481 and 495, consisted of all new material, having absorbed the oversize *Batman Family*. The Batman stories apart, mediocrity was prevalent, but look for some nice Michael Golden art in 482.

Goodwin was to return with a fine story about obligation in annual 3, the best of the annuals by a long shot, but when he stopped editing *Detective* it slipped back, if not into mediocrity, then into mundanity, with only the gradual return of the costumed villains noteworthy. The best of the period is Denny O'Neil's sentimental addition to Batman's origin in 457. It took Steve Englehart and the art team of Marshall Rogers and Terry Austin to breathe life back into the comic, and they did so in spectacular fashion between 471 and 476*, producing arguably the best run of stories seen in the title. In six issues Englehart returned Hugo Strange and Deadshot as credible foes, delivered memorable encounters with the Penguin, and particularly the Joker, introduced crooked councilman Rupert Thorne, set up the only believable relationship Bruce Wayne's ever had with a woman, and brought continuity to the title. Rogers' art was stylish and thoughtful, and both creators drew on the mood of the 1940s Batman, reflecting it with a distinctly contemporary outlook. Reissued as the five-part Shadow of The Batman, it also included material drawn by Rogers after Englehart's departure, serviceable without ever thrilling.

Englehart and Rogers had upped the quality considerably, and since then there's never been a prolonged dip back into mediocrity, although crossover stories have, at times, tried the patience. Artists like Don Newton, Gene Colan and Norm Breyfogle maintained Batman as the mysterious figure of the night, while plots have been varied. For a sample of Newton see 497's Spirit homage, and Colan's rendition is consistently good. The 1980s also introduced the concept of the anniversary issue, with any excuse serving to increase the page-count and celebrate. Initially this resulted in fine material, with the oversize 500 a real nostalgia-seeped bonanza. Batman has an opportunity to prevent his parents' murder on an alternative Earth, and there's also an intriguing story of Batman at death's door, a Hawkman tale drawn by Joe Kubert and a teaming of the assorted non-costumed detectives to have appeared in *Detective* over the years. 526's celebration of Batman's 500th appearance in *Detective* takes a different tack, as Batman and allies, in a single night, have to face all his major foes and a threatening new introduction in Killer Croc. It also has a new Robin in costume for the first time, an appointment made permanent in 535. 572's fiftieth anniversary of the title is disappointing apart from the Alan Davis art, but 600 is outstanding, the best of the anniversary issues. Sam Hamm's screenwriting experience and Denys Cowan's cinematic layouts contribute to 'Blind Justice' (598-600*) being an excellent page-turner. Focusing on Bruce Wayne more than Batman, it involves morally repugnant experiments and a seemingly unbreakable set-up for which Wayne will take the fall. At 144 pages "Blind Justice" is never padded or slow, and contains some insightful, almost throwaway observations about Batman and his milieu. 627's reworking of Batman's first appearance falls way short in comparison; an interesting idea, albeit used previously in 387. 700 is very ordinary.

Early to mid-1980s *Detective* constantly crossed over with *Batman*, creating in effect a two-weekly Batman comic. A tight continuity was maintained, and there are no really bad stories, but none that stand out either. The creative team of Mike Barr, Alan Davis and Paul Neary transfer from *Batman and the Outsiders* in 569. Davis and Neary quit a chapter into 'Batman: Year Two' (575-578*), leaving Todd McFarlane to finish the story. It's a pointless exercise and very ordinary in comparison with 'Year One' (*Batman* 404-407). With 583 John Wagner and Alan Grant join in place pencil artist Norm Breyfogle for a very good run. Starting strongly with the début of gang boss The Ventriloquist and his psychotic dummy Scarface, they rely on bizarre and interesting new adversaries, and infuse a macabre humour to lighten the increasingly grim tone of the title without returning it to the stupidity of the 1950s. Grant eventually becomes the sole writer until 621. His Anarky two-parter in 608-609 is good, and the Penguin story in 610 and 611 the highspot of his solo run.

The writing of Peter Milligan, often excellent elsewhere, disappoints in 629-643, and succeeding writer Chuck Dixon takes until chapters of 'Knightfall' in 658-666* to settle in. As a title 'Knightfall' stretches a sobriquet too far, but having Batman beaten and replaced in a story crossing between all the Bat titles generated controversy, acres of print and boosted sales enormously, making the DC accountants very happy indeed. Sadly, it prompted only a minor upswing in quality. Many chapters were dull and padded to extend the story beyond its natural lifespan, but one aspect in its favour was the sense of uncertainty. For the first time ever Batman wasn't guaranteed an eventual victory. 'Knightquest', with the former Azrael in Batman's costume, provided for better comics, with 670's eerie Mr Freeze story being the best, and 'Knightsend' (676-677*), in which Batman goes over the top and is dealt with, is an improvement, and all the better for its brevity.

Bruce Wayne reclaims the Batman costume in 682, and Dixon writes until 730, largely with consistently good Graham Nolan art until 721. Improved production results in a better-looking package, but it's a deceptive step forward. With frequent crossovers, a leisurely pace, and larger illustrations meaning fewer panels, a story once told in twelve pages now takes two issues. Freed from the constraints of crossovers from 704, Dixon writes better Batman stories, suspenseful and imaginative, albeit ones still generally over-extended by sacrificing story for art. For a good sample of the Dixon/Nolan style try 704's glimpse at an inept recidivist stick-up man, or 714-715's mystery. Oddly, though, his best story is 716 drawn by Jim Aparo, in which Dixon strings the readers along to a surprise ending that will remain a surprise prior awareness notwithstanding. Another Dixon tale of note is his re-casting of Batman and associates as 17th century pirates in the seventh annual, although it's notable more for the excellent Alcatena art than an ordinary story.

720 starts 'No Man's Land*', another long crossover with much of Gotham City reduced to rubble. Refused federal rebuilding aid, Gotham becomes a sealed-off dog eat dog zone where villains thrive. The story incorporates Nightwing, Robin and the Huntress, leaving out Batman altogether in 727-729, and as a whole is an improvement on previous crossovers, with 730 a standout issue. In a lawless city lacking technology Batman takes on The Ventriloquist and Scarface to re-establish his authority in a good story from Bob Gale and Alex Maleev. Gale returns with Phil Winslade in 733, an even better story. Whereas most issues to 730 are individual stories within a larger context, 731-740 are chapters continued from other Batman titles, establishing Greg Rucka as the regular writer from 739. From a surprising plot twist in a kangaroo courtroom sequence with Two-Face in his first issue, Rucka establishes himself as a type of writer Batman titles hadn't seen in a decade, prioritising plot and character over action. His arrival shortly precedes that of Bob Schreck as editor, providing an immediate change of emphasis for *Detective*, signified by Dave Johnson's attention-grabbing covers often using black, white and just a single colour, and an equally effective mood setting, limited palette for the interiors.

Shawn Martinbrough's pencilling from 742 (to 764), beginning a gang war over immortality, is initially shaky in places, but improves with veteran inker Steve Mitchell. Certainly moody, it never quite loses a slightly wooden quality. There's no such problem with Steve Lieber from 767, although both are occasionally substituted by other artists. Sample the political manoeuvring and action required to remove conservationist Poison Ivy from a park in 751-752. A commitment to innovative stories explains 753, presenting a comic produced in therapy by Two-Face. It's the most novel issue in a sixty year plus run, although 754's more traditional chapter of a crossover story in which Police Commissioner Gordon is shot is much better. Throughout, Rucka offers new, yet consistent, slants on old villains from whom nothing new is expected. His Two-Face in 755 is excellent, but the process trickles down to the likes of third stringer The Mad Hatter (759-760). Rucka's ongoing subplot involves Sasha Bordeaux, a bodyguard appointed for Bruce Wayne who becomes too close and makes an inevitable discovery. She's the narrative voice for many issues, contrasting Wayne and Batman, while the Gotham police detectives also play a large part. These are good stories, but readers, with justification, bemoaned the minimal presence of Batman, although there's more of him once the 'Bruce Wayne: Murderer' story and its follow-ups begin in 766. It's a plot selectively ignored in *Detective*, although it does produce the excellent 772, with Bordeaux tempted in prison. By this time the back-up strip 'Josie Mac' is every bit as good. By Judd Winick and Cliff Chiang in 763-772, it spotlights a police detective with an ability to trace inanimate objects attempting to locate the missing grandson of a mob boss. It's an excellently characterised detective story, and almost worth the price of the comic alone.

The back-ups had returned in 746 with The Jacobian, a detective with a mysterious past, a way with hunches and an inexplicable ability to cope with supposedly insurmountable odds. It's infused with the feel of the 1970s Manhunter, and by the conclusion in 757 it's been a decent effort, if a little confusing in places. Better is the unexpected return of Slam Bradley in 759-762 looking for Catwoman, drawn in gritty 1940s style by Darwin Cooke. 'The Hunt' (773-775) introduces a new vigilante, and mention must be made of Michel Gagne's astonishing silent 'Spore' starting in 776. Rucka departs with 775, having written a landmark run, and *Detective* has recently been better than at any point since the Englehart and Rogers days. 'Evolution' collects Rucka's stories to 750.~FP

Recommended: 437-443, 471-476, 500, 584, 591-593, 598-600, 608-611, 613, 716, 730, 733, 751, 752, 754, 755, 761, 762, 766, 772-775, Annual 3

The DETECTIVE: Chronicles of Max Faccioni

Caliber: *1 issue 1998*
Sunset Strips: *3 issues 1999-2000*

A journalist, his curiosity aroused at a story about Max Faccioni told by a morgue attendant, is surprised to find himself bullied into searching for the missing detective. This is the framing sequence for two tales of the detective involving boxing and kidnapping, voodoo and a hurricane. The same stories are reprinted in the first Sunset Strips issue, intended as a 12 issue limited series. The series continues with stories told in flashback, 3 being the first part of an origin for Faccioni. Both art and story are by Goff who's clearly been heavily influenced by Toth, Kubert and Munoz as well as by Chandler and Hammett. Something of a curiosity at first appearance, but had been developing into something more than faithful homage before coming to a second halt.~NF

The DETECTIVES

Alpha: *One-shot 1993*

Anthology commemorating seventy years of the private eye. Best stories feature The Maze Agency and Michael Mauser, both better in their own titles.~WJ

DETECTIVES INC.

Eclipse: *Graphic Novel 1980, 2 issue microseries 1985, 3 issue miniseries 1987*

Detectives Inc was among the earliest graphic novels published for the American market, and a favourite with older comic readers throughout the late 1970s. Don McGregor's writing had always tackled adult subjects, and artist Marshall Rogers was fresh from the most acclaimed run of Batman stories for several years. Titled 'A Remembrance Of Threatening Green', the title gives a clue to writer Don McGregor's prose style, which gets whole huge typeset panels to itself among Marshall Rogers' once-fashionable heavily zipatoned drawings with their bizarrely extruded human figures. McGregor celebrated the idea of being able to produce a big comic for adults by including just about everything that he wasn't previously allowed to use that would fit into the contemporary private eye genre he'd chosen. So you see explicit sex (hetero and lesbian only – the male gayness is all in the relationship between the two detectives and well repressed, of course), children as killers and as victims of terrible violence, and references to sado-masochistic prostitution. The real emotional content is at the

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* Available in a collected edition

Mary Tyler Moore TV level so it's nice to see comics finally aspiring to something so elevated, if you can stand reading "memories and fantasies" likened to "Siamese twins" or 42nd St to a "neon dinosaur". The 1985 microseries reprints the graphic novel. The follow-up series from 1987 is the one to try. McGregor restrains himself a bit and gets on with a good little mystery story, brilliantly illustrated by Gene Colan in pencil printed in sepia.~GK

DETONATOR
Chaos!: *2 issue microseries 1994-1995*

The destruction of Project Pandora unleashes a wave of genetic mutation. One of the resulting augmented beings is Detonator, who can explode himself and reform. He's looking to avenge the murder of his wife and child by Krill, who is manipulating those with powers and accumulating their powers for his own ends. This poor early work from Brian Pulido and Steven Hughes employs superheroes rather than their more characteristic, supernatural creatures, but the same violent, world-destroying themes are all present and correct.~NF

DETOUR
Alternative Press: *One-shot 1997*

Set in a near future when oxygen is bought like electricity, and masks are necessary when venturing outside, this is a story about Chris, living on an inheritance, but starting to think about finding a job. In the meantime, he observes the habits of his neighbours and housemates, one of whom has been developing a theory that the almost daily earthquakes have a pattern that can be understood through the bits and bobs he finds inside dead birds. Ed Brubaker details Chris' obsessive compulsions without judgement, in an unpolished, but effective, cartoony style. This was the first of an intended three-part series, and the whole may have been greater than this interesting, but remote, episode.~NF

DEVASTATOR
Image: *2 issues 1998*

Adapted by James Hudnall from his own unproduced screenplay, this is a dismally unimaginative and confused tale of a cop forced out of the force and into martial arts teaching. He's then implanted by crime bosses with a capsule that will make him kill the mayor of Los Angeles. The stiff unconvincing art by Greg Horn matches the dull plot, and the concluding third part never came out.~GK

Robin Bougie's DEVIANT
Venus: *1 issue 1999*

Think *The Slim Book Of Strange Sex* and you're there. Robin Bougie trawls medical journals, internet postings and foreign newspapers for his stories, and illustrates them in an appealing cartoon style. You'll gasp, you'll boak and you'll howl with laughter.~WJ

DEVIANT SLICE
Print Mint: *2 issues 1972-1973*

For once a comic that absolutely lives up to its title, as this Greg Irons/Tom Veitch masterpiece is about as deviant as they come. There's gore aplenty to be sure, but it's conceived by a keen sense of moral outrage at the establishment's shortcomings. It remains one of the most chillingly perceptive documents of the death of the *Age of Aquarius*.~DAR

Recommended: 1, 2

DEVIL CHEF
Dark Horse: *One-shot 1994*

In small doses, amid the eclectica of Deadline USA (in strips reprinted here), Devil Chef raised a smile or two. It's a caricature of the temperamental and tyrannical French chef, prone to towering rages, but twenty-eight unrelenting pages spread the paté far too thin. If you really can't get enough of our satanic gastronome, he's back in *Dark Horse Presents* 107-109.~WJ

DEVIL DINOSAUR
Marvel: *9 issues 1978, one-shot 1997*

One of many titles written and drawn by Jack Kirby – in a hurry, one suspects – where the grandiose concept and promise of an astounding universe was never fulfilled by the rather clichéd characters that peopled it. The misleading title doesn't help. Devil Dinosaur is, in fact, a singularly intelligent member of his species, telepathically controlled by a rather advanced cave youth called Moon Boy. The Devil doesn't come into it and Devil Dinosaur does nothing demonic except batter a few villains with his tail. Moon Boy communicates in odd bursts of purple prose, which gives the title an undeniably batty charm lacked by many later Kirby offerings. Certainly the maddest of many rather peculiar Jack Kirby creations. The 1997 attempt to revive the series is pretty mystifying also... three stories that say absolutely nothing, although Arnold Pander's frenetic art on the third one has a certain, rough charm.~FJ

DEVILINA
Atlas: *2 issues 1975*

Alias the sister of Satan, our behootered nominal heroine struggled to overcome her evil heritage while wearing a variety of skimpy fetishistic outfits. A patent Vampirella rip-off, she was backed up in this black and white magazine-sized comic by horror stories which, the ads boasted, "focused on fabulous females!", i.e. had a bit of badly drawn gratuitous nudity. Pathetic.~HS

DEVILMAN
Verotik: *3 issues 1995*

Akira Fudou has become merged with the demon Amon in order to protect mankind from an invasion of demons. Together with his friend Ryo he travels through time thwarting demons and meeting Hitler and Joan of Arc while he's at it. Go Nagai's gory adventure tries to be issue conscious – there's a lot of thought expressed in each story – but neither medium nor message attain a higher purpose.~NF

DEVIL'S REIGN
Image/Top Cow: *4 One-shots 1997*
Marvel: *4 One-shots 1997*

'La Ronde' style teaming of Marvel and Image's Top Cow line of characters. Silver Surfer and Weapon Zero bookend the continuity, which elsewhere has the second named character in the title continuing to the next chapter and moving up the billing. Thus Cyblade, Ghost Rider, Ballistic, Wolverine, Witchblade and Elektra also participate. Mephisto discovers a new world to conquer and has all the best lines, particularly at the expense of the Silver Surfer. Cyberforce's Heatwave plays noble hero while the heroes the issues are named for briefly team-up to be thrashed then leave before the finale. With eight different writers and seven artists (not counting the ten inkers on the final issue), the best bits are the one-liners from Wolverine, Ballistic and Mephisto (written to the tune of *Sympathy for the Devil*).~NF

DEVLIN WAUGH
Fleetway/Quality: *One-shot 1992*

The stylish and refined bodybuilder Devlin Waugh also happens to be the papal envoy and a freelance exorcist. When an underwater prison becomes infested with vampires, Devlin is the only man able to break the survivors out. He's just a little too glib and idealised to work properly in what is otherwise a gory thriller, but there's some excellent art from the underrated Sean Phillips. This was also available in the UK as a graphic novel.~WJ

DEXTER'S LABORATORY
DC: *34 issues 1999 to 2003*

Based on the Cartoon Network series, created by Genndy Tartatovsky, who writes and provides the artwork in 1-2. Dexter is a child genius, who has a secret laboratory under his parents' house. They don't know about the laboratory

and are generally blind to a large number of very strange events, but Dexter's sister Dee Dee does, and can't be kept out. She's Dexter's opposite and nemesis, a free spirit who's always pressing the buttons of Dexter and his inventions. The only person Dexter hates more is his rival, Mandark, who has his own laboratory, but suffers from an unreciprocated love for Dee Dee. In most adventures, Dexter naturally takes these rivalries to extremes, usually to his cost. Sample plots include the comic producing Kirbytron 2000 (1), Dexter's mind being transferred to his hamster (3), Mandark impersonating Dexter's mother to infiltrate the laboratory (5), a bubblegum blowing contest with Dee Dee and her friends (7), a teacher's pet competition (14), and a beardless Action Hank (25). Additionally, several strips are similar to cartoon episodes (including 2 and 11). There are normally two stories per issue, with a large number of different writers and artists, though most of the latter maintain a style as close as possible to that of the cartoon (largely thanks to the inks of Jeff Albrecht). John Rozum is the most regular writer, though Bobbi J. G. Weiss (from 15) and Robbie Busch (from 24) also appeared regularly, while Scott Roberts has written for half of the issues from 27. After 2, Tartakovsky turns up for several other issues (5, 10, 25), making these the best of the series, but Bill Wray (6, 12, 15, 25, 27) and Stephen DeStefano (11, 30) manage to leave something of their own distinctive style, while John Delaney is the best of the regular pencilers (over half of the issues).~NF
Recommended: 1-4, 8, 10, 25

Sergio Aragonés' DIA DE LOS MUERTOS

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1998*

This is a slight shaggy dog story about corpses taking revenge on tourists at the Mexican Day of the Dead festival, in Aragones' customary big-nosed and hyperactively detailed style. It's disappointingly unfunny.~GK

DIABLO

Dark Horse: *One-shot 2001*

Based on the computer games, backgrounds are provided for some of the characters. It's all standard fantasy stuff, with the only notable element the versatility of artist Francisco Ruiz Valasco as he adopts a different style for each of the three segments.~WJ

DICK DANGER

Olsen Comics: *2 issues 1998*

A detective comic for children launched at a time when there was little chance of it reaching the intended audience. The cartooning skills of W.W. Olsen are excellent, but there's not enough depth beyond that to engage an adult audience as the plot is stretched, and the gag ratio slight. Far better are the one page back-ups 'Crime-Quiz' mysteries.~FP

DICK TRACY Monthly

Blackthorne: *25 issues 1986-1988*

Published as a companion title to Blackthorne's 'Reuben Award Series' of *Dick Tracy* reprints, Blackthorne's monthly was edited by Shel Dorf. Though Dorf's love of the strip is clear, the decision to cut and paste the newspaper strip to fit a comic page was seen as heresy by purists. In fact, it is the change in panel size that does the most disservice to the strip. 14, containing the marriage of Tracy to Tess Trueheart, has the oddest printing, with two panels to a page instead of the usual nine of the daily pages. Chester Gould's *Dick Tracy* is a classic whose violence and conservatism has perhaps put it out of favour with today's comics readership. The series begins with reprints from 1940 but switches to 1949 with number 10. Lacking any information about the strip, the comic is nevertheless a noble attempt to bring Dick Tracy to a new audience.~NF

The Original DICK TRACY

Gladstone: *5 issues 1990-1991*

Even more heretically than Blackthorne, Gladstone's *Dick Tracy* comic (again, a comic to accompany a series of graphic novels) actually edited strips to avoid repetition, cut and pasted everything to fit a nine-panel page and coloured the originals. Published in no particular order (but all from the mid-1940s) each issue did contain a complete storyline, including the wedding of B.O. Plenty and Gravel Gertie in 5. Whatever purists might say, Gladstone's high production values made this an excellent showcase for Gould's artwork. Tracy himself is rather characterless but Gould's story-telling abilities make *Dick Tracy* an important part of newspaper strip history.~NF

DICK TRACY

Disney: *3 issues 1990**

John Moore and Kyle Baker turn in a witty and vividly coloured version of Dick Tracy, not at all harmed by having to include Warren Beatty's likeness as Tracy throughout. The first two issues act as a prequel to the 1990 movie, introducing Madonna's character Breathless Mahoney, and featuring several of Chester Gould's classic villains, including Flat Top and Prune-Face. Gripping, amusing and well plotted, they're the best *Dick Tracy* seen since Gould himself. Of course, Kyle Baker's sketchy and fluid art couldn't be further from Gould, but works nonetheless in conveying Dick Tracy's world. There's some doubt as to whether the third issue, containing the movie adaptation, was actually published. It is to be found, though, in the collection. Writer Len Wein was a little restricted by the film's less than sparkling script, but works wonders with it, and Baker is also present for consistency's sake.~WJ

DICK WAD of the Mega-Vice Squad

Slave Labor: *One-shot 1993*

Collection of Evan Dorkin strips from *One-Fisted Tales* and *Penthouse* along with new material. Satirising 1950s science fiction movies via the addition of sexual themes, this provides quite a few laughs and resurrects some very old jokes. Some cartoonists would kill to be this good, and others should, but it's just a minor part of Dorkin's work.~WJ

DICKS

Caliber: *4 issue miniseries 1997-1998**
Avatar: *4 issue miniseries (Bigger Dicks) 2001-2002, 4 issue miniseries (Dicks 2) 2002-2003*

What if the Freak Brothers had always lived in Belfast and were more scatological, prurient, obscene, violent and profane? The answer here, courtesy of Garth Ennis and John McCrea, is that they would be funnier. Our heroes, layabouts and would-be private eyes, take on gangsters, yokels, ghosts, cops and dumb soldiers. Each issue is a substantial read, and the 'Li'l Dicks' story in 2 is a highlight. There are a couple of scenes to make anyone wince, and if the whole thing didn't offend your mother you'd know you weren't old enough to read it yourself. The first Avatar series is largely reprint with some additional material, while the second is more of the same, if not even a little bit more scabrous, but just as funny. The loveable losers have apparent success in a rock band, tour the USA, meet the idiot President, and inadvertently take off in a Space Shuttle. One edition of the variant editions of 1 comes with a free green condom.~GK
Recommended: 1-4, Dicks 2 1-4

DIE CUT

Marvel UK: *4 issue miniseries 1993-1994*

Blade-handed anti-hero hacks his way through scratchily illustrated fights with the X-Men's Beast. Dismissable.~HS

DIESEL

Antarctic: *1 issue 1997*

Intriguing mangaesque debut concerning characters who're able to manifest potent other beings to battle on their behalf. Artistic deficiencies in a promising style would have evaporated with time, so it's all the more unfortunate that this issue was never followed up.~WJ

DIFFERENT BEAT COMICS

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1994*

Effectively a Fantagraphics sampler, it's a pity that *Different Beat* shows so few of their star creators to advantage. The blurb calls them rarities, but you're better off thinking of it as odds and sods by Joe Sacco, Los Bros Hernandez, Robert Crumb, Peter Bagge, Roberta Gregory and the other usual suspects behind a striking Dan Clowes cover. The best piece is the colour back cover by Chris Ware, an unsettling Jimmy Corrigan strip about going to a burger bar.~FJ

DIGIMON Digital Monsters

Dark Horse: *12 issues 2000*

To quote the various assembled Digimons in 1, "We're Digimons! Digital monsters, we're kinda cute and very loyal, with beautiful hair or maybe no hair at all". And that probably tells you all you need to know if you're over the age of ten. For younger readers, however, this is a well-crafted adaptation of the Japanese cartoon show, with Tai, Sora and pals and vast numbers of monsters, all present and correct. Peculiarly, the comics' credits are detailed enough to list designers and assistant editors but not the writer(s), which suggests these are adaptations of cartoon episodes. The publishing schedule was also bizarre, with four issues coming out in May 2000, then nothing for a couple of months followed by two issues a month for the rest of the run. Artwise, a variety of hands all acquit themselves well enough, with Nige Kitching probably the pick of the bunch. Fans of the insane should search out 6 with its Cactus creature vs. Teddy Bear slug fest!~DAR

DIGITEK

Marvel UK: *4 issue miniseries 1992-1993*

One of the more interesting concepts thrown up during Marvel UK's expansion period, Digitek is a warrior combination of deceased computer technician and advanced computer intelligence, able to move through electric conduits. The story never moves beyond battles with less benign counterparts, but there was potential here.~FP

DIGNIFYING SCIENCE

General Tektronics Labs: *One-shot 1999*

These are stories about female scientists, drawn by female artists, but written by Jim Ottaviani. Marie Severin (on Marie Curie), Carla Speed McNeil (Hedy Lemarr) Stephanie Gladden (one of the narrative voices on Rosalind Franklin) and Lea Hernandez (Barbara McClintock) are the most interestingly drawn, though the scripts are generally too worthy and uninvolving; the stories of Curie and Lemarr being the most personal. The Anne Timmons-drawn chapter on Birutė Galdikas was also issued as a one-shot sampler titled *Wild Person in the Woods*.~NF

DIK SKYCAP & Dr Ian DeFrost

Rip-Off Press: *2 issues 1991*

Black and white space humour title starring Dik Skycap as a dashing pilot and postal worker. He roams the galaxy, delivering stuff and risking his life, with subnormal sidekick Dr DeFrost. Written and drawn by Phil Groves, it's not laugh-out-loud funny, but is entertaining enough.~DB

DIM-WITTED DARRYL

Slave Labor: *5 issues 1998-1999*

Michael Bresnahan pulled off quite the achievement in producing a poke fun at the retard comic that altogether avoids malicious content, yet still managed to be funny. His cartooning style and approach comes straight from the John Kricfalusi school of animation, so nothing wrong there, and all in all this is a very confident debut. Repetition dulls the humour, though.~WJ

Recommended: 1

DINO ISLAND

Mirage: *2 issue microseries 1993*

Stunningly simple and gorgeous line art from Jim Lawson, with every illustration a postcard, sadly accompanies a stunningly simple and not so gorgeous story from Jim Lawson. Okay, there are dinosaurs, but they're not what we're used to, and even Amelia Earhart and a solution to the Bermuda Triangle mystery don't liven things up.~WJ

DINO RIDERS

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 1989*

Everyone starts their career somewhere. Later fan-favourite artist Kelley Jones probably neglects to list this early work on his CV. A dull toy tie-in with a lame plot about opposing warring forces harnessing the power of dinosaurs after arriving in prehistoric Earth.~WJ

DINOSAUR REX

Upshot Graphics: *3 issue miniseries 1987*

Upshot was an imprint of Fantagraphics, primarily publishing the work of Jan Strnad. Dinosaur Rex is a pulp adventure story written in a style that owes a great deal to P.G. Wodehouse. It's more homage than pastiche; the characters are well-drawn and the script adapts well to the search for a dinosaur graveyard. Henry Mayo's artwork is smooth (in a similar way to Sam Kieth's), but though he's obviously inspired by such greats as Roy Krenkel and Burne Hogarth, he manages a distinctive style of his own. A back-up strip by Bill Messner-Loebs and Dennis Fujitake is light-hearted science fiction that deals with the question of racism without ramming its politics down the readers' throats.~NF

DINOSAURS

Hollywood Comics: *2 issues 1993*

The *Dinosaurs* TV series was a lot of fun featuring puppets and models as dinosaur family unit. The comic, on the other hand, while well drawn, fails to capture the spirit of the TV show.~FP

DINOSAURS, A Celebration

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1992*

Half of each issue is illustrated factual text, which is suitable for intelligent children or adult general readers. This is broken up by short strips about imagined everyday episodes in the lives of individual dinosaurs of the various orders. These are painted by star UK artists such as John McCrea and Liam Sharp. There's no dialogue, of course, and the stories inevitably tend to focus on the threat of gory death, but it's all intelligently and enjoyably done.~GK

Recommended: 1-4

DINOSAURS ATTACK

Eclipse: *1 issue 1991*

The fondly remembered *Mars Attacks* bubblegum card series spawned a successful imitator years later in *Dinosaurs Attack*. It's much the same plot told over a series of cards, but substitutes saurians for Martians committing atrocities the globe over. The comic tells the same story with additional scenes, or at least begins to do so, as the proposed second and third issues never materialised. Despite this Earl Norem's painted art is worth seeing, but in contrast the pages pencilled by Herb Trimpe and inked by George Freeman come off distinctly second best.~FP

DINOSAURS FOR HIRE

Eternity: *9 issues, one-shot ('3-D Special) 1988-1989*

Malibu: *12 issues 1993-1994*

Three permanently wise-cracking dinosaurs, toting heavy artillery, and accompanied by a glamourous scientist helper, go as undercover as they can for, among others, the US government. Tom Mason successfully pokes fun at TV, movies, licensing deals, other comics companies and their characters and staff, New York, France, and various 1990s fads in this pleasantly light hearted series, which doesn't leave him much room to do anything else you might expect from a story. The violence is fun and the thoughtless sexism less so, but both are adequately pictured throughout. The last half-dozen issues, pencilled by Leonard Kirk, are the best. The one-shot is a handy 3-D reprint of the first issue.~GK

The DIRTY DUCK Book

Company and Sons: *1 issue 1971*

Not a book at all, the title notwithstanding, but a comic collecting Bobby London's 'Dirty Duck' strips. London was one of the 'Air Pirates', a group of counterculture cartoonists who based their art styles on early comics pioneers. London's influence was very clearly George Herriman and his *Krazy Kat* feature. The first half of the comic contains typical underground humour, applied to animals, but by the second half London had grown confident enough to almost totally abandon dialogue, and his similarity to Herriman is astonishing.~DAR

Recommended

DIRTY LAUNDRY

Cartoonists Co-Op: *1 issue 1974*
Last Gasp: *1 issue (2) 1977*

The first couple of an underground comics team to reveal all about their life together. Individually both Robert Crumb and Aline Kominsky had produced some of the finest comics of their time, so the combination of the two should have been terrific. Sadly, it just doesn't work. For one thing the combination of their styles was simply too jarring. On her own Kominsky's art works because of the power of her stories, but when put next to Crumb's draughtsmanship it simply comes across as crude. Thematically, too, their stories are either misguided (the science-fiction segment in 1, for instance), repetitive (far too many stories of the pair 'doing it') or simply too domestic.~DAR

DIRTY PAIR

Eclipse: *4 issue miniseries 1988-1989, 4 issue miniseries ('Dangerous Acquaintance') 1989-1990, 5 issue miniseries ('A Plague of Angels') 1990-1991, 4 issue miniseries ('Sim Hell') 1993*
Viz: *5 issue miniseries 1994-1995*
Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries ('Fatal But Not Serious') 1995, one-shot ('Start the Violence') 1999, 4 issue miniseries ('Run from the Future') 2000, 4 issue miniseries ('Sim Hell: Remastered') 2001*

Yuri and Kei think of themselves as The Lovely Angels. Trouble-shooters for the WWWA (Worlds-Wide Welfare Association), they visit whichever of the three-thousand-plus inhabited planets in the known universe has a problem and sort it out. At least, that's what they're supposed to do. A comedy action comic featuring a sexy and violent duo more prone to lose their tempers and solve a poser with an Uzi than discussion, *Dirty Pair* is unusual in being developed in America by Adam Warren and Toren Smith at Studio Proteus, then sold back to Japan, where it was made into a successful anime. The Viz series is based on the animation cells for the anime, and is smoothly drawn in full colour, as opposed to the slightly scratchy, semi-Westernised art of the originals. As the series develops there's more focus on the banter between characters, and the predictable horrified reaction of the people they're sent to 'help' than the violence. Note that 'Sim Hell Remastered' is a full colour version of the original series, issued with extra sketch pages all annotated by Adam Warren, so if you're into his art it's worth buying again. 'Start the Violence' collects and colours strips from *Dark Horse Presents* 132-134. And each issue of 'Run from the Future' has variant covers, to keep us on our toes.~FJ

DIRTY PLOTTE

Drawn & Quarterly: *12 issues 1990-1998*

Julie Doucet was one of the best, and probably laziest, cartoonists to come out of the Canadian scene of the early 1990s. Confrontational and abrupt, her strips about such unacceptable topics as cutting yourself with razor blades shimmer with real anger and frustration. There's something iconic about the way she draws, with rough, broad lines, filling in the page with pattern around her large-headed, somehow helpless characters. Although the quantity of her output is minimal, with various friends helping out on the art in later issues, *Dirty Plotte* is well worth seeking out, if only for vicarious thrills. The wittily titled 'Leve ta jambe' also includes hard-to-find work from Doucet's earlier mini-comics and was followed by *My New York Diary*.~FJ

DIRTY STORIES

Fantagraphics/Eros: *3 volumes 1997-2002*

This anthology is edited by Eric Reynolds, who claims "the underground is far more capable of dealing with sex in engaging fashion, in a way that offers rewards other than a stain in the pants". The first volume at least does offer some sexy, funny and thought-provoking fare from the likes of Renée French, Dame Darcy, Roberta Gregory, Peter Bagge, Steven Weissman, Bob Fingerman, Carol Swain, Paul Pope and Ivan Brunetti, whose own version of a Tijuana Bible contrasts with some examples of the real thing. The second volume offers more Brunetti, French (single page), Weissman and Fingerman, with the best of the rest being Dylan Horrocks, Ariel Bordeaux, Santiago Sequeiros, Tony Millionaire and Mack White, but the third has only Bordeaux, French (another page), Fingerman and Sam Henderson of note. Whilst some of these strips are funny or sexy, many are simply exercises in more explicit storytelling than is usual for the creators and only the first volume comes close to Reynolds' claim.~NF

DISAVOWED

Homage: *6 issues 2000*

Dalton Morrel is an alcoholic FBI agent whose life has been destroyed by his work straying towards cults and black magic. Telepath Cassandra Caulder hooks him up with Rachel Rande, a gifted magicienne, and a seer known as Iven. Their joint invstigations lead them to The Vatican and beyond with lethal consequences. Brandon Choi and Mike Heisler pepper this incomprehensible saga with a flurry of captions and expository dialogue impeding the excellent artwork by Tommy Lee Edwards. By the middle of 3 Edwards has left the art to the more decorative John Lucas. Abandoned by most of its primary creators, the series manages one further disappointment with its cop-out ending.~SW

THE DISCIPLES

Image: *3 issues 2001*

The series begins with Hong Kong being decimated by a nuclear bomb and The Great Myron being refused admission back into the cabal of magicians that star here. Evil forces have taken the name The Valetta Corporation and are trying to destroy the world. Standing against them are the Disciples, led by a psychic known as Mother, who operates behind the scenes at Arcana, her house in the USA's Deep South. The main players are Warlock, Eden, Psiren, Dexter and Simon, with Myron's assistant Ambrosia providing comic relief. In 2 we meet Suzi, another potential member, while Eden and Psiren play cat and mice with the unstoppable killer Mr Nunsthorpe in 3, set in Las Vegas. The writers are Colin Clayton and Chris Dows, one of whom is responsible for some pretty heavy word balloons that do the pacing no favours. The distinctive artwork is by Laurence Campbell inked by Larry Shuput. After 2 there was a four month gap in publication followed by 3 bringing a double-sized end to what had the potential to become an interesting series.~SW

The Mundane Adventures of DISHMAN

Eclipse: *1 issue 1988*

Paul Mahler discovers he has the ability to wave his hands over dirty dishes and they're instantly cleaned and put away. Of course, he designs a costume and goes out to change the world. A very funny superhero comic pastiche that works well because it's treated in a totally deadpan manner. *Dishman* appropriates the look of superhero titles with no hint of artistic exaggeration, and accurately represents the shorthand emotional conflict so commonly passing as characterisation. May John MacLeod never have to wash his own dishes.~FP

Recommended

A DISTANT SOIL

WaRP: *9 issues 1983-1985*
Donning/Starblaze: *2 Volumes 1987-1988*
Aria Press: *14 issues 1991-1996*
Image/Aria: *15 issues (15-29) 1996-1999*
Image/Colleen Doran Studios: *5 issues + (30-34) 2000 to date*

Colleen Doran began her career as a professional graphic artist at the age of 15. Two years later, after a couple of false starts, she achieved the dream of most comics fans, writing and drawing her own series for a professional publisher, in this case Wendy & Richard Pini's WaRP Graphics. Superficially Doran's series, *A Distant Soil*, blended well with the standard fantasy images that were the stock-in-trade of WaRP, publishers of Elfquest; big eyes, pretty costumes, knights in armour, faery types and androgynous aliens. While there is a grain of truth to that evaluation, it doesn't do the series justice, by any means.

The heroes of *A Distant Soil* – *ADS* for short – are a young girl, Liana, and her brother Jason, both possessed of immense psychic powers. For several years, they've been held in a government institute, following the deaths of their parents in suspicious circumstances, while scientists attempt to duplicate their powers. On escaping, they immediately find themselves caught in another conflict as aliens from Ovanan seek out Liana, who has the powers of their hereditary ruler in sufficient degree to prevent the current incumbent from using his abilities. Liana is rescued by two men from Ovanan's resistance faction, the enigmatic Rieken, and his lover and protector D'Mer, but Jason falls into the hands of the Ovanan rulers, notably the lovely but evil Lady Sere. Meanwhile, Rieken and D'Mer assemble a group of warriors from human volunteers (including a conveniently time-lost Sir Galahad) and one Ovanan exile, the formidable shapechanger Bast. The battle lines are drawn.

The WaRP incarnation ended with 9, in litigation over ownership and copyright. Having legally established her ownership of the characters and concepts, Doran made another attempt to tell the story in 1987 with two full-colour graphic novels. 'Immigrant Song' and 'Knights of the Angel' did advance the story, but their unwieldy size and poor distribution condemned them to commercial failure. Following a series of rent-paying gigs at DC, Marvel and Disney, Doran launched a third series of ADS under her own Aria Press imprint. With the tenaciousness that seems to be her trademark, Doran appeared determined to get the story told, and told her way, no matter how long it took! 12 of the new series was a relief to all longtime readers, as the story progressed from the Donning/Starblaze volumes, although most earlier Aria issues had new material and extensive reworkings of the old. When Image took over the solicitation and distribution of *ADS*, Doran was free to concentrate on the creative side, and started to get into her stride. 25 is sought after by some because it features a fantasy story by Neil Gaiman that Doran illustrated, and from 27 to 33 extra non-*ADS* material features, usually in prose form, from acclaimed fantasy writers. However good this is, it's always going to be dismissed as padding by devotees, wanting more of the real thing! From 33 all non-story material is at least *ADS*-related, such as character profiles, sketchbook pages, and the like.

The protracted and extremely complex plotlines are still problematic, rendering the series virtually inaccessible to new readers (although 'the story so far' is readily available in trade paperbacks). We simply have to accept Doran's word that everything will, eventually, tie together, but given the determination she's shown so far, that's not too much of a leap of faith. Doran has a fine ear for natural, unstilted dialogue and good delivery of emotional lines. These are characters one can rapidly differentiate by their speech patterns alone, and people that one quickly comes to care about. Her art is striking, with influences of Mucha and Beardsley visible, but also homages to various Japanese comics creators, notably Riyoko Ikeda, in the use of apparently irrelevant background images to denote strong emotion. The beauty of her work also conceals a cold, hard edge to events. You marvel at a lovely picture, then realise with a shudder exactly what you are admiring! The contrast between the cruelty of events and their ornate depiction creates a sense of unease that suits the story admirably. Despite appearances to the contrary, this is no soft, fluffy comic.

Doran has stated in 2002 that a few more issues will finally see the resolution of the storyline that has occupied her entire adult life. This obsession, however enjoyable for the readers, must have seemed to her at times like a cross between a holy crusade and a custodial sentence. It will be interesting, to say the least, to see the direction her career takes after that.~HS

Recommended: Aria/Image/Colleen Doran Studios 1-34

DIVA GRAPHICS Graphic Novels

This short-lived mid-1990s imprint published largely European material with a high sex content. Their one graphic novel *Flesh Wounds* is an examination of an unhappy sado-masochistic and abusive relationship. The material disturbs, but never enough to quell the distinctly uneasy feeling that this is intended as titillation whatever the redemption factor of the ending. *Naughty but Nice*, and *Pleasurable Passages* are anthologies. They include plenty of Dennis Sire crime and sex stories with Bettie Page, but while the material varies from trivial to explicit, there's very little that could be considered arousing. Sire has other concerns besides, but most other contributors don't, and while perhaps a glimpse at what pushes their buttons, why should anyone care?~FP

DIVINE RIGHT The Adventures of Max Faraday

Image: *8 issues 1997-1999**
WildStorm: *4 issues (9-12) 1999**

The subtitled Max Faraday is a twenty year old randy, insecure computer addict who substitutes a virtual relationship for reality, so not the type you'd figure on accidentally acquiring the secret of creation. In addition to manifesting physically, it comes with three other-worldly guardians, completing an already diverse cast. Of course, the secret of creation is a desirable piece of knowledge, and there are plenty of interested parties. The dynamism of Jim Lee's art has never been called into question, and when inked by Scott Williams, as it is for most issues, the appeal intensifies, but Lee's contributions diminish as the series continues. Lee also broadens his writing to a world beyond superhero fights. Unfortunately the secret of creation remains unrevealed, but as pageturning adventure entertainment, 1-7 are decent comics. With Max's power fully manifested, though, the wheels come off, with pages of exposition and dull demons for two issues. Everything appears concluded in 9, but there's a neat twist prompting the remainder crossing over into other WildStorm titles.~FP

DIVISION 13

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1993, 4 issues 1994-1995*

Introduced as part of *Comics Greatest World*, Division 13 was a military complex housing and testing superpowered and mutated humans. A break-in by escapees isn't entirely successful, but by the end of the introductory one-shot the facility has been breached and the internees are loose. The ongoing series concentrates on the previously introduced cast, which is a shame, as the imposing presence of fellow-prisoner Law is far more interesting. It's a decidedly average title, with Law coming into his own in the course of the far superior *Agents of Law*.~WJ

DJANGO & ANGEL

Caliber: *5 issues 1990*

Donne Avenell is better known as the writer of Axa, the popular European sword-and-sorcery newspaper strip. *Django & Angel* is a little-known thriller originally printed in Sweden. The premise is this: each issue Django, an ex-FBI agent working for Interpol, and Angel, an English private detective, solve a self-contained mystery, although they spend very little time in the same room together. Of minor interest to Axa groupies (if such sad beings exist).~NF

DNAGENTS

Eclipse: *Series one 24 issues 1983-1985, series two (The New DNAGENTS) 17 issues, 1985-1987*
Antarctic: *1 issue 1994*

As ever, Mark Evanier turns out an entertaining and well-crafted superhero tale, which just about manages to rise above the clichés on which it is built. The mad-scientist-infested Matrix Corporation discovers a formula by which to make creatures as near to human as you ever need to get, but who are capable of being programmed to obey. As a bunch of totally subservient superheroes wouldn't be much fun to read, the DNAgents soon manage to think for themselves, and spend the rest of the series at loggerheads with their (mostly) immoral Matrix bosses while they try to explore and discover their own identities. Despite the unoriginality of the basic concept and the high level of angst, probably influenced by contemporary *X-Men* stories, the title had its moments, not least of which were due to Evanier's strong characterisation ensuring that the artificial humans weren't always in agreement on how much, or in what way, they wanted to mix with the real world. The soap-opera elements of the series always outdid the action sequences. The final issue, which does its best to tie-up all the plot threads, finishes on one of the best cliffhangers you're ever likely to come across. Largely pencilled throughout by Bill Meugniot in his pin-up pose style, there is early Erik Larsen art in second series 13-17. A planned revival from Antarctic never worked out.~JC

D.O.A. COMICS

Jim Osbourne: *1 issue 1976*

Jim Osbourne was an undeservedly obscure underground artist with a fine eye for the grotesque, and this comic collects much of his best material. While his early work was a little crude, he quickly developed into a fine artist, and strips like 'The Suicide of Lupe Velez' are beautifully detailed, and written with some elegance. However, his subject matter was almost universally demented, and casual readers should be prepared to be offended.~DAR

Recommended

DOC BEHEMOTH

Chanting Monks Studios: *One-shot 1998*

Underdeveloped light-hearted homage to Doc Savage and the Atlas monster comics of the 1950s written by Roy Thomas. It's the humorous story of a man who likes to sing 'My Darling Clementine', trapped in the body of a giant alien. Sadly, despite the effort spent on it, John Orlando's artwork still appears amateur.~NF

DOC CHAOS

Escape: *2 issues 1984-1985*

Hooligan Press: *1 issue 1988*

The Escape issues establish the humorous premise of a near future in which politics are still conservative and the dangers of biotechnology have begun to exhibit themselves in random mutations. A group of anarchists hire detective Tito Livio to find Doc Chaos (a radical scientific genius who may or may not exist) to persuade him to kick-start the revolution. This could be a difficult task since no one knows what he looks like and he can move from body to body. Dave Thorpe and Lawrence Gray take a leisurely approach to storytelling but there's a lot of plot to keep your interest. Apart from an idea-packed script, the series also has the advantage of Phil Elliott's artwork. At once clearly European in style (heavily indebted to Hergé), it has a roughness that suits the sometimes outrageous characters and retains a distinctive feel.~NF

Recommended: Escape 1-2

DOC SAMSON

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1996*

Relying heavily on the cover-featured guest stars, Marvel, one supposes, knew a series starring a superstrong psychologist wasn't exactly a winner, and so it proves. Writer Dan Slott, throws every psychologist cliché (and plenty of others besides) into the brew, hoping to meld them into a plot. What story there is takes its cue from extrapolation in *Hulk* that exposure to gamma radiation results in a superstrong version of a previously repressed character facet. The art varies from dashed-off to appalling, and She-Hulk apart, the guest appearances are forced, and new gamma-superpowered character Geiger is irritating in the extreme. This will stink up your house worse than those trainers you've worn all week.~FP

DOC SAVAGE

Gold Key: *1 issue 1966*

Pulp novel adventurer Doc Savage has been licensed from comic publisher to comic publisher, most of whom have treated him rather shabbily. The first to do so were Gold Key in this poor adaptation of 'Thousand-Headed Man'.~FP

DOC SAVAGE

Marvel: *Series one 8 issues 1972-1974, series two 8 issues, 1 Giant-Size 1975-1977*

Relatively faithful to the all-action, convoluted adventures of the pulps, this short-lived series consists of two-issue adaptations of four original *Doc Savage* novels: 'The Man of Bronze', 'Death in Silver', 'The Monsters', 'Brand of the Werewolf'. Written by Steve Englehart, then Gardner Fox, and finally Tony Isabella, the comics are all plot, with most 'characterisation' taking place around the rivalry between Monk and Ham, two of Doc Savage's five aides. As a result the stories seem hurried but manage to retain something of the atmosphere and mystery of the originals. Ross Andru's artwork is not entirely inappropriate and is significantly improved by Tom Palmer's inking, but unfortunately with five different inkers in eight issues there's not much by way of a consistent look. Originally planning to bring Doc Savage into the 1970s, Marvel changed their plans and kept the adventures in the 1930s, but decided that other quirky period elements (such as Monk's pet pig) should be dropped.

Given more space to work with in the magazine-sized second series, Doug Moench wrote new Doc Savage stories, making good use of foreign locales, and gave him a chance to make greater use of Doc's companions and his cousin, Pat. Though several issues were drawn by others (John Buscema, 1 and 3, Val Mayerik 7), only the final issue, drawn entirely by Ernie Chan, doesn't bear the mark of Tony DeZuniga. Whether providing pencils and inks or just inking, his distinctive look provides a consistency that enhances the action-packed scripts. Not great, but faithful to the pulps and very entertaining.~NF

DOC SAVAGE

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1987-1988, 24 issues, 1 Annual 1988-1990*

DC tested the waters for a Doc Savage revival with a miniseries by Dennis O'Neil, drawn by the Kubert brothers, Adam and Andy, who then went on to produce a satisfying two-year run. It's a clever series, probing the origins of the Doc Savage 'myth', reintroducing the characters but updating them by providing Savage with a grandson and bringing Savage himself into the present. Though purists might dislike some elements of the story it does no disservice to the legend. Continuing from the miniseries, Denny O'Neil pits the Savages against creatures from the moon in 1-6. Mike Barr takes over the scripting with 7, which reintroduces Pat Savage, while 17 and 18 cross over with *The Shadow*. From 19 the series reverts briefly to the 1930s before a final storyline that ties up the stories from both eras. Drawn by Rod Whigham and Steve Montano, there's a blockiness and stiffness to the artwork that really dulls Barr's scripts. The highlights of the series are the covers by the Kubert brothers. The annual contains the first meeting of Doc and his companions in a story that takes them to the 1936 Olympic games.~NF

DOC SAVAGE: Curse of the Fire God

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1995*

Steve Vance has a good idea of what makes a cracking Doc Savage story, including the prominent use of his cousin, Pat. Pat Broderick's artwork doesn't suit the characters or the setting. Gary Gianni's eye-catching covers are a definite plus and the whole thing's a reasonable approximation of a pulp adventure.~NF

DR ANDY

Alliance: *One-shot 1994*

Dr Andy is a typically eccentric scientist with five mini-clones, an assistant, Betty and an intense rivalry with Dr Phineas, on whom he plays practical jokes like teleporting fruit rinds into his kitchen. When this teleportation device comes to the attention of the government, two agents are sent to buy or steal it. This screwball comedy is not unattractive (in a Joe Staton style), but nowhere near as funny as it thinks it is.~NF

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* Available in a collected edition

DR ATOMIC

Last Gasp: *6 issues 1972-1981*

Dr Atomic is a genius scientist confident in most disciplines, and possessing a strong interest in dope and coke. These obsessions are shared by his assistant Billy, and resourceful dope dealer 'Crazy' Crosby, from 2, rounds out the main cast. The layers of counterculture topicality apart, this seems very much influenced by the Carl Barks duck stories. Larry Todd's full length efforts in 2 and 6, and some of the shorts in other issues, are inventive travelogues to the Barks template, while the shorter humour items also follow the Barks structure with Billy assuming the enthusiasms and dismal luck of Donald Duck. Everything is well-plotted, with the detail of the cartooning matching the plots, possibly explaining the usual two year gap between issues. Todd brings an obvious scientific knowledge to some stories, and Fortean topics also generate plots, although 4 is heavy on the information. Much underground material has dated badly, but good stories and art always have their place, and Dr Atomic starts strongly and improves. The best issue is 6, incorporating pure cocaine, a trip to Peru, flying saucers and Howard 'Huge'.~WJ

Recommended: 6

DOCTOR BANG and his Big Guns

Rip-Off: *One-shot 1991*

Lisa-Marie Monroe and her boyfriend are watching a 3D movie at a drive-in, when the Demontronic Empire crashes through the screen and tries to kidnap her. She is saved by the rock'n'roll superhero Doctor Bang, a glam rock nightmare that makes Kiss in their prime look like they're allergic to greasepaint. Lots of hitting and unexplained speeches occur, but it's so badly drawn/airbrushed in glorious monochrome that you can't make out what's going on. Reprinted from a stripzine called Profolio, though God alone knows why.~WW

DOCTOR CYBORG

Attention! Publishing: *6 issues (0-5*) 1996-1997*

Allan Gross, Mark Wheatley, Marc Hempel and Damon Willis concoct a tale strangely reminiscent of the classic *Jonny Quest* series. Malcolm Syberg is a physicist/archeologist seduced into working for an American covert agency, spying and building gadgets. When his bodyguard, son, Indian companion and dog are blown up by terrorists, Syberg builds super-android duplicates to replace them, before succumbing to his own injuries and placing his head on a cyborg body. The missions they then undertake lead them to question just who the good guys really are. Dark blend of *X-Files* and *Man From U.N.C.L.E.* deftly done and very readable. The strip continues online at www.insightstudiosgroup.com/fundays/docstory.htm.~WW

DR FATE

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1985, 4 issue miniseries 1987, 41 issues 1988-1992*

The first miniseries reprints the Walt Simonson story from *First Issue Special* 9, and back-up stories from Flash 306-313. The second moved the goalposts. Previously archaeologist Kent Nelson, aloof and nigh-omnipotent master of magic, Dr Fate was now the mystically aged former ten-year-old Eric Strauss merged with his stepmother Linda. When not being Dr Fate they separated, and were monitored by Nelson's mentor, the immortal Nabu the Wise, now occupying Nelson's aged body. Writer J.M. DeMatteis stuck around for the ongoing title, added some humour absent from the miniseries, introduced a varied supporting cast, and produced a solid enough run in the company of ever-improving artist Shawn McManus. For the best of the bunch try 7's pastiche of *Romeo and Juliet* with Yiddish demons in New York (honestly). There's a death in 12, and the tone becomes markedly darker. DeMatteis starts exploring the nature of fate and spirituality, ground he's positively stamped to death elsewhere, and the series isn't the better for it.

A change of the title logo to read *Doctor Fate* with 25 is as good an indication as any that a new broom is in town, and writer William Messner-Loebs makes sweeping changes. It's farewell to the previous supporting cast, and, indeed, to the previous Dr Fate, as a youthful Kent Nelson returns in the company of his wife Inza. Unpredictably, it's Inza who is now Fate. Rather than occupy herself with cosmic matters she works on an altogether more human level, deciding that her destiny is to improve the lot of her immediate New York neighbourhood, making some interesting moral decisions along the way. Engaging supporting characters abound, not least a surly Lord of Order trapped in Kent Nelson's old body. Once Messner-Loebs hits his stride with 28 almost every issue is worth a look, and things improve further as Scot Eaton and Peter Gross take over the artwork with 33. A good sample issue is 35, by which time Inza has re-shaped the neighbourhood and the authorities are starting to take an interest. The stories published as *Scarab* were initially intended for this title (doubtless in very different form) and the next try is as *Fate*.~FP

Recommended: 28-32, 34, 35, 39, 40

DOCTOR GORPON

Eternity: *2 issues 1991*

Created by Marc Hansen, *Doctor Gorpon* combines elements of cartoonist Ed 'Big Daddy' Roth's manic monsters-in-dragsters style of art with Michael Gilbert's Mr Monster character. No originality in conception or art then, what about plot? Ummm, actually not much cop there either. It's slapstick cartoon violence with Gorpon going about dispatching monsters with glee and relish, while his former assistant wants revenge for poor treatment at Doc's hands. Announced as a three-issue miniseries, the final issue doesn't appear to have been published.~FP

DR GRAVE

Slave Labor: *6 issues 2000*

Awful rehash of the costumed monster-hunter genre played, unsuccessfully, for laughs. Venal braggart Dr.Grave and his long-suffering manservant Shandar travel the world and the afterlife fighting the forces of supernatural evil as long as there's a quick buck or a sexy chick in it. Don't waste your time.~WW

DOCTOR GUMBO'S ONE TRUE JAZZ COMIC

Oh No! Novelties: *One-shot 1997*

The adventures of Doctor Cyril Gumbo who embarks on a slapstick, alcohol fueled vision-quest involving hallucinatory appearances by many jazz greats. This collection of Lindsay Arnold's daily strips from Tasmania bears the cover blurb "guaranteed to cause a classic headache if you read it in one sitting (without assistance)". It is indeed sixty pages of crudely drawn incoherence, but there is a great love of jazz music and its history evident that makes even an unassisted read entertaining. You might even learn the truth about jazz hairpieces if you partake sedulously enough!~SW

DOCTOR MID-NITE

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1999*

Socially crusading physician Pieter Cross obstructs the goals of organized crime once too often, and an 'accident' is arranged. Not only is he blinded, but he's also framed so that his medical license is revoked. However, the substance he was doped with to set him up for the accident is an unstable steroid that gives him enhanced physical prowess and perfect nocturnal vision. Using his already established network of operatives and informants, he sets himself up as a costumed vigilante.

Writer Matt Wagner makes a conscientious attempt, in the first issue, to create a figure reminiscent of the pulp heroes such as Doc Savage and the Shadow, but subsequently doesn't show much inspiration, and the good Doctor merely engages in bog standard heroic fisticuffs.

Although this prestige format series didn't prompt an ongoing title, the Doctor took the place of his 1940's namesake in the revived JSA from 1999, and remains a highly visible figure in the DC Universe.~HS

The Second Life of DOCTOR MIRAGE

Valiant: *18 issues 1993-1995*

Destroyed by the evil entity Master Darque, parapsychologist Hwen Mirage is brought back from the beyond by the love of his wife, Carmen Ruiz. Unfortunately, his 'second life' is as an intangible spirit with supernatural powers. The supernatural powers are fine, but the intangible bit causes Hwen and Carmen certain...romantic problems. How they solve them, and how their relationship survives this crisis, is the charm of this witty and likeable series. Most readers, one suspects, picked up the title to see how Hwen and Carm were getting along, rather than to see the spook-of-the-month action (though there was that too, for them as liked it). Bob Layton and Bernard Chang created two leads whose relationship was a partnership of genuine equals, with a refreshing lack of the power struggle that characterises so many comic relationships. It's also indicative of Valiant's willingness to take risks that there wasn't a major Caucasian character in the series, and interesting that most folks don't actually notice this until it's pointed out. While some people found the fact that our heroes were genuinely passionate about each other a little stifling, the series' strong romantic bias made it an unexpected hit with female readers. Sadly, there weren't enough to give the title a long run and it was cancelled mid-plot (19 was advertised, but never appeared).~HS

DR. ROBOT

Dark Horse/Maverick: *One-shot 2000*

This very brilliant comic by Bernie Mireault, reprints back-up stories from *Madman* along with one new story. It ought to be published in washable hardback and given to children of all ages for Christmas. The almost wordless strips are about a giant robot who lives in idyllic countryside with his genial elderly creator/operator, and their heartwarming adventures, for example dealing peacefully with a rampaging monster in the nearby city. The simple, brightly coloured art is delightful.~GK

Recommended

DOCTOR SOLAR

Gold Key: *27 issues 1962-1969*

Whitman: *4 issues (28-31) 1981-1982)*

Dr. Solar unexpectedly survives a nuclear accident and is endowed with enormous nuclear power. The transformation turns Solar's skin green, like the Hulk, also created in 1962. 1-4 feature Solar's adventures clothed in the everyday lab coat of a nuclear scientist. He feels impelled to keep his new abilities a secret from his associates, particularly the lovely Gail Sorensen who he is afraid of harming with his radioactivity. In 5 he finally dons his protective scarlet costume with the distinctive facemask visor and becomes the superhero known only as 'The Man of the Atom'. Over the next 23 issues he usually finds himself foiling the machinations of the bald, obese master plotter Nuro. The series was written by Paul S. Newman, with the initial 4 issues finely drawn in a realistic newspaper strip style by Bob Fujitani. From 5 Frank Bolle draws most of the remaining run, while Al McWilliams produced some splendid art on 20-23's experiment with a continued story before handing the title to Ernie Colón (24-26), the José Delbo for the final issue. The stories are self-contained, but pedestrian, the best individual issue being 15 where Solar goes back in time and is forced to relive the horror of his origin. After cancellation the Doctor was next seen as a guest in *Doctor Spektor* 14.

In 1981 Whitman revived the title and writer Roger McKenzie gave Solar a first name: Ray. That's about the only interesting thing in the new version, apart from the usual accomplished art job from Dan Spiegle. Magnus, Robot Fighter, also by McKenzie and Spiegle ran as a back-up. The Man of the Atom's next appearance was in Valiant's revision of the character simply titled Solar.~SW

Recommended: 1-4, 15, 20-23

The Occult Files of DR SPEKTOR

Gold Key: *24 issues 1973-1977*

Basically an ordinary anthology title, this is different in that Dr Spektor is brought into the 1970s Gold Key universe with 7, revealing a blood link between him, Dagar and Tragg. There were guest appearances by Dr Solar in 14 and 23, and the artwork is mainly by the Filipino artists Gold Key used at the time.~SW

DOCTOR STRANGE

Marvel: *Series one 15 issues (169-183) 1968-1969, Series two 81 issues, 1 Annual, 1 Giant-Size, 1 Graphic Novel 1974-1987, series three 90 issues, 3 Annuals (2-4) 1988-1996*

The first series was an enigmatic little number that owed more to its breathtaking Colan and Palmer artwork and wild panel layouts than to the scripting. Plots improved from those in *Strange Tales*, from which the publication and numbering continued directly, but Roy Thomas' ideas somehow failed to gel. 174-177 and 180-183 are a cut above the rest in both story and art departments. Plotlines concluded in *Sub-Mariner* 22 and *Incredible Hulk* 126, wherein Doctor Strange renounced his use of magic and abandoned his role as a sorcerer. He returned in *Marvel Feature* 1 and *Marvel Premiere* from 3 onwards.

The second series continued directly from his spell in *Marvel Premiere*. Ever since 1973, the character of Doctor Strange has been almost unrecognisable from that of the man portrayed in the 1960s Strange Tales stories. Whereas he was once little more than a superhero functioning in magical dimensions, he graduated into a truly eldritch and universal occultist. Steve Englehart and Frank Brunner finally broke through to concepts and abstract plots that could have flourished in very few other titles. Witness the story in 10-13 wherein Earth is annihilated, then recreated instants later. Many issues are cerebral but the absence of limits on the writers' scope does not endear the title to every reader. Four of their early issues are reprinted as *Doctor Strange Special Edition*, and a collection of Englehart/Brunner work was published in 2002. Later issues, mostly written by Roger Stern, are a touch more conventional, but quality is high from 48 on. A foothold on this planet is maintained through new supporting characters, particularly Morgana Blessing, who adds spice to Strange's static love life. Blessed by mouth-watering pencils from Marshall Rogers, Dan Green and Paul Smith, the second-half highlights capture a delightful time-travel tale in 49-53 (epilogue in 55) and an astonishingly powerful fable in 58-62, wherein Earth is rid of vampirism. The Doctor's adventures continued back into a new series of *Strange Tales*. The graphic novel Into Shamballa by J.M. DeMatteis and Dan Green accommodates lavish, abstract artwork but the grandiose presentation fails to disguise the pretentious story.

When Roy and Dann Thomas take over the scripting of the third series from 5 (with Jackson Guice on pencils), they promptly revert the misguided changes of *Strange Tales*. With 6 a back-up strip is introduced, 'The Book of the Vishanti', written by Roy Thomas and R.J.M. L'Officier, which serves as a history of magic. With excellent, moody artwork from Tom Sutton (6-8), suddenly the title was worth reading again, particularly as the back-up moved on to the history of the Darkhold, the legendary book of evil.

10 introduces Strange's brother, Vic, and establishes a relationship with scientifically created vampire Morbius. Thomas also takes the opportunity to restore vampires to the Marvel Universe in 'The Vampire Verses' (14-18), and his next major plotline (21-24) involves Strange in conflict witb Baron Mordo, Dormammu, Clea and Umar, but things start getting sticky from there in. Chris Marrinan takes over the pencils with 27 as the title becomes dogged with crossover

issues. The interminable *Infinity Gauntlet* issues (31-36) followed shortly by six *Infinity War* crossover issues (42-47) are enough to make anyone give up. In case they haven't Len Kaminski introduces a whole new 'new' direction as Doctor Strange decides, after all these years, that he's fed up with all these gods that he has to keep calling on for help. The events of 50 lead to the formation of The Secret Defenders.

The Infinity Crusade occupies 54-56, after which the 'Midnight Sons' banner starts to have its effect on *Doctor Strange*. The 'Siege of Darkness' crossover affects 60 and 61, written by David Quinn and pencilled by Melvin Rubi, after which the good Doctor is a different person with new powers. This 'new' Strange lasts until 75, with stories in which guest appearances are used to keep reader interest. Warren Ellis writes 80-83, followed by J.M. DeMatteis. Mark Buckingham and Kev Sutherland took over the artwork with 80 but, good as the pairing is, they're wasted on some very poor scripts. DeMatteis' characteristic 'let's take a look at the human being in this character' ploy was just an excuse to go over old ground.

After years of indifference, having large chunks of crossover continuity dumped into its storylines, and a stream of half-hearted revamps, none of which were allowed time to fully develop, it's no surprise that Doctor Strange was cancelled again.~APS/NF

Recommended: Series two 6-13, 15-16, 49-53, 55, 58-62, 71-73

DOCTOR TOMORROW

Acclaim: *12 issue limited series 1997-1998*

Those whose complaint is that comics aren't the way they used to be are advised to seek out this pleasing run through a superhero's career from the 1940s to the 1990s. Doctor Tomorrow accesses the technology of the future, enabling him to become the pre-eminent superhero of his day on starting his career, but as years progress sustaining his status becomes ever more difficult despite his superior gadgetry and knowledge of the future. Bob Layton wrote this as a tribute to the artists who influenced him as a youngster, which makes the wildly varying quality of the artwork disappointing. Tom Grindberg (7) effortlessly evokes the art of Neal Adams, which is no surprise as he's built a career imitating Adams, but only Anthony Williams and Andy Lanning's take on Frank Miller in 10 otherwise approaches the named artistic influence. An editorially compromised ending and extremely irritating sidekick are flaws, but not fatal.~FP

DR WEIRD

Big Bang: *1 issue 1994*

Those with an interest in unearthing the earliest works of writers and artists are directed to *Dr Weird*, which features not only the fanzine-style art of Jim Starlin, but the fan writing of science-fiction author George R. Martin. It's utter tosh. Dr Weird is based on 1940s mystical superhero Mr Justice, himself based on The Spectre, and runs through assorted poorly drawn and written genre material. Curiosity won't pay off.~WJ

DOCTOR WHO

Marvel: *23 issues, 1 Graphic Novel 1984-1986*

Colour reprints of the mainly Dave Gibbons-drawn stories for Britain's *Doctor Who Magazine*. Largely concentrating on the Tom Baker version of the Doctor, if you've not seen his quirky and eccentric portrayal his persona in the comics quickly becomes irritating. Unlike the TV show, there's no respite from a supporting cast as Marvel's contract only covered likenesses of the Doctor. The Peter Davison version of the Doctor is featured from 16, illustrated by other artists, and the Doctor can also be found in a trial run for this series in *Marvel Premiere* 57-60. The stories are generally well crafted and faithful, but lack the vital spark. The graphic novel, titled 'Voyager', is a further collection of stories reprinted from *Dr Who Magazine* (88-99), this time enveloping the Colin Baker incarnation in a battle of wits against an ancient time-lord. Steve Parkhouse and John Ridgway combine well for an imaginative romp introducing a new helper.~FP

DOCTOR WHO AND THE DALEKS

Dell: *One-shot 1966*

A pedestrian adaptation of the film starring Peter Cushing as the Doctor, now commanding extortionate prices. Timelords should journey back to 1966 and buy one from the newsstand. Anyone else buying one would have more money than sense.~WJ

DR WIRTHAM'S COMIX AND STORIES

Clifford Neal: *8 issues (1-4, 5/6, 7/8) 1976-1983, 1987 (9-10)*

After a solo first effort by Cliff Neal (or Oisif Egaux, as he prefers), this became a very patchy underground anthology. Steve Bissette and Rick Veitch contributed some obviously very early work to 2 and 4, while other artists included Will Meugniot (2) and Gene Day (3). Neal himself had a beautifully detailed style, and each issue featured a number of illustrations and 'stories' by him, though story-telling was obviously not an interest of his. The later issues, some of which are double-numbered and 10 indicated only by 'X' on the cover, are a great improvement. There's nice work from a greatly improved Bissette and Veitch (5/6, 7/8), Jay Kinney (5-10), the great Greg Irons (in 5/6, 7/8), Peter Bagge (7/8), Mark Nelson (7/8, 9) and Mike Matthews in 7-10.~DAR

DR WONDER

Old Town: *5 issues 1996-1997*

Dick Ayers is behind this attempt to produce faux-1960s style Marvel comics. Gaining super-powers from a handily discovered new element, Dr Wonder battles to keep humanity safe from saboteurs and super-villains. The comics are decently turned out for what they are, but with nostalgia as the sole impetus without any ironic qualities, they're very much out of step with the times. Their comparative lack of sophistication marginalises the appeal to a very small audience, and it was no surprise to see this fail. Superhero fans over the age forty might want to investigate, though.~WJ

DOCTOR ZERO

Marvel/Epic: *8 issues 1988-1989*

One of three linked titles (see *Powerline* and *St George*) set in a world like ours except for the existence of a second, super-powered race of "Shadow" people who have been manipulating human society since the beginning of civilisation. Dr Zero, the oldest and most powerful of the Shadows, fears mankind is out of control, and thus instigates a cynical contingency agenda involving him becoming a "Super-hero" and saving the world, for himself. Created by Archie Goodwin, and initially illustrated by Denys Cowan, the work is sadly ruined by heavy-handed scripts from Margaret Clark and Dan Chichester. The storylines were concluded in *Critical Mass*.~WW

DR ZOMBIE'S HOUSE OF FREAKS

Starhead: *1 issue 1992*

Comic directory of "Famous Freaks" past and present such as Koo Koo the Bird Girl (featured in Todd Browning's infamous movie Freaks), Pujol the Farter (!) and the Jim Rose Circus Sideshow. Quirky and disturbingly well-drawn in the manner of Drew Friedman and Rick Geary by the presumably pseudonymous Art Penn, this is certainly not to everyone's taste.~WW

DODEKAIN

Antarctic: *8 issue limited series 1994-1995*

Another Japanese series so obviously intended for young boys here translated and presented for a much older audience. Earth's invaded by aliens and a twelve year old inherits a giant battlesuit to fight them. Once that's done (4), there's a rival battlesuit on the way. The lack of sophistication ensures only those with formative minds will derive anything from this.~FP

DOG BOY

Fantagraphics: *10 issues 1987-1988*

Be careful not to mistake the title, written and drawn by Steve Lafler, with Charles Burns' book of the same name.

Lafler's opus is a humorous anthropomorphic tale, and while both get humour out of contrasting dog and human behaviour, Lafler's jokes are very much more obvious. Lafler's art is up to conveying what's going on, but little more than that. The inking is heavy-handed and the characters visually unsympathetic.~FJ

DOGS OF WAR

Defiant: *5 issues 1994*

Another bow-wow from Jim Shooter's short-lived Defiant comics. The Dogs of War are Shooter and Mouse, two supersoldiers introduced in the unreadable *Warriors of Plasm*. Presumably not based on the editor, Shooter is a hair-triggered psychotic with the power to turn invisible while Mouse, a gentle soul, quickly becomes horrified by his friend's single-minded viciousness. Returned to Earth and unemployed, this odd couple decide to become vigilantes, taking on child pornographers, tobacco barons, gun smugglers and general scum-of-the-earth. Drawing liberally from Steve Ditko's *The Hawk and the Dove* and numerous buddy movies, writer Art Holcomb obviously believes that virulent misogyny and mindless violence are the stuff of gritty realism. However, the rest of the comic is so laughably unreal that these calculated moments of political incorrectness only serve to underline Dogs of War's general mediocrity.~AL

DOLL

Rip-Off: *8 issues 1988-1991**

Guy Colwell's *Doll* is a sensitive erotic story of a hideously deformed man who approaches a hyper-realist sculptor to create a truly realistic sex doll, since no living woman will consent to have sex with him. The plot is complicated when a porn magazine editor who agrees to bankroll the projects wants to keep Doll for himself. There's plenty of tension and exploration of how men relate to women sexually in the book, but very little sex. The occasional penis sighting validates the 'adults only' label on the cover, but the actual encounters are more like asides.~FJ

DOLLMAN

Eternity: *4 issue miniseries 1991-1992*

Based on a film of the same name, this tells of the return of the roughest, toughest cop on the planet Arturos to Earth, in search of his arch-enemy, a disembodied brain with a thing for creating designer drugs and testing them out on great, big, fleshy women. That's why Earth is ideal as your average Arturan is approximately twelve inches tall. A predictable action shoot 'em up.~WW

DOLLS

Sirius: *One-shot 1996*

Toned black and white Bisleyesque art characterises this tale of a future where programmed female androids are hired as companions. When Leo's is repossessed permanently because he's behind on the rent he turns mad as hell. Carnage follows. Hardly worth the cover price.~WJ

DOLLZ

Image: *2 issues 2001*

Cute girls with sewn-on buttons for navels. China is, well, Oriental; Ragz is all stitches and scraps; Baby is a little girl who is very strong so long as she has her talking toy rabbit Mr Bunz with her. Their guardian is a bigger doll, long blonde hair, perfect make-up, wears pink a lot. There are bad dolls made by an evil church too, and a wicked puppetmaster lurking in the shadows. As well as being slick and accomplished the artwork by creator Randy Green is extremely efficient, showing us as many leg and up-the-skirt shots as possible.~SW

The DOME: Ground Zero

DC/Helix: *One-shot 1998*

A tired story of dumb humans tampering with forces beyond their ken. This time a Quantum bomb test awakens an interplanetary terraforming device, forcing a crack team of generic hero-types to penetrate the mysterious dome that popped up over the bomb-site in a last ditch attempt to save the world. Substandard fare from Dave Gibbons and Angus McKie.~WW

DOMINION

Eclipse: *6 issue miniseries 1989-1990**

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1994, 6 issue miniseries ('Conflict 1') 1996**

It's a future where the Earth's atmosphere is poisonous and direct contact with the air can be deadly. The Tank Police are a force created to deal with the threat of a single criminal, Buaku, whose gang has been proving very difficult to stop. The heroic Leona, despite being very fond of her tank (named Bonaparte), can't seem to stop Buaku, even though she and her pilot, Al, do keep coming close. The first series introduces the Tank Police and its world, culminating in Buaku's plan to leave Earth on a space shuttle, involving a truckload of hostage babies and lots of mayhem. In case you hadn't guessed, this is a comedy. Normal citizens fear the Tank Police more than they fear Buaku, and certainly more than Buaku fears the Police. The Chief's constantly on the verge of a nervous breakdown, incompetence runs rife and the citizens keep withdrawing funds.

After that, 'Conflict 1' seems to be a completely different series. The Tank Police still exist but are just another department of a large police force and the poisonous air has somehow been cleansed. Leona now leads a team (without Al) and finds herself nursemaid to Anna and Uni, mayhem-prone androids that once worked for Buaku. There's still an overall storyline but it's almost redundant given the interest shown in the background to the series and the many social and political conflicts within the force. 'Conflict 1' is certainly a more mature work, though the humour remains, including Masamune Shirow's trademark footnotes and occasional 'to the reader' comments. There is a density to Shirow's later work that can be off-putting, especially his tendency to tell you more than you need to know, but it repays careful reading, and the comedy is always there to counterpoint the political machinations.~NF

Recommended: Dark Horse 1-6

DOMINION FACTOR

Marvel: *8 issue miniseries (Fantastic Four 1.1, 2.3, 3.5, 4.7 Avengers 1.2, 2.4, 3.6, 4.8) 1999-2000*

Parallel miniseries from Dan Jurgens and Bob McLeod (Fantastic Four) and Jerry Ordway (Avengers) as the world is threatened by time rending mystic giants. It forces the FF and a select crew of Avengers to travel back to earlier periods of Marvel history in search of slices of a magic apple – no, really! – to repair reality. Simple, enjoyable romp, but probably a cheeky attempt by the creators to redraw some of their favourite Marvel moments.~WW

DOMINIQUE

Caliber: *One-shot ('Family Matters) 1994, one-shot ('White Knuckle Drive') 1994, one-shot ('Protect And Serve') 1995, one-shot ('Killzone') 1995*

Ill served by unrepresentative and off-putting covers, in Nikki Saunders, Charles and Lisa Moore have created a likeable and resourceful private investigator, although she trades freely on her F.B.I. past. She also wears her heart on her sleeve, a potential vulnerability. The best story is 'Killzone', where that vulnerability is exploited over drugs deals, decently drawn by Casey Jones and Mike Perkins. 'White Knuckle Drive' is severely hampered by the poor storytelling of artist Matthew Smith, although it is his first published work, and the art of Gene Gonzales on the other comics is fine. 'Dominique', by the way, is a code name, and she also appears in *Dark Horse Presents* 71-73, and *Negative Burn* 9, 13, 25 and 34.~FP

DOMINO

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 1997*

X-Factor's assassin with the 'unnatural luck' has her chance at a solo adventure courtesy of writer Ben Raab and artist David Perrin, inked by Candelario. The villains of the piece include the evil spy organisation A.I.M. and messers Pearce, Lady Deathstroke and Skullbuster. There are predictable flashbacks to earlier days and along the way we meet Domino's first love, Dr.Milo Thurman. Domino has believed him to be dead for years, he thinking likewise of her. The bled-off artwork is dull and preoccupied with facial close-ups and clipped detail. The black and white elegance of Domino's costume is undermined by the computerised colour, the black circle around her left eye resembling a large grey bruise. A bit of a disappointment on all fronts, really.~SW

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* Available in a collected edition

DOMINO LADY

Eros: *3 issue miniseries 1990-1991, 3 issue miniseries ('Jungle Adventure') 1992*

Okay, the first question that occurs is: has writer/artist Ron Wilber ever actually seen a naked lady? Live and in person? Because judging by this, you wouldn't think so. Taking the name from a 1936 pulp character who's fallen into public domain, Wilber tells the story of Ellen Patrick, a socialite who adopted the identity of the Domino Lady to avenge her assassinated politician father. This gets her into a series of scrapes in which her already-flimsy costume gets torn off, which would be all well and good if her anatomy bore any resemblance to the established human form. Given the bulbous, marrow-like appendages presented as breasts, not to mention the inky fog representing her genitals, it makes you wonder why the hell they bother to get her naked. The first series involves cavemen, dinosaurs, a horny private dick and a madness-inducing magic flute. The follow-up involves our heroine, via contrived circumstances, crashing in the jungle, donning an inadequate animal skin and romping with both Mussolini and Haile Selassie. Lord have mercy. In the interval between the two series, Wilber's art marginally improved – the breasts are more sincere – but his rendition of a vagina still looks like the vague scribble schoolkids used to doodle before they ever actually saw one. For a wanky comic, it's bafflingly crude, and not in a good way.~HS

DOMU: A Child's Dream

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1995**

A translation of Katsuhiro Otomo's manga novel. A housing estate has had twenty-five mysterious deaths in three years. The police investigate, but how likely are they to get to the truth: that a spiteful, senile old man is using his psychic powers to drive people to suicide or murder? And their job is made no easier when a young girl with matching powers moves into the estate and within days the conflict turns to open war. A superb piece of work. If you've been avoiding manga because you think it's all bambi eyes and huge robots, have a look at *Domu*. The story is exciting, intriguing and truly frightening, given an excellent translation here. The psychic conflict is handled particularly well, with both fighters staying in character throughout, so you can recognise the emotions and tactics from playground skirmishes. The artwork is beautiful: the characters are all individuals, not a stereotype in sight, and the domestic details of the estate are rendered with a degree of loving care which serves to make the violence that much more real and horrifying. Read this comic. You owe it to yourself.~FC

Recommended: 1-3

DON MARTIN MAGAZINE

Welsh Publishing: *3 issues 1994*

Don Martin's goofy stretched figures were immediately identifiable with *Mad* magazine for over thirty years, as was his sense of humour, confounding expectations with well set-up exaggerations in short gag strips. Here, though, he opts for extended strips for the most part, and it's very surprising to see that they just don't work, either bludgeoning a joke to death, or failing to hit on it in the first place. One might have thought his instinct regarding the latter infallible after so many years. The small amount of two or three panel gags that are run are up to expectations. It's a shame the remainder falls short.~FP

DON ROSA'S COMICS AND STORIES

CX: *2 issues 1983*

College professor and adventurer Lance Pertwillaby becomes involved in a quest for lost Nazi treasure at the South Pole and the problems caused by a universal solvent. Don Rosa's now considered the best creator to work on Disney's ducks since Carl Barks and these 1970s stories contain all the hallmarks of a classic Uncle Scrooge adventure tale. In fact 2 was reworked for Scrooge in *Walt Disney's Comics* 604-606. Difficult to find, but worth the effort.~WJ

Recommended: 1, 2

Walt Disney's DONALD AND MICKEY

Disney: *18 issues 1991-1993*

Gladstone: *Series one 12 issues (19-30) 1993-1994, series two 7 issues 1995-1996*

Despite the title, only 26 by Paul Murry actually features Donald and Mickey in the same story (versus the Phantom Blot). Carl Barks' ten-page Donald stories from *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* feature in all but that issue, while apart from odd stories, the rest of the strips are produced by Jaime Diaz and the Disney studios. Diaz' strips in 23-25 and 28-30 are extended stories featuring Mickey and Goofy in Egyptian and Arthurian adventures respectively, and although nicely drawn, they're too reliant on dumb one-liners (and Goofy being goofy) to be satisfactory. The Disney studios (19, 21, 22) produced an oddity in Mickey Mouse's adventures with The Sleuth, a Sherlock Holmes type, only dumb and reliant on Mickey to do the real detective work. They're not great, but they're mildly entertaining. Issue 20 has the added attraction of a few Floyd Gottfredson Sunday pages from the Mickey Mouse newspaper strip.

Renaming the title *Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse*, Gladstone started to publish ten-page Donald Duck stories by Barks coupled with Mickey and Goofy adventures. The latter include 'The Arabian Adventure' (1-3) by Disney and Jaime Diaz studios, 'The Treasure of Shark Reef' and 'The Trojan Horse', both by The Egmont Group.~NF

Recommended: Series one 20, series two 4, 6

Walt Disney's DONALD DUCK

Dell: *85 issues 1952-1962*

Gold Key: *131 issues (86-216) 1962-1981*

Whitman: *29 issues (217-245) 1981-1986*

Gladstone: *62 issues 1986-1990 (246-279), 1993-1998 (280-307)*

It's assumed readers will know who Donald Duck is, and that he has a girlfriend Daisy, three nephews, Huey, Dewey and Louie, and an uncle, Scrooge McDuck. Making his screen début in June 1934, it was only a few months before he was also appearing in a 'Silly Symphony' comic strip. Not until 1940, however, did Donald star in a comic, reprinting newspaper strips drawn by Al Taliaferro in issue 4 of the original *Four Color* series. His first new story was notable also for being Carl Barks' first comic work. *Four Color* 9, 'Donald Duck Finds Pirate Gold' (reprinted in 250), was the first of twenty-nine *Four Color* issues before he started his own title with 26. Someone at Dell obviously failed their maths.

Until 1966, Carl Barks produced the best Donald Duck stories and his characterisation was what other writers and artists such as Paul Murry and Bob Gregory tried to emulate. Donald is generally short of money and either struggling at work, or else at the top of his chosen profession (of that month) until something goes wrong (and it always does). Sometimes Donald gets the better of his nephews or his cousin Gladstone (whose luck is near supernatural), but he's just as likely to be picking a fight with his neighbour Jones as getting anything done. Donald's irascibility is his greatest weakness and though he's perfectly happy playing pranks on other people, particularly his clever nephews, they almost always backfire. Apart from the short stories about life, love (Daisy's a little fickle and quite happy to date Gladstone) and getting ahead in Duckburg, there are longer adventure stories such as 'Secret Of Hondorica' (46), 'The Lost Peg-Leg Mine' (52), the search for wasps in 'The Forbidden Valley' (54, 248) or 'The Titanic Ants' (60). Other

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* Available in a collected edition

Disney characters, including Goofy and Chip and Dale, appeared in short back-ups or in single page gag strips, but after 163 the title increasingly became a reprint comic.

When Gladstone restarted publication of Disney material the natural basis of their titles was reprinting the work of Carl Barks. From 246, only 283 didn't contain a Carl Barks strip, and that had the first new Donald strip since 236, written and drawn by Don Rosa, a man widely regarded as Barks' natural successor. Gladstone didn't stop with Barks, though. Determined to attract new readers, they reprinted European material not previously seen in the US. The popularity of Disney characters in Europe has not diminished as it has in their homeland, and Disney magazines have been published since the 1930s, so there was plenty of material to choose from. Volker Reiche (247, 249, 251, 260), Fred Milton (258, 277), Romano Scarpa (279), Marco Rota (300) and Frederico Pedrocchi (286) are among the named artists but many issues contain work by the Danish Gutenburghus and Dutch Oberon Studios. Rosa himself produced work for the Europeans (278) before creating new stories for Gladstone. His main rival for Barks' crown is William Van Horn (263-265, 268, 269, 271, 272, 286), whose artwork is similar to that of Barks but more rounded and uniform in line, while Rosa's ornate, more detailed style has fewer dramatic angles than that of Barks.

Al Taliaferro's short strips can be found in 247, 258, 259, 262-265, 267-276 and his work on the Donald newspaper strip, written by Bob Karp, features in 280-285, 287-299, 301-307). Taliaferro's smooth, long-necked Donald is one of the highlights of American newspaper strip history. Of note also in the Gladstone series is Walt Kelly's version of Donald in 275 and Floyd Gottfredson's in 286, co-starring Mickey Mouse. The break in publishing between 1990 and 1993 was caused by Disney's decision to publish under its own imprint though, strangely, they stopped Donald's title to launch *Donald Duck Adventures* in its place.

Though Barks didn't actually provide much of the material for issues 27-163, his influence can be seen in practically every story. The Barks reprints in the Gladstone issues are mostly from Walt Disney's Comics and Stories but those that aren't are often from the many one-shots and promotional specials published since the 1940s (*Vacation Parade* in 257 or *Firestone's Christmas Special* in 251). The longer Barks stories are all collected in Gladstone book format, either in their 1980s album series, or chronologically in 25 volumes of *Donald Duck Adventures by Carl Barks*. Much of Barks' best work was ten page stories from *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories*, and these are reprinted over fifty-two volumes of *Walt Disney Comics and Stories by Carl Barks*..~NF

Recommended: 246-307

DONALD DUCK ADVENTURES

Gladstone: *20 issues 1987-1990*
Disney: *38 issues 1990-1993*
Gladstone: *28 issues (21-48) 1993-1998*

Primarily a vehicle for longer Donald Duck stories, starting with reprints of the *Four Color* stories by Carl Barks, later issues included more European and non-Barks material. Of note are the longer new stories by Don Rosa ('The Crocodile Collector', 8, 'Return To Plain Awful', 12 and 'Lost Charts of Columbus', 43), Marco Rota's Viking adventure 'Andold Wild Duck' (23) and the two stories written by Barks but drawn by Daan Jippes ('Traitor in the Ranks', 31 and 'Storm Dancers', 32) both from *Huey, Dewey and Louis Junior Woodchucks* in the early 1970s.

Barks' stories are masterpieces of storytelling, as the additional story length provided full scope for his detailed backgrounds and exotic locales. His scripts extend from the satirical 'Dangerous Disguise' (2), which spoofs Cold-War spy stories as Donald matches wits with 'Madame Triple-X', to the slapstick 'The Pixilated Parrot' (22) and the adventure of The Golden Helmet (32). Others of particular note are 'Lost in the Andes' (3), 'Mystery of the Swamp' (7), 'Ghost Of The Grotto' (9) and 'Sheriff of Bullet Valley' (28).

Disney decided to publish their own comics in 1990, and showed a greater willingness to print work of writers and artists other than Carl Barks, though they reprinted European material previously unseen in the USA rather than commissioning new work. Vicar is represented most frequently (all issues except 1, 9, 10, 24, 26, 29, 33, 35-38), but the series also introduces Don Rosa (1, 22, 24, 34, 37), William Van Horn (2-8, 10, 13, 15, 16, 19, 20, 27, 37, 38), Daniel Branca (12, 24, 25, 26, 32, 33), Ron Fernandez (19), Romano Scarpa (22, 28), Santanach (1, 25) and Daan Jippes (26). Most of these are also represented in the later Gladstone run, but Rosa and Van Horn, spiritual heirs to Barks, consistently account for the most diverting material.

Barks is represented more towards the end of the Disney series (2, 4, 9, 17, 18, 21, 23, 26-29, 31, 33, 35, 37, 38), but these issues include the first Uncle Scrooge story ('Christmas on Bear Mountain', 9), 'The Golden Christmas Tree' (21), 'The Lost Peg Leg Mine' (23), 'In Darkest Africa' (29) and the 'Titanic Ants' (36).~NF

Recommended: Gladstone 1-23, 26, 28, 30-33, 43, 45, 48, Disney 1-10, 13, 15, 16, 19, 20-24, 27, 29, 34, 36-38

DONNA MATRIX

Reactor: *1 issue 1993*

A pleasure android goes bad. With all the editorial bluster about the advantages of computer graphics the folk at Reactor forgot a story's also desirable. Dreadful.~FP

DONNA MIA

Dark Fantasy: *2 issues 1996*
Avatar: *3 issue miniseries 1997, 2 issue microseries ('Giant-Size') 1997*, one-shot (0) 1997, one-shot ('Infinity') 1998*

Donna Mia is all to easily lumped in with exploitative 'bad girl' rubbish published by Avatar, but is deserving of wider attention. A demoness complete with large wings, long tail and cloven feet, on Earth she is an alluring woman able to disguise any two of these attributes simultaneously. This is quite the odd series. While there's certainly elements of the old tosh afflicting almost every story about demons in comics, there's also a real undercurrent of eroticism to the work, particularly the black and white issues. Mike Kaluta produced covers for the Dark Fantasy series, while Neil Gaiman consented to be used as major story character. Unfortunately, the infinity issue apart they're the weakest issues of the run, bettered by creator Trevlin Utz's previous Donna Mia stories in *Dark Fantasies*, which are reprinted in the Avatar Giant-Size issues with new pages.~WJ

DOOFUS

Fantagraphics: *2 issues 1997-1998*

Familiar to readers of Hate where the feature ran as a back-up from 21, Doofus and his croney Henry Hotchkiss are small town ne'erdowells. They're ugly, they're stupid and they probably smell too. Author Rick Altergott treats us to choice episodes from these painfully embarrassing jerks' lives, and the result is hilarious. Doofus is a non-hip salute to 1990s slacker culture, steering clear of anything that might vaguely resemble wholesomeness or a positive role-model. The comic is also well-rooted in underground comics through its creator's devotion to EC artist and sometime pornographer Wally Wood. An acquired taste but heartily recommended.~SW

Recommended: 1-2

DOOM

Marvel: *Graphic Novel (Emperor Doom) 1987, one-shot 2000, 3 issue miniseries 2000, 3 issue miniseries ('The Emperor Returns') 2002*

Sadly nothing to do with the great computer game, but dull Dr Doom comics. The graphic novel has Doom succeed in taking over the world, but it's not what he anticipates. The one-shot, part of the Heroes Reborn series of one-shots, has a Celestial plotting against Doom. In the miniseries he has to fight his way back to Earth. It's life or death for Doom, but just a paycheck job for Chuck Dixon and Leonardo Manco. Doom recreates the world his way in the second miniseries, which is another job and another paycheck for Dixon and Manco. Lucky them, there was more money from a collection of both miniseries.~WJ

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* Available in a collected edition

DOOM FORCE

DC: *One-shot 1993*

Shortly after Image Comics launched, Grant Morrison and assorted artists came up with this pastiche of what was then their house style. Daft superheroes with dafter names (all with trademark notification appended) were drawn in misproportioned fashion with an excess of lines and on as many preposterous pin-up pages as could be managed. All women had globular breasts and buttocks, all men were impossibly muscled, and the characters argued among themselves throughout. The writing is staccato and ludicrously dramatic, but at fifty-six pages the joke is stretched too far, and probably won't appeal if picked up cold.~FP

DOOM PATROL

DC: *Series one 39 issues (86-124) 1964-1968 (86-121), 1973 (122-124), series two 63 issues, 1 Annual, 1 Special 1987-1993*
DC/Vertigo: *24 issues (64-87), 1 Annual 1993-1995*
DC: *Series three 13 issues + 2001 to date*

The 1960s series is a largely unknown treasure. Introduced in *My Greatest Adventure* 80, the "World's Strangest Heroes" proved so popular that the title became Doom Patrol with 86. All stories to 89 are collected in a DC Archive Edition. The team consisted of a wheelchair-bound genius, Niles Caulder, The Chief, who brought together three outcasts. Hollywood actress Rita Farr, the Elasti-Girl, inhaled strange volcanic fumes that enabled her to expand or reduce her body, while adventurer Cliff Steele's body was destroyed in an accident, but his brain was saved by the Chief to be placed in a cybernetic body, creating Robotman. He was an updated version of a 1940s creation who enjoyed a long run of back-up strips for fifteen years. The strangest of them was Larry Trainor, a pilot exposed to solar rays that made him radioactive, and enabled him to release Negative Man, a radio-energy being. If a team of outcasts led by a wheelchair-bound character sounds familiar, it should be noted that the *Doom Patrol* débuted at the same time as *X-Men*. Stretching the coincidence, while the X-Men fought the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, the first Doom Patrol tale introduced the Brotherhood of Evil. Furthermore, scripter Arnold Drake was the only contemporary DC writer to predict the later popularity of Marvel. His writing upheld DC's high standards of plotting, but the excellent interaction between the characters created a wonderful soap-opera feel separating Doom Patrol from its 1960s DC counterparts, while Bruno Premiani's artwork, wonderful as it was, maintained the more subtle DC look. *Doom Patrol* lived up to its "World's Strangest Heroes" subtitle, with many strange adversaries, the most notable being the Brotherhood of Evil. Their leader, the Brain, was an evil genius whose body died, but who lived on as dismembered brain. He used his intellect to advance the IQ of a gorilla to genius level, and named him Monsieur Mallah, and they were joined by Madam Rouge, who could remould and stretch her features. That she was French was another unusual touch. Their eventful reappearances gave the series a nice sense of continuity. 91 introduced Mento, the wealthy and clever Steve Dayton, who created a helmet giving him telekinetic powers. His interest in the Doom Patrol was purely Elasti-Girl, with whom he was madly in love. The mid-1960s issues contain lots of wisecracking jokes or situations, particularly 104, where Mento and Elasti-Girl wed, with Robotman and Negative Man trying to stop the event. These were momentary lapses of concentration, because on the whole the series was well handled. Another landmark was 99, introducing Gar Logan, the green-skinned youngster, Beast Boy, who could change into any kind of creature. In due course he was adopted by Mento and Elasti-Girl.

The most exciting soap-opera theme running through the series was the development of Madam Rouge, who fell in love with the Chief, but never escaped the influence of the Brain. The weirdness returned with a vengeance in 115-116, featuring three grotesque creatures, perhaps a precursor to things to come in the 1980s. One had an eye for a head, another had eyes only on his palms, and the last was headless with his face on his torso. This continuing strangeness probably contributed to the falling sales, but given its general nature the surprise is that *Doom Patrol* lasted so long. Editor Murray Boltinoff and artist Premiani guest-starred in 121, asking the readers to keep buying the title to keep it going. If so, the Doom Patrol would return. The plea failed, and the Doom Patrol, who sacrificed their lives to save a small community, remained dead for many years.

Reprint issues in 1973 kept the name alive, as did a brief revival in *Showcase* 94-96, establishing Robotman had survived the explosion that had killed his comrades, and introducing Celsius, who claimed to be the widow of the Chief, Tempest, and Negative Woman. The successful 1980s revival of *Teen Titans*, featured Gar Logan as Changeling, and Robotman also returned there in 13-15, having survived the explosion that killed his comrades. The 1977 team stepped into their own title in 1987, for which Paul Kupperberg wrote stories concentrating more on superheroics than weirdness. They entertained without ever being outstanding. He introduced new outcasts and reintroduced the not-so-dead Larry Trainor, his negative-being now inhabiting Negative Woman instead. This caused a lot of tension, as did Celsius' belief her husband was alive. Readers were kept guessing until The Chief revealed himself in 15, meaning everyone but poor Elasti-Girl survived their apparent death. Kupperberg ended his run in good form in 17-18, tying in with the Invasion crossover with dire consequences for a few of the cast. Of the artists, Steve Lightle brought a smooth look to 1-5, while Erik Larsen provided a more dramatic line in 6-15, when he was replaced by Graham Nolan.

It was all change with 19. Grant Morrison, with artist Richard Case, took the original concept of the Doom Patrol being the world's strangest heroes to a new level of weirdness and originality. Joining the Chief, Tempest and Robotman are Rebis, a radioactive hermaphrodite composed of Larry Trainor and physician Eleanor Poole, and Crazy Jane, with sixty-four separate personalities, each possessing a super power. 'Crawling From The Wreckage' in 19-22* magnificently establishes Morrison's *Doom Patrol*, introducing the Scissor Men, creatures who can literally cut people out of reality, and come from a plane of existence created by a bunch of philosophers. The weirdness continues with a spirit of Jack the Ripper who's out to marry the comatose Doom Patrol member Rhea Jones (from Paul Kupperberg's run). The story introduces Dorothy Spinner, a young girl with an ape-like face who gives life to characters from her imagination; not always a pleasant experience. Both stories are available in a collection. Morrison excelled himself with the creation of Mr Nobody and the Brotherhood of Dada (26-29), who transfer themselves into a painting that then swallows Paris. While there's certainly an element of style over content, Morrison is so imaginative that this is acceptable, and when he incorporates potentially touchy topics, such as Crazy Jane's childhood abuse in 30, it's sensitively handled. 31-33 is another gem, featuring the obnoxious Willoughby Kipling, a Knight Templar who brings word to the Doom Patrol that the world is going to be destroyed. The storyline features the Book of the Unwritten Verse and the men from N.O.W.H.E.R.E, who all speak in anagrams. Hours of fun for all. The Brain and Monsieur Mallah return in 34, a great black comedy, but with little respect for the original characters, and 35 introduced one of the most bizarre comic characters ever invented. Danny The Street is a sentient transvestite street with the ability to teleport itself anywhere, named after Danny La Rue, Britain's most famous female impersonator! The issue begins a plot involving the Doom Patrol in intergalactic conflict, but it's not that straightforward, as it offers the final fate of Rhea Jones. It also leads into the origin of the wonderful Flex Mentallo in 42. Originally a wimp who's had too much sand kicked in his face, Flex gains mastery of all his powerful muscles and investigates just why the Pentagon is five-sided. Facial hair haters will love 45's Beard Hunter, who kills people with beards and is after the red-bearded Chief.

Mr Nobody returns with a new Brotherhood of Dada in 49-52, where he runs for the Presidency. Well, there have been worse candidates. By this time Morrison is becoming a victim of his own success. The weirdness that had been so startling originally is becoming stale with repetition, and even change-of-pace issues such as 53's Marvel pastiche, with the Doom Patrol in the Fantastic Four role, lack bite. Events starting in 55 play with readers' preconceptions. Dire consequences are in store for the Chief and Cliff Steele with the emergence of the Candlemaker in a storyline ending in 61. Morrison leaves with 63, chronicling the final tale of his marvellous Crazy Jane character. In a text page new scripter Rachel Pollack asks how she follows genius. Well, you don't. Obviously, you try to do your own thing. Perhaps editorial pressure resulted in her pale attempts to emulate Morrison's style, but she would have been better off making the series her own and introducing an entirely different direction. 64 is the first Vertigo issue, and while Pollack's run produced some good efforts, on the whole it didn't work, a particular drawback being the continuing exposure for Dorothy Spinner's countless manifestations. Her better ideas included George and Marion, 67's Sexually Remaindered Spirits, who like shopping. Then there's 70's villain the Codpiece, a none too well endowed, penis-size-obsessed character who builds a powerful mechanical codpiece with many abilities (the fantasies are endless). That issue also introduces a young woman who's had a sex change, calls herself Coagula and has the ability to dissolve things. Not her penis, by the way, but the Codpiece wasn't so lucky. Pollack's best moment is 'The Teiresias Wars' in 75-79, an ancient conflict involving the creation of the Tower of Babel inside the Pentagon. The story is helped by the unique and refreshing artwork of Ted McKeever, whose stark stylings added to the weird nature. Pollack and McKeever end the series on a relatively high note with 'Imagine Aris Friends' in 84-87, a story with Biblical overtones about a renegade Hassidic miracle-worker trying to stop a cult of messianic magicians from destroying the world. Doom Patrol to the rescue. But not in time to save the series.

The third series is an amalgamation of the previous ones. John Arcudi is in charge of the words and illustrations are by one of the finds of the new century, Tan Eng Huat. After a rather bad start with the word 'doomed' written all over the series, it soon settles down to become an interesting read. Arcudi brings back Cliff (Robotman) Steele, introduces four young misfits with obnoxious personalities and powers and a corporate head, Thayer Jost, wants to licence the Doom Patrol to makes lots of money. When Robotman decides he doesn't want to work for a big corporation, Jost creates a new Doom Patrol, this time consisting of Beast Boy, Elongated Man, Dr Light and Metamorpho – the latter apparently dead when last seen. Matters really hot up by the end of 5 as something very interesting happens to Robotman making this a must-read series. It's not long before we're reintroduced to someone from the Morrison/Pollack Doom Patrol, so weird things become the norm. If Arcudi can keep away from monsters, demons and such like this should turn out to be an entertaining series. Tan Eng Huat's art, along with clever colouring by Dave Stewart, make the series a visual treat, though emphasis on 'big-art' sometimes makes for a very quick read. 13 begins a story with an interesting premise as the new youngsters are stuck in the bodies of the original cast, and guest-penciller, Seth Fisher again offers great art.

Overall you have a title in four parts. If you like solid 1960s-style superheroics with a subtle sense of wonder, then the original series is for you. DC are now reprinting this series in their Archive format. If, however, you like superheroics with colourful characters, powers and personalities, then the Kupperberg/Lightle/Larsen issues are for you. And if you're a budding pseudo-intellectual then the Morrison/Pollack issues are for you. Lots of hours to ponder the relevance of surrealism. And if you like a bit of mixture pick up the latest offering.~HY

Recommended: Series one 86, 87, 90, 91, 93, 96, 97, 99, 100, 104, 107, 108, 110-113, 115-119, 121, series two 19-34, 42, 45, 57, 75-79, series three 6-9

DOOM 2099

Marvel: *44 issues 1992-1996*

With Latveria crushed under the heel of a brutal tyrant, an armoured figure claiming to be Dr Doom appears, and 1-4 see him oust the incumbent and assume control. Although a technological genius, is he really the 20th-century Doom beloved of the Latverian population? 6-10 have Doom in cyberspace, which wears thin long before the end, following which there's a global tour of 2099. All stories run to a formula in which Doom gets his armoured butt kicked, but returns to triumph over adversity. It's a relief when 25 resolves the question of who Doom is. From 26 Warren Ellis portrays a more vindictive and brutal Doom, and is handed a plot that sees him assuming control of the USA. This spills over to other 2099 titles, but it's soon all change again, with Doom on the run and hunted. Then he's in 1996 to encounter current Marvel superheroes. The problem throughout is that continually changing circumstances prevent any sense of cohesiveness. New readers never have time to adjust before the desperation to appeal to a larger audience overturns everything. The final issues have extraordinary but totally out of place pencil art from Jeff Lafferty, perhaps more suited to parody than a straight superhero title.~FP

DOOM'S IV

Image: *4 issue miniseries 1994*

Grimm, Slyder, Burn and Brick (which might give you some idea of the level of creativity Rob Liefeld brought to the creation of this mess) are a team of superheroes who are in conflict with Doom's Corporation, which has the nasty habit of sending armed robots to kill them. Co-scripted by Kurt Hathaway and penciller Mark Pacella, it's not very good, although well placed as a contender for the most stupid character ever in villain Dr Lychee, whose head is an enlarged lychee. A freebie issue 1/2 was offered via Wizard, also by Pacella.~NF

DOOMSDAY + 1

Charlton: *12 issues 1975-1976 (1-6), 1978-1979 (7-12)*

After a nuclear holocaust wipes out humanity three astronauts return to Earth, team-up with a newly thawed-out caveman (but of course!) and have loads of exciting adventures. No, really. Inevitably they weren't really alone, and pretty soon their world was over-run with robots, aliens, fish-people, mutants, killer apes and crazed Russkies. It's all great fun if you are under 10, but Joe Gill's scripts are far too basic to engage an older readership, and it's left to John Byrne's crude, but engaging art to carry the day. 7-12 reprint 1-6, and what was to have been 7 was eventually printed in *Charlton Bullseye*.~DAR

DOOMSDAY SQUAD

Fantagraphics: *7 issues 1986-1987*

A retitled reprint of *Doomsday + 1* including the *Charlton Bullseye* strip, but of interest really only as a curiosity. Far more appealing are the short back-ups promoting the published Fantagraphics strips. Dalgoda and Usagi Yojimbo in 1 and 3 are fine, but the standout is Daniel Clowes' Lloyd Llewelyn in 2, a commentary on the fuss surrounding John Byrne's 1986 reworking of Superman.~WJ

THE DOOR

Epoch: *1 issue 2001*

A bio-genetically engineered clone with Adolf Hitler's brain is sent back to the Wild West, and a party from Bio-Tech including an emu and the disembodied head of Abraham Lincoln is sent to retrieve it. More a gag vehicle than a plot, there are several good laughs, but overall this is too disjointed. Excellent cover, mind.~FP

DOOR MAN

Cult Press: *1 issue 1993*
Caliber: *4 issue miniseries ('Family Secrets') 1995-1996*

Quite the inventive concept from writer Mike Leonard and artist James Lyle. The Door Man is able to open doors to the past enabling those with a guilty secret to rectify, atone for or gain an alternative perspective on what haunts them. The failure is in the presentation, which is guilty of valuing style above content. It's often unclear seemingly for the sake of being so, and occasionally over-written, but there is enough of worth to make Door Man a decent bargain box purchase.~DB

DOORWAY TO NIGHTMARE

DC: *5 issues 1978*

DC fiddled with their house mystery format, extending stories over the entire issue, but the lovely Mike Kaluta covers are the only recommendation for this otherwise ordinary title.~FP

DOPE Comix

Kitchen Sink: *5 issues 1978-1984**

A very odd concept indeed. Almost five years after underground comics had largely given up the ghost one of the few publishers to survive and thrive decided to publish a series of stories about drugs. It's not quite as narrow in scope as the title might suggest, with all sorts of illicit substances covered. Predictably enough, there's a fair amount of contributors deciding to detail hallucinogenic experiences, boring bastards one and all, and most of 1-3 are extremely self-indulgent, with little of note. The standout strip is Howard Cruse's 'The Guide' in 3, in which a group experimenting with LSD appoint one of their number to ensure there are no accidents during their trip. By contrast 4 is vastly improved. Of the previous regulars only Dan Steffan and Steve Stiles remain, both among the better artists. The new contributors include Valentino, Greg Irons, Aline Kominsky-Crumb and Michael Gilbert, whose touching tale of an acid casualty is a salutary reminder of the possible payback among the general celebration. Steffan and Stiles are back for 5, but it's probably the Reed Waller Omaha short that's of most interest in a title that had run out of puff. *All American Hippie Comics* collects most stories.~WJ

DOPIN' DAN

Last Gasp: *4 issues 1972-1973*

Ted Richards gives us Beetle Bailey with dope. A few chuckles, but don't go out of your way.~WJ

DORK

Slave Labor: *10 issues + 1993 to date*

With *Milk & Cheese* proving an unexpected success, *Dork* was issued to collect Evan Dorkin strips previously published elsewhere along with a spattering of new material. If you only liked Dorkin's work in *Instant Piano*, it's all here, for instance, but from early on new strips outweighed reprints, and from 7 it's all been almost exclusively work first seeing print here. Dorkin is best known for his rant strips, but, as has been cemented by latter-day TV writing, his strength is being an adroit comedy turn, and his talent covers most facets of humour. Gags are exemplified by a torrent of three panel gems, anecdotes by his 'Devil Puppet' stories, and there's parody, observational humour and even sitcom. That's 'The Murder Family' a satire on feeble TV comedy, with the thrust being how to dispose of the corpses accumulated by this family of psychopaths and how to throw the police off the track. Throughout it helps that Dorkin is an excellent cartoonist, and for all his reputation, there's a humanity his work. The meat of many issues, and all of 6, is 'The Eltingville Comic-Book, Science-Fiction, Fantasy, Horror and Role-Playing Club', in which four anal-retentive outsiders band together in defence and celebration of their obsessions. Although Dorkin drops a fair share of savage barbs each strip, the humour comes from an understanding of what motivates the quartet. And let's not take the moral high ground here; you're reading this book. The best is their disintegration during a twenty-four hour *Twilight Zone* marathon in 4. 7 requires particular mention for a step away from the humour as Dorkin strips himself metaphorically bare in detailing how a fractured childhood led to an aggressive personality and demons that haunt to this day. The storytelling devices used throughout are mature and inventive, and still make the point. Although only published annually, there are few people in comics producing work anywhere near as funny as *Dork*, and anyone interested in more than superheroes should sample an issue or the collection of 1-5.~FP

Recommended: 3-10

DORK TOWER

Corsair Publishing: *8 issues 1998-2000*
Dork Storm Press: *13 issues (9-21) + 2000 to date, one-shot ('The Best of') 2001, one-shot ('Swimsuit Special') 2001, one-shot ('The Dork Towers') 2002, 1 volume ('Livin' La Vida Dorka') 2002*

Matt, Igor, Ken and Carson are gamers, and this, often laugh-out-loud funny, series is a mixture of single page gag strips and longer, humorous episodes from their lives. Matt is the voice of insecurity, and has a recurring failure to date anyone that understands him. Igor is an idiot, Carson is a muskrat (literally), Ken can be as bloodthirsty as Igor and Carson, but still manages to seem above it all. The humour springs from reactions to television, cinema, computers, games, comics and conventions, compared to some of which, even Igor has some dignity. Creator, John Kovalic, has a simple, but effective, cartoon style and uses many running jokes – his biggest tease being the budding romance between Matt and Gilly, the Perky Goth (of Clan Gangrene) – Goths, of course, being another source of humour. The characters are shown playing real and imaginary games and each issue tends to have some factual games-related material, if not the rules to a whole game. *Dork Tower* began as a monthly strip in *Shadis* magazine in 1996 and has since run in several other gaming magazines including *Dragon*, *Pyramid* and *Scrye* as well as on the Web. Most of the strips that haven't been reprinted in the regular series are collected in 'Livin' La Vida Dorka'. 'The Dork Towers' collects the various strips that relate to *The Lord of the Rings* and adds a few more for good measure.

'Nodwick' by Aaron Williams and 'PvP' by Scott R. Kurtz have been regular backups from the beginning, but in later issues the series has almost become an anthology with the addition of Lethargic Lad by Greg Hyland (from 16), PS238 (from 18) and The 3 Geeks (from 19). Mark Smylie's Artesia also had a brief run in 16-18. The 'Best of' issue contains strips from 1-6, and there are three collections of material up to 17, 'Dork Covenant', 'Dork Shadows' and 'Heart of Dorkness'.~NF

Recommended: 'Dork Covenant', 'Dork Shadows' and 'Heart of Dorkness'

DORMAN'S DOGGIE

Rip-Off: *1 issue 1979*
Kitchen Sink: *1 volume 1990*

Lots of fart gags about a very needy and stupid dog, and his long-suffering owners. Funny in places and nicely drawn by Foolbert Sturgeon, but not for those who've never owned a dog. The Kitchen Sink collection gathers material from far and wide, but there's not a great difference.~DB

DOUBLE DARE ADVENTURES

Harvey: *2 issues 1966-1967*

A misguided attempt to introduce light-hearted superheroes in the wake of the *Batman* TV show. Cover feature B-Man is stung by alien bees, develops wings, increases his strength by ingesting a honey concentrate, and turns criminal. "What sheer irony... Barry E. Eames, whose very initials spell BEE, is about to reap a harvest of riches because I almost am one," he proclaims. We're not talking high concept here. Nor is that a path followed by companion feature The Glowing Gladiator, although Magicman at least aspires to competency. Better by far are the short reprints by Jack Kirby in 1, and Reed Crandall and Al Williamson in 2.~FP

* Available in a collected edition

DOUBLE DRAGON

Marvel: *6 issue miniseries 1991*

Insipid adaptation of a video game starring a duo of martial artists. The sole redeeming feature is an Art Adams cover for the second issue.~HS

DOUBLE EDGE

Marvel: *2 issue microseries 1995*

These issues partition the Punisher's first and second series, and bookend his rampage through Ghost Rider 65, Daredevil 344, Hulk 433, and Dr Strange 81. In the first issue (un-numbered, but designated 'alpha') he's captured by S.H.I.E.L.D, and while under hypnosis is convinced that S.H.I.E.L.D. head honcho Nick Fury is responsible for the death of the Castle family, thus starting the Punisher's career. A chase ensues through the above titles, before a conclusion of sorts in the 'omega' issue. The second issue's better than the first, revealing the machinations of a factor within the law enforcement agency that used Castle as a pawn, with tragic consequences. Strangely, though, the ending appears rushed.~WJ

DOUBLE HAPPINESS

Jason Shiga: *One-shot 1999*

This is an excellent study culture clash and character. The naïve Tom has grown up in Boston, completely ignoring his Chinese heritage, but when he arrives to work in San Francisco his more worldly-wise cousin Jackson takes him in, in both senses of the term. Jackson exists in a Chinese community almost autonomous of the outside world, and intimidated by this new culture it's a long while before Tom awakens to the truth of what's going on around him. Jason Shiga's cartooning is deceptively simple, yet very expressive, and he acknowledges the influence of Malaysian cartoonist Lat. Many of his minicomics are advertised in the back, and they reward investigation.~FP

Recommended

DOUBLE IMAGE

Image: *5 issues 2001*

Anthology offering two series per issue. In 'Bod' (1-4), writer, Larry Young can't make up his mind what tone to adopt for the tale of a wannabe actress turned invisible woman, trying to deal with fame. In the unfinished 'Codeflesh' (1-5), by Joe Casey and Charlie Adlard, Cam is a bail bondsman, who puts on a mask to act as a bounty hunter on his own cases. Unfortunately, his obsession with work becomes increasingly dangerous. Adlard's artwork is good, but there's little of interest in the story to bring readers back. The final strip is 'Trust Trust In Me Me' (5), a painted, would-be-clever cannibal story that neither looks good nor reads well.~NF

DOUBLE SHOT

Marvel Knights: *4 issue miniseries 2001-2002*

Four stand-alone issues, each containing two unrelated stories by different creative teams, allowing name creators to present their take on the imprint's characters. As with all such anthology endeavours, the issues are hit and miss, with few turning up anything other than exactly what you'd expect from the names on the cover. On the other hand, if you're a big fan of Joe Quesada (1), Garth Ennis (1), Grant Morrison (2), Greg Rucka (3) or Gene Ha (4) among others, what you'll find is unlikely to disappoint. Ted McKeever's Man-Thing in 2 is worth a mention for at least being sufficiently different from anything you'll find in the regular titles to be worth a look.~JC

The DOWN AND OUT DAWG Treasury Bonanza!!

Cheshire Iguana Publications: *One-shot 1993*

Collecting James Sturm's college newspaper strip from 1987 and 1988 and a story that appeared in Check-Up (about Dawg selling one of his sons to fund a bet), this is very primitive cartooning, though it's not completely without style. Cultural references abound, particularly in respect of cartoons that could be said to be related like *Dick Dastardly and Muttley* or *Deputy Dawg*. There's some fun to be had in spotting these references, but no sign of the "laughs galore" promised on the cover.~NF

Dark Horse DOWN UNDER

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1994*

Perhaps inspired by Fantagraphics' attempt to introduce Australian cartoonists to the US in *Fox Comics*, Dark Horse launched this unsuccessful anthology, featuring material of mixed quality. Rather than feeling like a showcase, there's an air of ghettoisation about the book. Far better to have included the strips in *Dark Horse Presents*. Gary Chaloner and Ashley Wood's 'The Undertaker' is the only constant across the three issues, a dark but comic story of a serial killer and his stuffed dog. Wood's scratchy, heavily inked artwork shows early promise. The highlight of the series is the episode of Bacchus in 1. Eddie Campbell tells the tale of 'That Crafty Bastard Sisyphus' in his fine, irreverent style.~NF

DP7

Marvel: *32 issues, 1 Annual 1986-1989*

Following a celestial phenomenon known as "the White Event", people all over the world start spontaneously developing powers beyond those of mortal men, though often with a painful or disfiguring cost. Desperate for help and advice, an elderly schoolteacher, a suburban housewife, an overworked doctor and several others travel to a clinic that offers assistance in coming to terms with these "parabilities". The clinic has its own plans for them, though, and when they come to light, seven of the 'Displaced Paranormals', our DP7 of the title, flee the clinic, hotly pursued by its agents. An intelligent, enjoyable read, with likeable protagonists who are refreshingly capable of being selfish and indecisive, rather than the infallible paragons favoured by most comics. Mark Gruenwald turns in the second best writing job of his career (*Squadron Supreme* being the best), and Paul Ryan's realistic, low-key art enhances the human scale of the drama admirably.~HS

DRACULA

Dell: *7 issues 1962 (1), 1966-1967 (2-4), 1972-1973 (6-8)*

The success of the sixties Batman TV show encouraged numerous new superhero comics from publishers who hadn't a clue about irony, believing stupidity to be the essential ingredient for success. Dell don't disguise the fact, producing a wholesome superhero Dracula attempting to redeem the tarnished family name. He adopts the transparent alias of Al U. Card and was able to transform himself into a bat, only ever drawn as a black outline by appalling artist Tony Tallarico. He (Dracula, not Tallarico, although the latter might have been better value) appeared in plots so dumb even 1960s school kids could pick out flaws. The nadir is 4, in which Al deals with a guy who stands on chairs wearing a sheet to scare old women into donating their savings. 1 adapted the classic 1930s Dracula film, there was never an issue 5, and 6-8 reprint 2-4, presumably in a misguided attempt to sucker in readers enjoying the contemporaneous sophistication of *Tomb of Dracula*.~FP

DRACULA: Lord of the Undead

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 1998*

The popular 1998 *Blade* movie revolved around a number of characters introduced in *Tomb of Dracula*. This belated follow-up series, from writer Glenn Greenberg and penciller Pat Oliffe, may well have been published to help Marvel secure certain contentious copyrights. Despite the fact that 'Lord of the Undead' features a rather tasteless plot about an AIDS-like virus that destroys vampires, the comic is otherwise curiously old-fashioned in tone and execution, and is plagued by far too much stilted expository dialogue. Inker Tom Palmer, who beautifully embellished Gene Colan's pencils on most issues of *Tomb of Dracula*, does his best to maintain some kind of mood and atmosphere. Prior to this miniseries several Dracula one-shots were issued by Marvel, all featuring reprints from *Tomb of Dracula*, and dealt with under that title.~AL

The Curse of DRACULA

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1998*

Dracula wants to control the world by putting his man in the White House. Ranged against him are the usual suspects; a disparate group of individuals led by Van Helsing, seeking vengeance after a bad experience. With Dracula, is there any other kind? *Tomb of Dracula*, on which Gene Colan and Marv Wolfman originally collaborated, is considered the benchmark for Dracula in comics, but while Colan's artwork is as good as ever, Wolfman has nothing new to say.~DB

DRACULA LIVES

Marvel: *13 issues, 1 Annual 1973-1975*

A companion title to *Tomb of Dracula*, this black and white magazine mixes stories of Dracula's adventures in the past with contemporary stories and articles on Dracula films. Roy Thomas and Dick Giordano adapted the Bram Stoker original (5-9), while a whole collection of artists and writers had a go at depicting the dread Count, including Wolfman and Adams (2) telling the story of Dracula's origin, Thomas and Colan, Mike Friedrich and George Evans (7), Tony Isabella and Colan (5), and Doug Moench and Tony DeZuniga (8). *Dracula Lives* lacks any real gems and the number of different creative teams means that there's no real consistency of approach. The 1975 annual reprints material from the regular series.~NF

DRACULA VERSUS ZORRO

Topps: *2 issue microseries 1993*
Image: *2 issue microseries 1998*

Returning by ship from Europe, where he's picked up a near-mystical sword, Zorro tries to defend a fellow-passenger from the attentions of Dracula, who's looking for a new bride to keep him company during the journey. Jousting over the beautiful Carmelita, Zorro and Dracula learn a healthy respect for each other before a final showdown in Notre Dame Cathedral. Don McGregor's writing is as sparse as he gets and becomes a treatise on the nature of love and loyalty. Tom Yeates' artwork beautifully complements the script. All together, a well-characterised, suspenseful package. The Image reprise is in muddy black and white.~NF

Recommended: Topps 1-2

THE DRAFT

Marvel: *One-shot 1998*

An entirely unremarkable yarn set in Marvel's 'New Universe', populated by just dozens of superpowered characters, not the usual thousands. An explosion has destroyed Pittsburgh. Not knowing who's responsible, the government start a massive military programme to test the entire population aged under forty-five for possible superpowers in case of a war. Nightmask, prominently cover-featured, is largely redundant inside, where half a dozen new superheroes are introduced and there's a surprise about Ronnie Reagan. The continuation can be found in *The War*.~FP

DRAGON: BLOOD & GUTS

Image: *3 issue miniseries 1995*

Jason Pearson writes and draws this miniseries, relating the trials and tribulations of a childhood friend of Savage Dragon's cop buddy, Alex, as she decides to testify against her husband, a superpowered evil maniac. The art is classy and confident, but the characters struggle to achieve one-dimensional status. There is less to this than meets the eye.~HS

DRAGON CHIANG

Eclipse: *One-shot 1991*

In many respects a straightforward action adventure, Tim Truman's *Dragon Chiang* gets its edge from its black humour and grim political background. Told in a cold, detached manner, it's the tale of a truck journey from China to San Francisco via a bridge across the Bering Straits. Violent and brutal, it's everything you want and expect from Truman, in fact.~NF

DRAGON FLUX

Antarctic: *3 issues 1996*

Thanks to the sword of Ahron, Joe finds himself transported to the world of Analon, where he meets Maria and cat-woman, Trish. Unfortunately, for Joe, Melvadore wants the sword and sends his Gemini Warriors to retrieve it. This is a slight, unfinished fantasy, in a rough manga style, from creator Tyrone Ford.~NF

DRAGON KNIGHTS

Amaze Ink: *1 issue 1998*

Vincent, one of the Dragon Knights, has killed the emperor whom they are sworn to protect. Now the other knights are pursuing him on their flying dragons. But did he kill him, or is there more to this than meets the eye? We don't know, because there's only one issue and it doesn't say. At a guess, though, yes.~DB

DRAGON KNIGHTS

Tokyopop: *6 issue miniseries 2002*

Silly Dungeons and Dragons style fantasy featuring Rune, Rath, and their bewildering entourage of anachronistic fairy tale knock-offs who lightheartedly – and dim-wittedly – seek to end the depredations of the evil Dragonlord Lykouleon. Maybe it's the translation, but it seems this tries for tongue-in-cheek but only manages cutesy and glib in an instantly forgettable Manga adventure.~WW

DRAGON LINES

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1993, 2 issue microseries ('The Way of the Warrior') 1993-1994*

Blending ancient Chinese fables and mysticism with a plot concerning taking over the world thirty years hence is just window-dressing concealing your basic superhero punch-em-up. The second series is marginally better, probably by virtue of being shorter.~WJ

DRAGONBALL

Viz: *12 issue limited series (Part 1) 1998-1999*, 15 issue limited series (Part 2) 1999-2000*, 14 issue limited series (Part 3) 2000-2001*, 10 issue limited series (Part 4) 2001-2002*, 7 issue limited series (Part 5) 2002, 2 issues + (Part 6) 2003 to date*

Immensely and inexplicably popular series from Japan created by Akira Toriyama. It stars a small, irrepressible, and above all, super-powerful boy named Son Goku who lives for fighting, eating and having adventures. It gradually transpires that Goku is no ordinary boy. Moriyama originally based his character on the classical Chinese legend Trickster King Monkey from *Journey to the West*, and like his inspiration Goku is rude, crude and mighty. Like Monkey he can fly by sitting on a cloud. Like Monkey he has a staff and a long furry tail, and when he looks directly at the full moon he is even transformed into a gigantic breaker killer ape. The creator soon changed his mind, however, and went about retro-fitting the backstory. Thus, we eventually discover that the boy's abilities are due to his being an alien foundling from a warrior race of Chi masters, largely covered in companion title *Dragon Ball Z*.

Integral to the magical universe that he inhabits, a world of anthropomorphic talking animals, of devils and aliens, rampaging villains and wacky wise men, mad science and mystic shape changers are the seven magic Dragon Balls. If they are gathered together, the Eternal Dragon Shelling will manifest and grant a single wish to the one who collected them. Part 1 covers some of the trials and misadventures of Goku and his female companion Bulma the teen genius as they strive to beat a host of crazy rivals to the magic totems. Once the initial "shoreline" (actually a loose string of collected tales with a shared theme) ends, Goku decides to learn all he can about the martial arts and enrolls with rival

Kuririn under the obnoxious tutelage of Kame-Sen'nin, the Turtle Hermit. He trains them and enters them in the "Strongest Under The Heavens" fighting tournament before Part 3 and beyond returns to the life of Dragon Ball hunting, now that the mystic spheres are recharged, re-hidden and ready to be found again. Naturally along the way the young hero and his friends encounter secret paramilitary cadres, monsters, rival Ball hunters and deadly supervillains. The entire series is a non-stop rollercoaster of big fights, slapstick set-pieces and toilet jokes that cannot fail to enthral young boys. Irresistible for some, unintelligible for many.~WW

DRAGONBALL Z

Viz: *9 issue limited series (Part 1) 1998*, 14 issue limited series (Part 2) 1999-2000*, 10 issue limited series (Part 3) 2000*, 13 issue limited series (Part 4) 2001-2002*, 10 issue limited series (Part 5) 2002*

In Japan, Goku's adventures ran 42 volumes from 1984 to 1995 and he gradually grew up during that period. For the animation series, and therefore for the western markets, the producers chose to run two parallel series. On one hand there are the largely comedic antics of the young superboy appearing in concert with the combat-heavy exploits of the grown warrior and parent Goku Kakkarot in what seems like one continuous landscape-shattering super duel after another.

Part 1 covers the period leading up to the arrival on Earth of two aliens, Nappa and Vegeta, determined to kill Goku and destroy the world. It seems there is an energy force in the universe that beings can be trained to manipulate to give the user mighty powers. On Earth it is known as "Ki" or "Chi" and in the Dragon Ball continuity masters of this energy, usually not from Earth, are called Saiyans. As Goku grows up he eventually learns that he is from the same race as the invaders, albeit of a less pure strain. Forewarned, and knowing he cannot defeat two such powerful masters, Goku dies, and travels the Serpent Road to find and be trained by the Master of Worlds, gaining more Chi and then rushes back to life. Part 2 has his son Gohan and his friends and foes-turned-allies Piccolo, Tenshinhan, Yamcha, Chaozu and Kuririn – all immensely Chi powered themselves – fight a catastrophic holding action until he can return. No sooner does this battle end than the gathered heroes are embroiled in battles with super cyborgs and time travelling alien invaders, in a non-stop fight scene that never seems to end. Well crafted but painfully unrelenting. Even fighting gets boring eventually, but the series continues in *Shonen Jump*.~WW

DRAGONFLIGHT

Eclipse: *3 issue miniseries 1991**

Painted graphic novel adaptation by Brynne Stephens and Lela Dowling. The inevitably abridged nature of the comic-book version expurgates much of the explanation behind the story in Anne McCaffrey's original book. Avoid if unfamiliar with the novel. Flat, wooden dialogue flows like a pile of bricks.~APS

DRAGONFLY

AC: *8 issues 1986-1987**

Nancy Arazello interrupts her boyfriend Ken in the middle of a deal with a demon, and Nancy, blundering in, obtains the powers Ken wanted. The demon, being a petty sort, collects Ken's soul anyway. It's an oddball opening to a series that quickly became a routine, if not badly done, superheroine feature. After the demise of the title, with poor old Ken now a rampaging cyborg, Dragonfly could still be seen as a member of Femforce. 1-2 were collected as 'Cycle of Fire'.~HS

DRAGONFORCE

Aircel: *13 issues 1988-1989, 5 issue miniseries (Dragonforce Chronicles) 1989*

Night Wynd: 8 issue limited series ('The Early Years') 1993

Spinning off from *Dragonring*, the surviving characters shuck their fantasy adventure roots and find themselves miscast in the roles of superheroes in a laborious and slow set of stories notable only for early work from writer/artist Dale Keown. Completists only. At two stories per issue, *Dragonforce Chronicles* reprints Dale Keown drawn issues of Dragonring (10-15) and *Dragonforce* 1-4, while the Night Wynd series reprints the same material.~WW

DRAGONLANCE Comics

DC: *34 issues, 1 Annual 1988-1991*

Based on a role-playing game, à la Dungeons and Dragons, *Dragonlance* is a fantasy adventure that makes the characters 'real', therefore negating the whole point of being able to become them in the game. Mostly drawn by Ron Randall, there's really nothing good to be said about it.~NF

DRAGONRING

Aircel: *6 issue miniseries 1986, 15 issues 1986-1988*

Dragonring began as another Barry Blair mystical adventure title with characters crossing over from *Samurai* and *Elflord* swamping any individual identity. There's early art from Patrick McEown in the second series, and with 9 Dale Keown becomes penciller. His dynamic layouts are apparent from the start, and the cast is rapidly whittled down to a core group of superheroes. Keown writes from 14, and while a vast improvement over earlier issues, these are still very ordinary. 10-15 are reprinted as *Dragonforce Chronicles* 1-3, and the characters would continue as *Dragonforce*.~WJ

Tandra: The DRAGONROK Saga

Hanthercraft: *13 issues 1993-1998*

After spending twenty years on the magazine sized *Tandra*, creator Hanther switched to a comic-size publication. He retains the text and accompanying illustration format, and 1-2 are life as normal on Tandra, but thereafter the story occurs on Earth until 11. The glamorous Tremaine and General Kargor arrive attempting to locate a sword, deliberately drawing attention to themselves with a high-profile campaign establishing them as the first aliens to visit Earth. There are some good jibes at the possible reaction to extraterrestrial life, and 7's superhero parody is well handled, but without the unique background of Tandra to sustain them, Hanther's characters lose their way somewhat, and the constant nudity appears exploitative. This isn't to say the series is bad. It's very good, if largely lacking the title character, but doesn't live up to what came before. 10, however, is essential for explaining most of what Tandra was and is. After 13 Hanther became majorly enamoured with computer technology and has been devoting his time to presenting improved versions of previous stories on CD-Rom. See www.tandra.com for further details.~FP

Recommended: 2, 4, 5, 7, 10

DRAGON'S CLAWS

Marvel UK: *10 issues 1988-1989*

Written by Simon Furman, drawn by Geoff Senior, and clearly influenced by movies like *Rollerball*, *Death Race 2000*, *Star Wars* and *Mad Max*. Set in 'Greater Britain' in 8162, Dragon's Claws are Mercy, Scavenger, Digit, Steel, and leader Dragon, ex-Champions of 'The Game', a murderous free-for-all now outlawed by the World Development Council. After being 'reactivated' by an embittered Agent named Dellar, Dragon's Claws begin new careers as unwilling Government Operatives, paving the way for routine encounters with villains like The Evil Dead (2), or the first version of robot bounty-hunter Death's Head (5). Competent enough stuff, but lacking any of the imagination or sadism that made the UK *Action* future-sport strip 'Death Game 1999' such a guilty pleasure.~AL

DRAGON'S STAR

Matrix: *3 issues 1987**

Caliber: *2 issues 1994*

Based on and set in Mary Ann Bramstrup's Shonn Universe, as seen in her novel 'Courier', Dragon's Star tells the story of Chandra, a young telepath thrown into the deep end of intergalactic intrigue. A half-human, half-Shonn hybrid, Jeremy Hawke, embroils her and frontier scout Marrik

* Available in a collected edition

Hawthorne – a Dragon warrior who is strong like Stallone and charming like Connery – in a mission to prevent the destruction of the galactic empire. The story is well-crafted, with excellent artwork from Ian Carr, confidently unfolding itself, making it a dreadful shame as the black and white comics implosion of 1987 killed it stone dead. In 1992, Caliber collected 3 Matrix issues and added a previously unpublished 70 pages to complete the first story arc. At Caliber Bramstrup returned to Shonn storylines with the Empire at war with the Pandorans, major league Bad Guy species. Hawthorne and Chandra find themselves on a devastated starbase with enemy aliens closing in. Dave Cullen and Peter MacDougall fail to match the charm of Ian Carr, and it all degenerates into standard space opera.~WW
Recommended: *Dragon's Star* collection

DRAGONS IN THE MOON

Aircel: *4 issue miniseries 1990*

For once the paedophile friendly imagery in an Aircel title isn't the work of Barry Blair, unless he's using an alias. This time the guilty party is Xiao Gui, illustrating a story of three young boys naturally adept at magic attempting to outwit an evil brotherhood. It's well enough executed, but the gratuitous pictures of near naked children are inexcusable.~WJ

DRAKUUN

Dark Horse: *24 issues 1997-1999**

Karula and Rosalia are sisters, princesses of Ledomiam. When the Emperor Gustav invades, they are separated and fall into a number of dangerous situations whilst trying to forge some sort of resistance to the occupying forces. One of Gustav's generals, Kurgh, is secretly plotting to take power for himself and tries to enlist Karula's aid by giving her a mystic sword. Gustav's daughter Minerva is soon also under threat from Kurgh's plans whilst Karula and Rosalia each finds herself the object of romantic, as well as murderous, attention. This is another science-fiction epic from Johji Manabe, with action, adventure, humour and a lot of space for the many likeable characters to shine. His artwork's a splendid mix of detail, large scale and cartoon effects. Unfortunately, the final story-arc of the series has not yet been released.~NF
Recommended: 1-24

DRAWN & QUARTERLY

Drawn & Quarterly: *Series one, 10 issues 1990-1992, series two 6 issues 1994-1997, series three 2 issues + (volume 3, volume 4) 2000 to date*

The personal vision of editor and publisher Chris Oliveros shines through this anthology. Primarily a black and white publication in its first incarnation, the rotated use of the few colour pages among regular contributors worked well, and the line-up is impressive when listed. Unfortunately, early contributions are slight, seemingly pages that had been lying around for a while. Only Joe Matt's one-pagers (a selection every issue to 6) and Julie Doucet consistently shine. By the later issues the good material far outweighs the bad, with Maurice Vellekoop's vignettes on gay culture and the likes of Mary Fleener (3-7), Roberta Gregory (7, 8), David Mazzucchelli (9) and Michael Dougan (6-10) all impressing. 8-10 gave an indication of the title's future with translations of Spanish artist Marti's work, and Debbie Drechsler presaging her *Nowhere* series in 10.

The second series is even better, as longer strips gave contributors breathing space. Jacques Tardi's stories of ordinary folk caught in the madness and squalor of World War One's trench warfare are magnificent, Vellekoop continued to impress while Carol Tyler and Avril and Petit Roulet make the first relaunched issue outstanding. Baru's story of an Algerian boxer in France unwillingly caught in his homeland's struggle for independence in 4-6* is also of note. There remained, though, an editorial penchant for well produced, but deadly dull material.

Series three so far consists of two 180 page books, labelled '3' and '4' on the spine. 3 is a gem, featuring thirty pages of the inventive *Gasoline Alley* newspaper strip commemorated via covers and a strip about its creator Frank King by Chris Ware. Other contents include several strips by excellent European artists not previously widely published in English, if at all. They'll not all have universal appeal, but dull material is minimal. Particularly noteworthy are R. Sikoryak's Sprang-era Batman recast in the Dostoyevsky Comics' adaptation of *Crime and Punishment* and Hincker Blutch's vignettes about the history of boxing. The highlight, though, is the 1999 Angoulême Comics Festival's grand prize winner, as Phillipe Dupuy and Charles Berberian present the first full-length novel starring their Monsieur Jean character. All three also appear in series two, 6, and this is a well-observed social comedy as Jean comes to terms with his life while his girlfriend is reconsidering their relationship away in New York. His novel is progressing only slowly, he's encumbered with responsibility for his injured flatmate's incontinent child, and his choices are influenced by an ancient Chinese fable and a possibly fictitious story of a painter in the 1930s. In 4 Sikoryak adapts *The Scarlet Letter* with Little Lulu, there's more of Blutch's boxing stories, more *Gasoline Alley*, and harrowing recollections of Miriam Katin's childhood in revolutionary Hungary and perhaps the first mathematics based comic strips by Ron Rege. The meat of the issue is biographical snippets from the life of *Tintin* creator Hergé, drawn in an approximation of Hergé's style by Stanislas. Dealing with an often puzzling man, with assorted references to his stories, it requires the supplemental index for full comprehension, a failing from the singly named writers Bocquet and Fromental. Overall it falls short of 3, but not by much.~WJ
Recommended: Series one 5, 7, 9, series two 1, 3, 5, volume 3, 4

DRAWN & QUARTERLY Graphic Novels

Drawn & Quarterly magazine specialises in combining top foreign language strips and work from the English-speaking small press. The periodical is supplemented with both collections of compiled strips from its own pages and graphic novels, either new to the general public or reprints enhanced with previously unseen, extra material. *Just the Facts* is a compilation of strips from David Collier, compellingly crafted in the manner of Robert Crumb, and ranging from autobiography to cultural and popular history to just, plain "cool-stuff-we-should-know". Collier is a wonderful example of a creator who would still work if he were the only person left alive. Good stuff. Much of this end of the industry uses perception of the everyday as the theatre for its tales. When the narrative arena is thus restricted, the personal preference of the reader becomes paramount. Both *No Love Lost* by Ariel Bordeaux and *The Fall of Homunculus* by Pentti Otsamo deal with the lives and relationships of the arty, philosophical introspective and disenchanted – the kind of people who read this type of strip. Each brings a highly personalised, art style. Bordeaux's protagonist wants to know why her relationships don't work, and Otsamo's doesn't know how to react to his partner's unplanned pregnancy. Only the latter really works, simply on the basis that it is much better drawn.

James Sturm's *The Golem's Mighty Swing* relates a tale of the early, less enlightened days of Baseball when non-white, non-Christian sportsmen were barred from competing with "real Americans". The Stars of David are a Jewish team, barely eking out a living touring the country, when a sharp promoter makes them a degrading yet potentially lucrative offer... It's a beautifully rendered and powerfully compelling book. *Road to America*, by Baru, also uses sport as a narrative device and metaphor in an award-winning story set in Algeria in the 1950s, when the country was struggling to achieve independence from France. The story documents the bloody rise of an impoverished boxer fighting his way out of the slums to the glittering lights of Paris, in a uncompromising and mesmerising yet never overblown strip.~WW
Recommended: The Golem's Mighty Swing, Road to America

DREAD OF NIGHT

Hamilton: *2 issues 1990*

Count Robespierre is joined by the hosts of Dread of Night's equally dire sister titles, Madraven Stark from *Maggots* and Echo, the ghost who narrates *Grave Tales*. Despite the presence of artists like Gray Morrow and Gene Colan, as well as writer Nick Cuti, we should be grateful that Hamilton comics' attempts to copy the Warren black and white horror format were justly short-lived.~SW

DREADLANDS

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

Fleeing from scavenging mercenaries in an ecologically apocalyptic future, a band of soldiers and scientists end up in what they believe is Earth's distant past. Then the aliens arrive... An uneasy blend of popular science-fiction movie influences (*Aliens, Predator, Terminator*), this never quite gels.~HS

DREADSTAR

Eclipse: *Graphic Novel 1982*
Marvel/Epic: *26 issues, 1 Annual, 1 Graphic Novel, 1982-1986*
First: *38 issues (27-64) 1986-1991*
Bravura: *6 issue miniseries 1994*
Slave Labor: *4 volumes 2001-2002*

After the 'Metamorphosis Odyssey' serial in *Epic Illustrated*, Jim Starlin switched to Eclipse for 'The Price' (reprinted as the Epic annual) and concentrated on the adventures of immortal warrior Vanth Dreadstar. He escapes to a new galaxy (having been largely responsible for destroying his old one) and falls into a cosmic war between Church (The Instrumentality) and State (The Monarchy). Starlin wrote and drew the series, which was the first released under Marvel's Epic imprint, dedicated to the idea that creators who owned their work would, of necessity, produce better quality material.

The Marvel graphic novel, fully painted by Starlin, tells of Dreadstar's arrival on the agricultural planet Delta 219 and subsequent renunciation of violence. He marries Delilah, an Instrumentality anthropologist and the only human on a world of pacifist cat-human hybrids. Becoming a farmer, he enjoys an idyllic life enlivened only by periodic nights out with Syzygy Darklock (Bishop turned wizard from 'The Price') until Monarchy soldiers sent to investigate the planet, originally a test centre for breeding genetically enhanced warriors, slaughter the entire populace. Dreadstar, Syzygy and Oedi, the last Deltan, vow to end the 200 year conflict, which has become essential to the economies of both sides.

In the regular series Vanth and his freedom fighters initiate a long term plan to end the war. Hidden forces thwart them at every turn, however, and the Instrumentality leader The Lord High Papal (a third-rate version of Starlin's earlier creation, Thanos) rapidly takes centre stage. At this point *Dreadstar* devolves into little more than yet another bunch of tights and super-fights mess, meandering along until the title moves to First. The pace picks up immediately, and many long running subplots are swiftly resolved, leading to a final confrontation in 30. 31 reveals the real origin of Dreadstar and redefines his powers for new adventures. With 32 the series enters its only really interesting period as Vanth emerges from a two year coma to find the galaxy slowly recovering from economic chaos and all his surviving friends employed as state bounty hunters tracking down war criminals. 1-6 were reprinted as *Dreadstar & Company*.

This much darker vision coincided with Starlin relinquishing the art. Peter David began writing with 41, with Angel Medina drawing, thus the first mainstream published creator-owned title in decades became indistinguishable from the work for hire comics it was touted as destined to replace. Perhaps coincidentally, it also marked a drastic plunge in quality as the series degenerated into uninspired Space Opera, involving another galaxy, another space war, cosmic gods, stellar Sargassos and even *Star Trek* parodies. It was dead long before its inevitable cancellation. David partially redeemed himself with the 1990s miniseries, illustrated by Ernie Colón, wherein Dreadstar's daughter, raised by the resurrected Lord Papal, searches for her vanished father and her origins. A strong conclusion to an incredibly erratic series. The Slave Labor books start reprinting with 'The Metamorphosis Odyssey', continuing with the Eclipse published 'The Price', then the Marvel graphic novel before beginning on the Epic run.~WW

Recommended: Dreadstar (Marvel Graphic Novel 3), 1-2, 32-40, miniseries 1-6

DREAM ANGEL

Angel: *2 issues 1997, one-shot (Dream Angel and Angel Girl) 1998*

Was the world crying out for another poorly written exploitation comic from David Campiti in 1997? Probably no more so than at any stage for his previous efforts. This barely clad busty beauty wanders the dream realm shedding clothes and sorting problems. 1 has a special guest appearance by everyone's favourite Nazi dictator, your friend and mine, give it up for the one, the only, Adolf Hitler. Crap.~FP

DREAM WOLVES

London Night: *4 issues (0-3) 1993*
Dramenon Studios: *8 issues 1994-1995*
Gothic: *One-shot ('Swimsuit Bizarre #0') 1995*

The original storyline, in the London Night issues, has Carnifex as a politician and vampire, hunted by Desiree, a werewolf, for the murder of her mother, but in the Dramenon series, Carnifex is the werewolf, driven from his wolf pack, who attacks Desiree, causing her to become a werewolf, too. While Desiree tries to come to terms with her transformation, Carnifex is attacked by a vampire and become even more dangerous. In New Orleans, with her friend, Wendy, a romance blossoms, but Carnifex is not ready to let Desiree escape. 4-5 are a crossover with another of Daniel Presedo's series, *Practice in Pain*. The artwork uses photographs or computer-generated backgrounds, mostly not very successfully as they contrast badly with the scratchy artwork. Gothic were meant to be producing a further miniseries completing the story, but nothing has yet appeared.~NF

DREAMERY

Eclipse: *14 issues 1986-1989*

This fantasy anthology is probably best remembered for carrying the earlier appearances of Donna Barr's gentleman centaur, 'Stinz', but the other features, Cathy Hill's 'Mad Raccoons' and Lela Dowling's 'Alice in Wonderland', are also charming and eminently readable.~HS

THE DREAMING

DC/Vertigo: *60 issues, 1 Special 1996-2001*

Using various characters and concepts established in The Sandman, the title is taken from Sandman's kingdom. The series begins with various stories of different lengths, by different creative teams. The best of these is Terry LaBan and Peter Snejbjerg's tale of Goldie, the pet Gargoyle belonging to Abel from the *House of Mystery* (1-3). LaBan shows a keen understanding of the characters while Snejbjerg's artwork is a pleasure. Peter Hogan and Steve Parkhouse tell the tale of a man displaced from the 1950s in 4-7, and Alisa Kwitney and Michael Zulli tell the origin of Cain (8) while Jeff Nicholson (15) describes, in his blank-face way, how Bob's blue-collar dreams lead to a suicide.

Caitlin R. Kiernan effectively becomes series writer with a Corinthian tale (17-19) and one in which raven, Matthew reverts to human form (22-24). 26-34 deal with retaliation by Abel against Cain and a sequence of shorter stories have art from Snejbjerg (27, 29), John Totleben (33) and Marc Hempel (34) amongst others. 36-38 introduce regular penciller Christian Hojgaard and are a sequel to 'The Girl Who Would Be Death', while 39's dream sequence drawn by Shawn McManus is based on 'The Kindly Ones' from *Sandman* 57-69. 39-49 are effectively one storyline, as Madelaine, the Thessalian, Nuala and Lucien struggle against the will of

Titania. Both 50 and 55 have a number of guest artists, 55 in particular gathering a diverse group of artists together, including Daniel Torres, Paul Pope, Michael Kaluta and Adam Hughes. Bill Willingham's tale of Danny Nod, library assistant, collecting fable and folklore volumes from various parts of the Dreaming, is clever and entertaining. 52-54 and 57-60, complete long-running plotlines about the Corinthian and Cain, while Steve Leialoha (56) illustrates the story of how Edgar Allan Poe's cat saved him from despair. The special by Len Wein and Brian Apthorp puts Cain on trial for the repeated murder of Abel, with an unfortunately all too obvious outcome. Kiernan and Hojgaard provide some interesting and well drawn issues, and though the scope of the series is limited by linking it closely with past storylines, this provides a steady background from which to launch into the non-continuity stories. 1-8 are collected, and a second volume reprints 15-19 and 22-25.~NF

Recommended: 55

DREAMSMITH STUDIO'S BOOK

Dreamsmith Studio: *2 issues 1998*

Dreamsmith Studio is Ben Capozzi, who wrote the three historical fantasy stories in these squarebound comics and found good artists to draw them. Kevin Sharpe is the best, obviously influenced by George Pérez, who inks his first issue cover. Sharpe draws a story of Norsemen and werewolves in both issues, and the second chapter of 'Chimera' about a druid on a mission. Richard Pollard pencils 'Anna', whose father is the greatest craftsman of olden times. Credit should also be given for the smooth inking of Chris Dreier throughout. Capozzi is a decent writer, but if there's a criticism of the stories it's that there's not enough variety to the settings. On the other hand decent fantasy comics have been few, and two years later CrossGen would prove them saleable, so it's a shame this ambitious effort floundered.~WJ

DREAMWALKER

Dreamwalker Press: *5 issues 1995-1996*
Tapestry: *6 issues 1996-1998*
Avatar: *1 issue (0) 1999, 2 issue microseries ('Carousel') 1999, one-shot ('Summer Rain') 1999, 2 issue microseries ('Autumn Leaves') 1999*

When sleeping, medical receptionist Karen Brinson has the subconscious ability to enter and interact with the dreams of others. At first this is rather a puzzling surprise, but after a real heartbreaker in 2 she seeks help in the form of her neighbour, very at home in dreams. Despite the dreams, this is very much well-characterised slice of life material, but for some the pacing of the story may seem a little slow with too many talking heads. Their loss, as this would translate well to television and novelisation. By the Tapestry issues Jenni Gregory's initially awkward art has developed well into the type of simple expressive linework practiced by Terry Moore, and the story continues to twist away from expectations. Karen has to learn how to apply her ability to real world use when the Doctor for whom she works is lost in Brazil. The conclusion occurs in the first Avatar issue, otherwise a stepping-on point, while 'Summer Rain' reprints two short stories along with a new piece serving as a taster for 'Autumn Leaves'. ~FP

Recommended: 'Carousel' 1-2

DREDD by BISLEY

Fleetway: *One-Shot 1993*

Collecting and reprinting the Judge Dredd strips produced for *Rock Power Magazine*. The art is standard Bisley stuff but the stories, produced for adult heavy metal fans and intended for simultaneous release in seven European countries are some of the simplest, not to say dumbest, tosh ever produced. They're also available as a British collection titled *Heavy Metal Dredd*.~WW

DRIPPYTOWN COMICS

The Drippytown Manufacturing Concern: *1 issue + 2002 to date*

A rather aimless collection of material in the "let's throw the comic right here!" style. The lack of direction is summed up by contrasting the heartfelt contribution of Colin Upton, bemoaning political ignorance and corporate control, with the largely nihilistic and frankly pointless strips surrounding it. Tony Millionaire is the only other notable contributor, and James Lloyd is a good cartoonist and his inside back cover strip the only other worthwhile contribution. A wasted opportunity.~WJ

Star Wars DROIDS

Dark Horse: *6 issue miniseries 1994*, one-shot 1995, 8 issues 1995**

Being consistent with the films, there's a lighter touch applied to those loveable robotic personalities R2D2 and C3PO than is present in the remainder of the Star Wars titles. The miniseries is six tales, loosely connected by the droids being entrusted with the guardianship of a young industrial heir. It's set in a period prior to their Star Wars escapades, and the later one-shot details how they came to be in service. Dan Thorsland's light adventure scripts manage little more than filling up 24 pages, and his best issue is 3 by virtue of even knocked out Ian Gibson artwork being preferable to that of Bill Hughes. Gibson also illustrates 5, written by Ryder Windham, and that's the team responsible for 1-4 of the ongoing series. Gibson's on better form here, but the story ploughs much the same ground as those in the miniseries. Jan Strnad's effort in 5-8 is far better, as the droids fall foul of an unhinged dictator in search of an enslavement drug. It's matched by much improved Hughes art, and is the only story worth reading in the series. The later *Star Wars* one-shot 'The Protocol Offensive' is a Droids tale in all but name.~FP

Tex Avery's DROOPY

Dark Horse: *3 issues 1995*

Another failed attempt to bring cartoons to life in comics. Droopy's appeal is in no small part due to the fixed hangdog expression and drone of a voice. The latter's absence reduces the impact of these already weak strips. The back-ups featuring other Avery creations similarly fail to live up to cinema cartoons.~WJ

DRUID

Marvel: *4 issues 1995*

Doctor Druid was a dated mystic dredged out of Marvel's 1950s mystery titles in the early 1980s, eventually graduating to membership of the Avengers in a desperate attempt to popularise him. Always a third-stringer, there was plenty of scope for revamping. Warren Ellis turns in a tattooed, misanthropic sociopath in an ill-advised attempt to deliver the first New-Age horror comic. A total yawner.~HS

DRUNKEN FIST

Jademan: *54 issues 1988-1992*

Titled after a form of kung-fu, this is largely an ensemble piece, prone to switching focus for issues at a time, but shares the failings of the Jademan line in general. On the positive side there's a decent amount of pages (anything up to sixty-two), and, on occasion, a little more story than other Jademan comics. The tendency though, is still towards page long sequences of kung-fu. The plot boils down to the conflict between Chek Fai and the Invincible Swordsman, as a child with a destiny, Porky, grows up as their battles occur. Populated by an imaginative cast of villains, with artwork credited to publisher Tony Wong, any issue will provide a sample of what's on offer. Try 14 with Fai's wedding.~FP

DRUUNA

Catalan: *2 volumes 1990-1992*
Heavy Metal: *7 volumes 1993-2001*

If you're into tits and ass, you'll like Paulo Eleuteri Serpieri's creation Druuna, even if you've never had an interest in post-apocalyptic interstellar shenanigans. All stories first ran in *Heavy Metal*, so if you're looking for a cheaper version the cover dates of the issue concerned are provided. What sets Serpieri's creation apart from other attempts at adventure porn is his superb draughtsmanship: the guy could draw for his country. Not only does the soft-faced, round-assed Druuna look gorgeous, everything else is beautifully

* Available in a collected edition

delineated, even the hideous zombies, rotting cities, computer rooms and grimy sewers which seem to provide the backdrop for most of her adventures. Druuna's plot is like a Russian doll – each book opens one up to find another story hidden inside. We start, in *Morbus Gravis*, originally published by Catalan, and split over two volumes (Summer 1986 and Spring 1988), with the premise that most of the population has succumbed to a mysterious plague that's turned them into hideous mutants. The few 'normal' people need a special serum to survive. Druuna has more problems than most: her lover has half mutated and she'll do whatever's necessary to get more serum and keep him from turning into a monster. Then Druuna is contacted telepathically by the mysterious Lewis, leading her on a chase to save the city from destruction. Only it isn't a city, as she discovers in *Creatura* (November 1992), when she awakens on a devastated world and falls into the grasp of a strange bunch of sex-obsessed humans, the only survivors, and is rescued by a spaceship, seemingly from another dimension. In *Mandragora* (September 1995) she realises that the spaceship isn't what it seems as its computer begins to evolve and... Well, you get the idea (and it's continued in Aphrodisia (issue 170), *Carnivora* (July 1993), and *The Forgotten Planet* (May 2001).

Making it satisfying on both fronts, Serpieri manages to balance telling a rollicking story with lots of sex, some of it quite sadistic, although the worst is cut out, making some later books a bit jerky when whole pages of violent sex are removed. Amongst the strip volumes, there are also a number of Druuna collections (*Druuna X*, *Serpieri Sketchbook*, *Obsession*, *Druuna X 2*, and *Sweet Smell of Success*), featuring essays, sketches and layouts by Serpieri, in which he discusses his "obsession" with his own character. The raunchiest are the two *Druuna* X books.~FJ

Recommended: *Morbus Gravis* 1 and 2

DUCK TALES

Gladstone: *12 issues 1988-1990*

Disney: *19 issues 1990-1991, One-shot ('Dime After Dime') 1991*

How ideas fold back on themselves. Carl Barks' Uncle Scrooge stories inspired a TV cartoon christened *Duck Tales*, which in turn ended up as a comic. 1-2 have the Disney TV animation studio adapting episodes of the show, although they turn their hands to original material after that, and there are Barks reprints feature throughout. The better issues are those concentrating on Scrooge, Huey, Dewey and Louie, and avoiding the characters created for the TV show. The well intentioned but inept pilot Launchpad McQuack grates, as does the saccharine Webbigail, although matronly housekeeper Mrs Beakly has charm. William Van Horn either writes or draws most issues from 5, and does a decent job. His stories were later collected in slim volumes clunkily titled *Walt Disney's Uncle Scrooge Adventures in Color by William Van Horn*. With Disney temporarily deciding to publish their own comics, *Duck Tales* becomes the first title to run continued stories with Disney characters (although each issue is a self-contained part of the longer story). The reprints are cut, and 1-7 detail attempts to retrieve Scrooge's number one dime from Magica De Spell, followed by another six part tale. As with the Gladstone issues, the stories are fine, but fall far short of the Barks material that inspired them. This also applies to the squarebound one-shot reprinting material written by Americans (including Michael Gilbert) for the European market.~WJ

DUCKMAN

Dark Horse: *One Shot 1990*

After an appearance in *Dark Horse Presents* 22 Everett Peck's working class slob and inept Private Eye sidles his surreal, histrionic way through a collection of sordid, shocking, surreal and bleakly funny tales. Worth a look.~WW

Recommended

DUCKMAN

Topps: 3 issue miniseries 1994 ('The Mob Frog Saga'), 5 issues 1994-1995

In the miniseries Duckman tries to join the underworld only to accidentally murder his own gang boss during his initiation. Then things really start to go wrong... Stefan Petrucha and Jay Lynch tell a yarn that's more for TV fans than comic readers. The ongoing series is based on the animated TV show. It tries, but comes off a castrated second best to the Dark Horse issue, with poorly conceived, episodic tales from Stefan Petrucha and Gary Fields.~WW

DUKE SNIDER

Magnum: *1 issue 1992*

Professional runs through the careers of Brooklyn Dodgers centre-fielder Snider and Giants pitcher Sal 'The Barber' Maglie by Joe Orsak. Hardly in depth, this first and only issue of a planned three takes Snider's life to 1949, his breakthrough year. Snider may have been the more highly regarded player, but from the brief run-through Maglie gets as the back-up it would seem he had the more interesting career.~FP

DUNCAN'S KINGDOM

Image: *2 issue microseries 1999*

Reminiscent of Wally Wood's *Wizard King*, this is a psychodrama cleverly dressed as a bigfoot sword and sorcery tale. Duncan is the stringbean protagonist who becomes a reluctant hero thanks to the mysterious Brother Patchwork. Beset by persisting dreams of a far more mundane world, Duncan is finally forced to come to terms with his reality. Unobtrusively written by Gene Yang with efficient, clearline artwork by Derek Kirk, the story is given just enough darkness and mystery to disturb with its dreamlike qualities. These guys really know what they're doing.~SW

The DUNG BOYS

Kitchen Sink: *3 issue miniseries 1996*

A disjointed anarchist romp starring Hillary and her roadmates Stickee and the silent Benji out in middle America. As they are wrecking, shooting and insulting everything in their path they meet fellow sociopaths Clyde Hayseed, Lou in her bra-top, and a degenerate circus troupe. There is no plot, just lots of destruction. Author Robb Conaway is clearly a very talented artist, but his attempt at a *Tank Girl* knock-off extends to emulating the useless, sloganistic writing style too. Pseudo-nihilistic crap.~SW

DUNGEON

NBM: *3 issues + 2002 to date*

The Dungeon is immense, capped by four towers and a little world in its own right, peopled with monsters and phantoms. Amongst other adventures in 1-2, Herbert the Duck and Marvin the Dragon pose as interior decorators in an effort to infiltrate the headquarters of the soul-eating Hooded Ones. A new adventure begins in 3, as Herbert crosses the path of Sonja the Huge and tries to learn how to be a warrior so that his Belt of Destiny will allow him to draw his sword. Each two-issue storyline is reprinted from a single volume of the original French editions by Joann Sfar and Lewis Trondheim. Something is lost in the use of grey shades instead of the riotous colours of the originals, but Sfar's zany comedy and Trondheim's terrific cartoons are still a delight.~NF

David Greenberger's DUPLEX PLANET Illustrated

Fantagraphics: *15 issues 1991-1996*

David Greenberger, toiler in a retirement home, gets residents to tell him stories or answer questions. Transcribing the responses, since 1979 he's been publishing an infrequent magazine featuring their comments and anecdotes. A cult item, the poems of one resident have been set to music by various artists, and this title has Greenberger's transcriptions illustrated by various comic artists. Notable contributors include Chris Ware (2, 15), Jason Lutes (3, 4), Peter Kuper (4, 6), Mark Martin (5, 8, 11), J.R. Williams (2, 3, 5, 7, 10, 12) and Wayno in almost every issue. The comments are occasionally surprisingly moving, but more often just wandering and pointless.~HS

DUSTY STAR

Image: *2 issues (0-1) 1997*

Dusty is a hard-hitting no-nonsense sort of woman who, for reasons unrevealed, is being warned off from visiting the town of Bradstreet by various lowlifes. Dusty rides through a traditional wild west setting but with robotic adversaries and computers that help you play poker. The first two short stories in the first issue are reprinted from Negative Burn while the third sets the scene for the regular series, of which only the first issue has so far appeared. Joe Pruett and Andrew Robinson, writer and artist respectively, lace the strip with humour and hint at an interesting story waiting to be told. Stylistically, the artwork can be compared to that of Philip Bond but that's not to suggest that it's derivative.~NF

DV8

Image: *25 issues, 1 Annual 1996-1999*
WildStorm: 8 issues (0, 26-32), 1 Annual, one-shot ('Wild Times') 1999

Designed to be an antidote to the feelgood nature of Gen13, DV8 are similarly a team of young gen-actives led by Ivana Baiul, a former government operative. She plans to use the 'Deviants' as a spoiler force against other intelligence agencies, though what this means in practice is unclear. Threshold, Bliss, Frostbite, Sublime, Evo, Powerhaus and Copycat are a nasty bunch as written by Warren Ellis (1-8*) and Mike Heisler, though as the series progresses there is growth that sees them begin to take more responsibility for themselves and their actions.

A new member, Freestyle is introduced in 11, just before Ivana's relationship with International Operations (I.O.) is put on a formal footing with her as its head (13). One team member goes mad in 14 as a result of the drugs and mind-control being used against him by Ivana, while Grifter guest stars in 18. The Slipstream storyline running in 24-25 and the 1999 DV8 and Gen^{13} Annuals concerns an alternate reality and results in a death. Another member is sacked in 26, and later apparently dies in the final story arc, which sees them fighting for independence. *DV8 Rave* and an Image Preview issue contain background information on the characters and series, as well as a short story in the case of the latter. Artists include Humberto Ramos (1,2, 4-7), Juvaun Kirby (8-13), Tom Raney (14-16) and Al Rio (19-30). All do a reasonable job but the changing styles detract from the labyrinthine elements of the plotting and, after Ramos, can't keep up with the underlying down and dirty nature of the series. It's something of a tribute to Heisler that he manages to make anyone sympathetic after the Ellis issues, but the main enjoyment is the character interaction as the team's adversaries tend to be repetitive and dull.~NF

DV8 VS BLACKOPS

Image: *3 issue miniseries 1997*

Reading their letter pages, creators Shon Bury and Dan Norton, think they've produced a minor masterpiece. Back in the real world, we have a battle between a bunch of super-powered critters and a hi-tech government team with big weapons, both trying to get their hands on some super-duper technology. Not exactly a great plot, but the art is decent, even if the high production value colouring actually confuses the eye. What really lets this down is the distasteful and unnecessary violence. There's no respect here for human life, or a decent character in either organisation. For some good to result from all the violence the teams would have to kill each other. Alas, they all survive. Who needs role models like these?~HY

DYKE'S DELIGHT

Fanny: *2 issues 1993-1995*

Collection of lesbian cartoonists, edited by Kate Charlesworth and fronted by her amazing Auntie Studs character. Other contributors include Roberta Gregory, Griselda Grislingham, Jeremy Dennis and Lucy Byatt. Funny, wry and occasionally heart-rending, but sadly currently on hiatus. It's hoped further issues are in the pipeline.~HS
Recommended: 1, 2

DYLAN DOG

Dark Horse/Bonelli: *6 issue miniseries 1999*

The adventures of paranormal investigator Dylan Dog have been enormously successful in Italy since their 1986 introduction. Conceived and written by Tiziano Sclavi, a variety of artists illustrate these 96 page paperbacks, each adorned with a Mike Mignola cover. The plots, though, are very much at odds with the largely stylish art, the occasional poetic touches being submerged in old-fashioned Hammer horror sensibilities. Dylan Dog himself often performs as if programmed, and the eccentricity of having Groucho Marx as his assistant is a joke that's expired before the end of 1, which, oddly for an introductory volume, is the poorest of the run. The best issue is 6, with Dylan wandering London at night, followed by an axe murderer, or try 2 with Andrea Venturi's Neal Adams influenced art and a disturbing tale of an artistic prodigy who's also a legless deaf mute! Credit to Dark Horse for the reasonable cover price.~FP

DYNAMITE DAMSELS

Solo: *One-shot 1976*

Not quite Roberta Gregory's début, but her first major impact on the underground comics scene. The majority of the comic concerns Freida Phelps' struggle to attain her own identity and purpose, wrestling with issues of gender politics and sexuality. Far from being didactic, however, these strips are tender, wry and moving, with Freida's self-questioning confusion being oddly endearing. The stories at the front and back of the issue are fantasies: 'Superdyke' and 'Liberatia', one a naïve power trip, the other a bitter-sweet fable about a separationist nation of women.~HS
Recommended

DYNAMO

Tower: *4 issues 1966-1967*

In *T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents* 1 Len Brown was fitted with a belt that made him a superman for limited periods. Main writer and artist Wally Wood took Stan Lee's 'common touch' route with the character, portraying Len as a bit of a dope, albeit an heroic one with designs on the chief's daughter Alice. All 4 issues feature stories with Wood's distinctive inks, including a memorable teaming with Steve Ditko in 1. Other pencillers include Reed Crandall in 1, Ogden Whitney in 2, and Wood's credited collaborations with his assistant Dan Adkins throughout, some of which form a loose continuity about contact with an extra terrestrial race of telepaths resolved in 4. Other artists include Mike Sekowsky and Chic Stone. The scripts manage an entertaining balance of romantic gaffes and the defeat of numerous would-be tyrants and acronymic spy organisations. The 'Weed' back-up begun by Wood in 1 and continued by George Tuska is usually funny and rounds the sixty-eight page packages out nicely. These lightweight 1960s comics remain good, clean fun.~SW

DYNAMO JOE

First: *15 issues, 1 Special 1986-1988*

Dynamo Joe's back-up strips in Mars 10-12 are reprinted in the Special, and he then shared *First Adventures* before his own title. In the future humans are one of three races peacefully cohabiting. The peace is shattered by the arrival of a seemingly invincible new race, only temporarily halted by the seventy-foot-tall Dynamo battle suits. These suits are humanoid in shape for maximum mobility for the two occupants, and have a number of potent weapons. Yup, this is the American equivalent of the Japanese robot comic. There's a well-conceived political backdrop to the ongoing conflict, with a similarity to plots later used in *Babylon 5*. Often unpredictable, but it sticks closely enough to the restrictions of its genre to ensure it'll only appeal to those already hungry for giant robot titles.~WJ

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EAGLE

Crystal: *16 issues 1986-1988*
Apple: *7 issues (17-23) 1988-1990*
Comic Zone: *4 issue miniseries 1992*

On a world where alien contact was made in the 19th century, Crystal City is rife with corruption from the Mayor down, but Eagle is a mysterious scourge of criminal elements. There are plenty of them, ranging from a martial arts cult to assorted mutated beings and a mysterious silent juggernaut. Eagle possesses a mysterious sentient orb offering abilities such as teleportation and communion with the recently deceased, but it's only used sparingly as he has good reason to consider its intentions less than benign. Luckily he can fall back on not insignificant martial arts talents. A wealth of backstory and a rich cast permit Eagle himself to remain the cipher until his origin in 12. There's the occasional Ditkoesque quality to the art of Neil Vokes and Rich Rankin (with Adam Hughes backgrounds on 8-12), and certainly to the writing of Jack Herman. 12 concludes the first story, and subsequent issues are less satisfactory, although the never completed six part story started in 20 was an upward curve. At the time of cancellation the creators offered a synopsis of the planned conclusion to anyone who sent a stamped envelope. The miniseries moves on to other matters, but 1-12 remain the issues to read.~WJ

EAGLE:The Making of an Asian-American President

Viz: *22 volumes 2000-2001*

As the subtitle suggests, this is the story of how Senator Kenneth Yamaoka, an American of Japanese descent, declares himself a candidate for President of the United States. On one level this is the straightforward story of his struggle to how he becomes the official Democratic Party candidate and what happens during the Presidential election of 2000 (including guest appearances from the Clintons). The introduction of Japanese reporter, Takashi Jo, Yamaoka's illegitimate son forms the basis for much of the intrigue in the series and provides another voice to be offset against Yamaoka's apparently altruistic actions – only he knows Jo's true identity. Alongside the political storyline, there's a romance between Jo and Yamaoka's adopted daughter, which is threatened by allegations that she's his real daughter. There's also the mystery of whether Yamaoka is as noble as he appears to be as Jo begins to suspect that his mother's recent death was not an accident.

Creator Kaiji Kawaguchi takes the reader on a tour of American politics, illustrating how the system works on the surface and behind the scenes, covering the compromises and the media battlefields as well as the desperation of both candidates and voters. On top of all this, Kawaguchi's Yamaoka expresses a political doctrine that borders on the fascistic cult of the individual whilst espousing a desire to hand back the real decisions to an informed populace (see *Sanctuary* for similar ideals in a purely Japanese context). So, depending on how much you want out of it, this is a suspenseful political thriller, a satire on US elections or a challenge to your political beliefs.~NF
Recommended: 1-22

EARTH 4

Continuity: *Series one 3 issues 1993, series two 4 issues 1994*

A bizarre numbering system barely hides the fact that *Earth 4* is in fact *Urth 4*, although someone clearly learned how to spell in the interim. As before, the writing is barely readable, but tragically the art from Walter McDaniel (and a cast of thousands on inks) owes more to Image than to Neal Adams. Lamentable stuff, with the first series being part of the company-wide 'Deathwatch 2000' crossover.~DAR

EARTH X

Marvel: *14 issue limited series (0-12, X) 1999-2000**

Twenty years in the future, the now blind Watcher (Uatu) kidnaps X-51, teleports him to the moon and forces him to become the new Watcher of Earth. After a quick fire fast forward through Marvel Earth's pre-history in 0, X-51 is brought up to scratch and reports current events back to Uatu. In this alternate future, all humans mutated and gained super powers ten years earlier. The plot flows like treacle as the constant dialogue between Uatu and X-51 serves as the vehicle for transmitting enigmatic crumbs of information to the reader, much of which is nauseatingly repeated time after time. Yet Jim Krueger and Alex Ross's sombre, dour story delivers loving touches of Marvel's history, rendering this series unsuitable for neophytes to the Marvel canon. John Paul Leon and Bill Reinhold's artwork is muted yet strangely engaging. Most issues are backed up by five to eight page appendices containing text features that merely continue that issue's graphic story, thus giving a somewhat unfinished feeling. Sampling any individual issue provides the flavour. Thereafter it's all or nothing. *Earth X* spawned sequels *Universe X* and *Paradise X*.~APS

EAST MEETS WEST

Innovation: *1 issue 1990*

Considering so much is made of his credentials as a film storyboard artist, it might be assumed that Paul Power could tell a story. He might be able to were he not so concerned shovelling his old comic strips between portions of a new story. That story is meandering and confusing, Power's art is now competent, but hardly distinguished and only the one issue of three was published. Three strikes. Yeeeeerrrrrr out!~FP

EAT-MAN

Viz: *6 issue miniseries 1997*, 5 issue miniseries ('Second Course') 1998**

Bolt Crank is an explorer in a futuristic yet desolate world where magic and sorcery co-exist with advanced technology. He's also an adventurer for hire whose abilities are usually at the service of the underdog. There's generally a pretty girl involved somewhere, but he always ends up walking off into the sunset on his own. His greatest asset is the element of surprise that he creates by being able to transform his arm into whatever weapon he last ate. A typical panel early in the story sees him swallowing some nuts and bolts. Sharply rendered grey tones and a healthy dose of humour make this a very attractive series even if creator Akihito Yoshitomi lays on the enigma a little too heavily at times.~NF
Recommended: 'Second Course' 1-5

EATING RAOUL

Mercury Film Distribution: *One-shot 1982*

This oddity was distributed through cinemas accompanying Paul Bartel's decidedly offbeat, independent film *Eating Raoul*. Uptight Paul and Mary Brand dream of opening a restaurant, but their dream is fading until a chance encounter with a swingers party. Realising there's money to be made from sex, they lure prospective clients to their place and murder them. Their nest-egg is accumulating nicely when the scheme is rumbled by crooked lockfitter Raoul, at which point things become complex. The sexual themes apart, Bartel's script could almost be a classic Hepburn and Stewart movie. It's hilarious, and this excellent adaptation by Kim Deitch is a rare instance where a comic of his doesn't connect to his intricately contrived and interlinking stories.~FP
Recommended

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* Available in a collected edition

ECHIDNA VARIATIONS

Damn Fine!: *1 issue 1996*

For a comic which, as writer/artist Lee Brimmicombe-Wood states, was "bashed out in ten days flat", this tale of three weird characters (a man, a woman, and an anthropomorphic cat) who stumble across giant robots in the desert is surprisingly slick and accomplished looking. The content, however, is so lightweight that it would blow away if you sneezed injudiciously. Intended to be continued, but so far no second issue has emerged.~HS

ECHO

Image: *5 issues 2000-2001*

A successful American attempt at capturing the spirit of Japanese action animation with good artwork from Long Vo, stunningly enhanced by colour and effects work he creates with Charles Park. That's not to suggest the story takes second place, though. In 2044 Echos are complex holograms capable of mimicking humans in every respect, and it requires special technology to reveal the deception. A team of covert operatives is charged with this task, and the back story of each is woven into the series by writer Ken Siu-Chong. There is also an inessential zero issue, which provides extra background information for the converted, but the series was just left hanging.~FP

ECHO OF FUTUREPAST

Continuity: *9 issues 1984-1986*

Ambitious if flawed attempt to create a *Heavy Metal*-style comic. Starting with the artistic line-up of Mike Golden, Neal Adams and Arthur Suydam on 'Bucky O'Hare' (1-6), 'Frankenstein' (1-5) and 'Mudwogs' (1-5) respectively, the title seemed likely to attract a following even if Jean Teule's 'Virus' (1, 3, 4, 6, 7) and Lindley Farley and Louis Mitchell's 'Tippie Toe Jones' (1, 5-9) were less inspiring. 'AE-35' (6-9) by the little-known Tim Ryan and William Jungkuntz, a science-fiction thriller, showed promise. The real bravery of the title was in including non-US material, but deciding to colour it, presumably for commercial reasons, now seems a mistake. Though creditable, the colours hide too much of the subtlety of Toth and Bernet's work on 'Torpedo' (8, 9) and Giminez' work on 'The Damned City' (7-9). Apart from Torpedo, the real strength of the title is in its artists, and the mix of science fiction, fantasy and thrillers should have provided the variety that keeps as many readers as possible coming back for more. However, it ceased publication with 9, leaving all the stories unfinished.~NF

ECLIPSE Graphic Novels

Early on, Eclipse were innovators in seeing the idea of stand-alone works for a more mature audience, and also in bringing a number of classics to the attention of a new audience. Their graphic novel line, though, was a real hodge-podge of reprints (both of their own and other companies work from the 1940s to present day), translations and original material, produced in a number of formats that we might not easily recognise as graphic novels today. For titles also having their own series, look under that entry.

Among the most important reprint collections are *Zorro in Old California*, more swashbuckling adventures by Nedaud and Marcello, translated from the French, and *Real Love*, a collection of Simon and Kirby romance strips from the 1950s. *Fast Fiction* reprints a rather poor version of Rider Haggard's *She* by Vincent Napoli, which originally appeared in the Fast Fiction series *Famous Authors Illustrated*.

The rest of the originated material is of very mixed quality. Worth a look is *Brought to Light*, a hard-hitting political book containing two stories about American atrocities in Central America, one written by Alan Moore and the other by Joyce Brabner. The desire to instruct occasionally gets the better of the pacing, but Bill Sienkiewicz's elliptical art on Moore's script gives it subtlety. *Floyd Farland*, by a then nineteen-year-old Chris Ware, reworks his newspaper strips from *The Daily Texan*. In an Orwell-style dictatorship, Floyd is so conformist that the authorities think he's involved with a new, subversive movement, but he's immune to their brainwashing techniques because he already believes. A curiosity in light of his extraordinary later work. *Stewart the Rat* is Steve Gerber's rather unsuccessful attempt to recreate the satirical appeal of *Howard the Duck*, drawn by Gene Colan. *Sisterhood of Steel*, by Christy Marx and Peter Ledger, continues their story from Epic Illustrated about an island of female mercenaries and is pappy stuff, if prettily drawn. *Samurai, Son of Death* is a US/Japanese collaboration. Sharman DiVono (writer) and Hiroshi Hirata (artist) base their tale on 16th-century Japanese history for a story about a samurai who seems to have returned from the dead.

Finally, there are two real curiosities. *Pigeons From Hell* is Scott Hampton's adaptation of Robert E. Howard's quite awful epic poem (poetry was the very least of Howard's accomplishments, way down the list below shooting, mother-fixating and self-pitying) and XYR is a choose-your-own-plot fantasy story. It's rather like a role-playing game book, where you read different bits in different orders depending on what you feel like.~NF

Recommended: Real Love

ECLIPSE Monthly

Eclipse: *Series one 8 issues 1981-1983, series two (comic size) 10 issues 1983-1984*

High-quality mainstream anthology, with good production values and an adventure-based remit. *Eclipse Monthly* mixed superheroes and Westerns, moral tales and thrillers, and featured a star-studded line-up. Steve Ditko's 'Static', while not the work of a creator at the peak of his powers, is still a thing of wonder (series two 1-3), and Doug Wildey's complex Western, Rio (1-4, 9-10), equals Clint Eastwood's finest efforts in the genre. Steve Englehart and Marshall Rogers' Coyote appeared in series one 2-8 before spinning off into its own Epic title, and Don McGregor and Gene Colan's 'Ragamuffins' was a far-sighted attempt – with its pencil-only artwork and reflective insight into the terrors and pressures of childhood – to expand what was an acceptable topic for a comic story. Although not to everyone's taste, Trina Robbins' stylised adaptation of a neglected and rather risqué Sax Rohmer pulp, *Dope*, is sympathetically executed. Although relying on a backbone of superhero adventures (such as B. C. Boyer's *Spirit* homage The Masked Man and Mark Evanier and Mike Sekowsky's Nightingale), *Eclipse Monthly* got the best out of its contributors and is a lasting monument to the publishing company. The first series is a black and white magazine with occasional colour pages, but the second is traditional comic format.~FJ

Recommended: Series one 2, series two 1-3, 10

ECLIPSO

DC: *2 issue microseries ('The Darkness Within') 1992, 18 issues 1992-1994*

The first two issues start and finish DC's 1992 big crossover in which Eclipso, an evil, god-like creature, takes over the bodies of various superheroes in order to destroy the Earth. Like all good characters he has a major fatal flaw: light. Bruce Gordon, the scientist who unleashed Eclipso, secretly puts together a group of superheroes to fight him, while a separate team under Hawkman is infiltrated by a possessed Starman. It all ends badly for Starman and nothing is really resolved (as if we expected it to be) because Eclipso's own series was due in a few months. Not bad, as crossovers go, written by Keith Giffen and Robert Loren Fleming, drawn by Bart Sears, but equally as disappointing as they tend to be, promising much but changing little.

For the ongoing title *Eclipso* takes over the South American country of Parador, killing a lot of people in the process. Bruce Gordon puts together another Eclipso SWAT team, including The Creeper, Cave Carson and Amanda Waller (from *Suicide Squad*). Darkseid turns up to emphasise how big a bad guy Eclipso is in the DC Universe and in 11 additional heroes turn up to continue the fight against him, including Commander Steel, Dr Midnight, Major Victory, Manhunter, Nemesis, Peacemaker and Wildcat. The series tries hard to be different – Eclipso is both villain and host – but in the end it becomes another team book because Eclipso's evil is too downbeat and serious for him to carry the narrative by himself. By far the best issues are 7 and 8, Eclipso vs Sherlock Holmes, by regular writer Robert Loren Fleming and guest penciller Ted McKeever. An unlikely recipe, but it works.~NF

Recommended: 7, 8

ECTOKID

Marvel/Razorline: *9 issues, 1 Special 1993-1994*

The result of a union between ghost and human, Dex Mungo is able to walk the Ectosphere, where the deceased exist. An interesting idea, initially well handled, soon descends into a standard human-battles-demons title. The special, titled *Ectokid Unleashed*, is an improvement and ties up loose ends from the series.~FP

EDEN

Ironcat: *6 issue miniseries, 1 volume + 2002 to date*

Not quite hardcore collection of short stories, prettily produced, on subjects of sexual conquest, escape from sexual tormentors, forbidden love and temptation. The first volume collects the miniseries, but two volumes of new material are scheduled for 2003.~NF

THE EDEN MATRIX

Adhesive: *2 issues 1994*

Poorly drawn, plotted and written rubbish about hacker trapped in a computer and forced to act by rebels. The first issue is almost entirely confusing random imagery, so few will have bought the second, and time hasn't dulled the ineptitude.~WJ

EDEN'S TRAIL

Marvel: *3 issues + 2003 to date*

Very much a departure for Marvel, this, as for the first time in a decade, a new title doesn't make use of the established Marvel Universe. It's not missed either. Steve Uy, with co-plotter and scripter Chuck Austen, merges elements familiar from Westerns with science fiction standbys to create an atmospheric character driven story. So far it focuses on bar owner Tila, the enigmatic Latch, who arrives at her bar one day, and inept hold-up man Mag. There are surprises in every issue to date, and Uy's manga animation style art is well considered, although makes little use of the landscape presentation.~FP

EDGAR ALLEN POE

Eternity: *One-shot ('The Tell-tale Heart and Other Stories') 1988, one-shot ('The Masque of Red Death') 1988, one-shot ('The Pit and the Pendulum') 1988, one-shot ('Murder in the Rue Morgue and Other Stories') 1989, one-shot ('The Black Cat and Other Stories') 1989*

Adaptations of Poe's stories reprinted three per issue from Skywald's 1970s horror magazines *Scream*, *Psycho* and *Nightmare*. Without exception the material is shoddy and slapdash and should be avoided at all costs.~WW

EDGE

Bravura: *3 issues 1994*

It's difficult to present a totally new take on superheroes, but Steven Grant and Gil Kane begin with a decent attempt concerning the ages-old idea that absolute power corrupts. Intended as the harbingers of a new and better age for mankind, a group of genetically created superheroes in a world otherwise largely lacking in superpowered individuals gradually decide that might justifies their interpretation of right and wrong. The son of their creator returns in the guise of one of their dead comrades, determined to end their oppression. It's a shame the ethical motivations are swept under the carpet after the first issue, because although *Edge* is a decidedly superior superhero series it's nowhere near the comic it might have been. It is a treat, though, to see Gil Kane illustrating an out-and-out superhero strip. The concluding issue was never published.~WJ

Over The EDGE

Marvel: *10 issues 1995-1996*

What a strange concept. In 1995 Marvel recompartmentalised their titles, cleaving off a bunch of them to be labelled 'Marvel Edge', the idea being that those darker and more violent characters would henceforth have their own linked editorial structure. That being the case, it's very odd, to say the least, that this title appeared at low price (signified by some issues being subtitled "And Under A Buck") designed to attract younger readers to what was ostensibly the more mature section of the Marvel line. Daredevil is the star of 1, 6 and 10, Ghost Rider occupies 4 and 9, and there's The Hulk in 3, the Punisher in 5 and Elektra in 8. The majority of issues don't stray above average, the exception being Dr Strange's appearance in 7 (he's also in 2). It's a suspenseful and intelligent story, also featuring Nightmare, drawn by Stephen Jones, who shares the pencilling duties on the series with Robert Brown. Both provide dynamic layouts, with Brown from the school of artists whose linear over-indulgence fails to hide a multitude of defects. Jones needs to sharpen up his anatomy and liven his action shots, but is the better of the pair.~FP

Recommended: 7

EDGE OF CHAOS

Pacific: *3 issue miniseries 1983-1984*

Gray Morrow's personal view of the Gods of Olympus seen through the eyes of his latter-day Hercules, Eric Cleese. Having been set his own quest to fulfil, Eric gets the chance to meet numerous interpretations of mythical deities and creatures, all drawn in the inimitable Morrow style. The licence to depict semi-naked nymphs and goddesses must have been something of a dream come true for Morrow. His scripting, while entertaining, reads as rather corny, which doesn't detract from the sword-and-sorcery feel of the title one whit. The format and paper stock changed from issue to issue, ruining any feeling of consistency. Indeed, the colour does the title few favours.~SW

EERIE

Warren: *139 issues, 3 Yearbooks 1965-1983*

Like its sister publication *Creepy*, *Eerie* was a black and white horror magazine that differed from most Warren publications by eventually featuring serials rather than solely short stories. Unusually, the first issue was a short-press-run collection of inventory and reprint material to secure trademark on the name, so to all intents and purposes 2 was the first proper issue. The first twelve issues of *Eerie* were predominantly drawn by former EC artists, so they're full of the likes of Al Williamson, Reed Crandall and Joe Orlando. While EC alumni Johnny Craig (2, 6, 7, 11, 12, 16) and Angelo Torres (2, 3, 5, 6) excelled themselves, it was the moody wash work of Gene Colan (2-11) and Steve Ditko (3-10) that impressed the most. Of writer and editor Archie Goodwin's many fine scripts the finest was 3's 'Monument', the tale of a murderous architect, rendered in a suitably elegant and sophisticated style by Alex Toth. Dan Adkins' breath-taking work on 'The Day After Doomsday' (8), and early strips by Neal Adams (9, 10) and Jeff Jones (11, 12, 15), round out this exceptional early period.

Sadly, as with other Warren titles, the late 1960s saw a calamitous drop in quality, and from 13 to 28 the comic was a sorry mixture of reprints and mediocre new material. Issues after 29 saw a gradual improvement due to an influx of new talent such as writers Gerry Conway, Marv Wolfman and Steve Skeates, and artists Pat Boyette, Tom Sutton and Billy Graham. More significantly, however, from 34 Eerie increasingly featured work from the more technically accomplished Spanish artists such as Victor De La Fuente (35), Luis Garcia (41) and Ramon Torrents (50). Amidst the European tide American artists were still very much in evidence, more so here than in Warren's other magazines, notably Mike Ploog (35, 40), Frank Brunner (35) and Neal Adams (53).

Eerie's first series ran in most issues from 39 to 52. Esteban Maroto's beautifully drawn sword-and-sorcery epic 'Dax the

Warrior' proved popular enough despite its frankly bonkers story-line, to inspire a flood of serials. Early efforts 'Dracula', 'Werewolf' and 'The Mummy' were patchy at best, but 52-57's post-apocalyptic 'Hunter', by Rich Margopoulos and Paul Neary, heralded a golden age of continued stories. A typical Warren serial ended with the hero's death, so sequels were rare, but Neary followed up his 'Hunter' story with the equally well drawn series 'Exterminator One' in 60, 63 and 64, written by Bill Dubay, and 'Hunter II' (67, 68, 70-73), written by Budd Lewis. Other notable stories were the Sherlock Holmes pastiche 'Dr Archeus' (54-58, 60, 61) by Gerry Boudreau and Isidoro Mones, the similarly Victorian set 'Hacker' by Steve Skeates, Tom Sutton (57) and Alex Toth (65, 67) and the Greg Potter and Richard Corben collaboration 'Child', a poignant and moving exploration of the Frankenstein myth.

52-72 are overflowing with fine strips, not all of them serials, and both Berni Wrightson (58, 60, 62, 68) and Wally Wood (60, 61) produced some of the finest work of their careers here. 54 and 55 featured beautifully coloured reprints of Will Eisner's 1940s strip 'The Spirit', which proved popular enough to lead Warren to begin publishing a *Spirit* magazine. Two of this era's finest stories were Bill Dubay's superb 'Daddy And The Pie' in 64, which predated E.T. by a decade and boasted typically fine Alex Toth artwork, and Budd Lewis' 'Godeye', drawn by Leopoldo Sanchez in 68, a deliciously acerbic debunking of fantasy clichés. No-one typified the era more than the veteran Spanish artist José Ortiz, whose gloriously dark and textured drawings graced a number of continued tales. Most notable were Bruce Bezaire's violent Dr Jekyll And Mr Hyde-inspired 'Jackass' in 60, 63-65, Budd Lewis' grisly Western 'Coffin' (61, 67, 68, 70) and his masterpiece 'Apocalypse', also scripted by Lewis, in 62-65. Following editor Bill Dubay's departure with 73 the comic took a significant dip in quality, from which it never recovered.

The post-Dubay period also saw a significant move away from horror to science fiction, fantasy and even the occasional superhero strip, but though it never achieved its earlier consistency the magazine could still come up with the occasional flashes of brilliance. The team of Bruce Jones and Richard Corben produced a fine time-travel story in 'Within You, Without You' (77, 79, 87 and later to prove an inspiration for the comic *Rip in Time*), and also contributed a nice story to 90. Jim Starlin's suitably cosmic 'Darklon the Mystic' (76, 79, 80, 84, 100) boasted both fine artwork and Starlin himself committing suicide, and was later collected for a one-shot comic published by Pacific. 81 was a themed issue based around a Frank Frazetta cover, featuring contributions from Corben, Torrents and Carmine Infantino among others. More significantly, the following issue saw the first appearance of Bill Dubay and Luis Bermejo's time-travelling cowboy The Rook, which quickly came to dominate the comic. Although rarely exceptional, The Rook was at least well crafted, and while its pre-eminence robbed *Eerie* of some of its diversity, following its departure to its own title in 105 the parent magazine became badly directionless.

With the exception of the odd Russ Heath (98) and Alex Niño (87, 92, 93, 95) efforts, the Rook era's finest hours were provided by Paul Gulacy, whose 'Trespasser', written by Don McGregor in 103-105, and 'Blood On Black Satin', written by Doug Moench for 109-111, were career highpoints. More typical, sadly, were the likes of Pablo Marcos' brainless 'Beastworld' (104, 105, 107-110) and the breathtakingly blatant *Star Wars* clone 'Mac Tavish' by Bill Dubay and Pepe Moreno (95, 96, 105, 107, 109, 111). *Eerie*'s last few years were, if anything, less appealing, with half-baked space opera becoming its staple ingredient. The sole exceptions to this were Victor De La Fuente's 'Haxtur and Haggarth' stories, which ran in most issues from 111 to the comic's demise. Even here, though, the fine art was sometimes scant compensation for the poor writing. With ever-increasing numbers of reprint issues, the magazine's days were clearly numbered, though the last few issues contain a few nice surprises. There's the return of the Rook in 132, a lovely Howard Chaykin strip in 127, and, best of all, the first English translation of Paul Gillon's masterful 'Les Naufrages Du Temps' (129, 132, 134, 136).

Between 1970 and 1972 Warren issued annual reprint anthologies, which they transferred to the parent title with 42. Subsequent reprint issues collected some of the comic's most popular serials: 'Dax' (59), 'Hunter' (69), 'The Mummy' (78), 'Within You, Without You' (97), José Ortiz' 'Hard John' (106), Leopoldo Sanchez' 'Spook' (112) and 'Jackass' (115). Other reprint issues concentrate on specific artists, with Richard Corben (86), Neal Adams (125), Wally Wood (131), Ramon Torrents (133) and Steve Ditko (135) those featured. For the more casual readers any of these would provide an excellent starting point for the comic.~DAR

Recommended: 2-12, 35, 44, 50, 52-73, 76-81, 84, 87, 90, 103-105, 109-111, 127, 129, 132, 134, 136

EGON

Dark Horse/Shok Studio: *2 issue microseries 1998*

Egon, an over-muscled, hyperactive, yet sensitive serial killer who calls himself 'Uncle Crock' mistakenly butchers the wrong victim and feels compelled to adopt her monstrous children, a situation further complicated by their grandfather's hiring a bounty-killer to avenge their mother's death. Excessively violent and blackly comic with minimal story by Tatjana wrapped in lush Simon Bisley style art from Alberto Ponticelli. Originally printed in Italy.~WW

EGYPT

DC/Vertigo: *7 issue limited series 1995-1996*

Pure filth. Incest, human excrement, zombies, murder, torture, sex, foul language, missing penises, and even more human excrement – have comics ever seen such depravity? Well, the more the better, because Peter Milligan conceived an excellent series.

Vincent Me, a selfish, self-obsessed, miserable cretin, is murdered by a group of nutters experimenting with near-death experiences, influenced by the ancient pharaohs of Egypt. Poor Vince doesn't survive the experience, but is reincarnated in ancient Egypt. And that's when all the fun starts. After taking revenge on his murderers, he's back to Egypt to become involved in various battles between gods and the like. Milligan's plot is masterful, centring on rebirth and love, and his dialogue is exceptional. He also fleshes out the personality of our protagonist with great skill, especially the references to his incestuous thoughts regarding his sister. Milligan has really excelled himself here, while the ancient Egypt of artists Glyn Dillon, Roberto Corona and Phil Gascoine is a captivating place. You can believe the brutality and depravity as the underbelly of the advanced Egyptian culture. And just when you think you've figured everything out there's a surprise revelation about *Egypt*. The only let-down is the Hollywoodish ending, where our antihero sails off into the sunset with his lover. Then again the poor lad did atone for his past (or future) mis-doings. After all, who of us is perfect?~HY

Recommended: 1-7

EIGHT-LEGGED FREAKS

WildStorm: *One-shot 2002*

Judging solely by Marv Wolfman's script, the film on which this is based is an attempt to apply the post-modernism of *Scream* to the ecologically driven monster genre, with knowing characterisation and plot devices. A small town falls prey to giant spiders (conveniently kept by a local expert, though this allows the filmmakers to feature many different species), after eating insects contaminated by a chemical waste spillage. To mining engineer, Chris McCormack and Sheriff, Sam Parker, childhood sweethearts, falls the task of destroying the spiders before they kill everyone. This ought to be a lot more fun, but the artwork is very clunky and unappealing.~NF

EIGHTBALL

Fantagraphics: *22 issues + 1989 to date*

The late 1980s were a golden age for quirky but intelligent cartoonists, with Chester Brown, Peter Bagge and a host of others creating funny but scary series characterised by individual world-views and killer artwork. Chief among them was Daniel Clowes. Eightball is, in Clowes' own words, "An orgy of spite, vengeance, hopelessness, despair and sexual perversion". What a pity he didn't select the title Hate, later used by Bagge, which would have suited Clowes' glowering persona, ranting diatribes and black sense of humour, always tipping over into despair, to a tee.

Clowes' drawing style lends itself to the loving depiction of the grotesque and deformed: the American heartland has rarely looked uglier than in his 'Like A Velvet Glove Cast In Iron' (1-10*). Preceding Twin Peaks, it shares the same sense of visceral whimsy. A young man becomes obsessed with an S&M film, and in trying to track down its origins, he becomes drawn into a world of mysterious symbols, crackerjack wisdom, mutant fishwomen and bizarre coincidences. It's deeply disturbing stuff, as are Clowes' violently expressed narrative dialogues. He's forever finding the unnerving in the ordinary, even when illustrating the amusing non-sequiturs of old people giving their opinion on various topics in a series of strips reminiscent of *Duplex Planet*. Even his seemingly straightforward parody of Marvel Comics, the wickedly funny Dan Pussey series*, soon turns into a bile-driven lash out at the whole of the comic industry, from Stan Lee to *The Comics Journal*.

Some readers have complained that 'Ghost World'*, Velvet Glove's replacement, the suburban adventures of two anti-fashion girls, is much too ordinary. It's not: it's superbly observed, and shot through with bitterness. Clowes manages to make juvenile cynicism fresh all over again and saw it turned into an extremely successful film in 2001, staring Thora Birch and Scarlett Johanssen. He followed it up in 19-21 with 'David Boring', the story of a young would-be artist who works as a night watchman and becomes embroiled in a noiresque sequence of murders (including his own) due to his obsessive search for the perfect woman. It's a brave work, which echoes the films of Douglas Sirk and Rainer Werner Fassbinder more than other comic projects. Brave stuff for stylish readers. Bring your own neuroses.~FJ

Recommended: Issues 1-10, 18

THE EIGHTH WONDER

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1997*

In an alternate Victorian era, where the British Empire is building a bridge across the Atlantic, an ambitious lord tries to kill a scientist whose invention may speed the construction. Cast into the depths of the bridge, the scientist is befriended by a young girl and her steam-powered robot, Archie. This European feel in content is matched in Peter Janes' literate script, which barely scratches the surface of this strange world while Kilian Plunkett's intricate pencils are reminiscent of the Schuiten Brothers. Reprinted from *Dark Horse Presents* 85-87.~NF

80 PG GIANT

DC: *15 issues 1964-1965*

DC's first attempt at mining their then almost thirty years of material. Every issue contains a sympathetically selected parade of reprints, generally from the 1950s, that represented tremendous value at the time of publication. Sadly these are no longer cheap ways of obtaining classic old stories, having a rarity value themselves through their desirability and novelty at the time. Superman stars in 1, 6 and 11, with his pals Jimmy Olsen (2, 13) and Lois Lane (3, 14) also having their own editions, along with Superboy (10) and Superman's teamings with Batman from *World's Finest* (15). Batman inhabits 5, celebrating twenty-five years, and 12, with the Flash in 4 and 9 and *Sgt Rock's Battle Tales* in 7. The best issue is the 'Secret Origins' selection in 8, reprinting *Justice League of America* 9, and backing it up with the origins of Aquaman, Atom, Robin and an expanded Superman origin story. Having confirmed the popularity of the package, DC continued to use the title for reprint selections incorporated in the runs of their more popular titles, for some reason continuing the *80 pg Giant* numbering in the logo, even when the page-count dropped to 64 pages. *JLA* 39, 48, 58, 67, 76, 85 and 93, for instance, are all labelled 80 pg or 64 pg Giants. In 2001 DC issued reprints of 4 and 8.~WJ

87TH PRECINCT

Dell: *2 issues 1962*

Based on the TV series rather than the original Ed McBain books. Detective Steve Carella is the focal point of the action. In 1 Carella and his team investigate a murderous portrait painter with the help of Steve_s deaf-mute wife Teddy and in 2 Steve works undercover to expose a heroin importer. The inside back cover features a short sermon on a heroin but the illustration has had the dropper removed so the addict appears to be staring at his arm mournfully. The first story sports Bernie Krigstein_s last artwork in comics. Thrown together for poor rates and drawn straight onto the boards for the most part. Readers nevertheless still get to see Krigstein unleashed on 32 pages. The anonymous art in 2 is peppered with signs featuring names like Fitch and Jack Sparling, members of the disbanded Jacquet shop who packaged comics for Dell in the early 1960s. The zany scripts are like nothing else in comics.~SW

EL DIABLO

DC: *16 issues 1989-1991*

Using the name of the then defunct former *All-Star Western* character, Gerard Jones turned out very worthy scripts about a young Hispanic Councilman. He's so concerned about social issues he goes out and fights crime as a non-superpowered masked adventurer, kind of a Batman with a crusading bent. Jones fails to make his hero anything much besides earnest, and Mike Parobeck's art was at this point immature and uninteresting. The best story in 13-15 concerned illegal immigration into the USA, but by the time it saw publication cancellation was inevitable.~HS

EL DIABLO

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 2001*

This El Diablo, given the bleak Vertiginous 'spin', is in a western setting once again, but Brian Azzarello and Daniel Zezelj use the title character only as a fleeting and threatening presence, driving the protagonist, Sheriff Moses Stone, to a rendezvous with fate. It's a good story with a fine sense of inevitability, but once again bears little resemblance to any previous version.~HS

EL-HAZARD

Viz: *5 issue miniseries 2000-2001*, 5 issue miniseries (...the Magnificent World) 2001*, 5 issue miniseries 2001*

Slick fantasy wherein the ubiquitous goofy but good-looking high-school lad, Makoto Mizuhara, finds himself transported to the fabulous Arabian Fairytale land of El-Hazard. Although at first glance a mystical place, it is soon revealed to be a place of fantastic technology and deadly intrigue. There's war brewing between the Allied Kingdoms and a marauding insect race, the Bugroms. led by Makoto's high school rival Jinnai. All the royal family have super powers which slowly begin to manifest in Makoto himself, and other Earth people keep arriving and becoming empowered. As Jinnai revives the demon Goddess Ilfurita, in actuality the girl who brought them all to El-Hazard, armageddon comes ever closer and total destruction seems inevitable. Solid fantasy adventure from Hidetomo Tsubura.~WW

EL SALVADOR: A House Divided

Eclipse: *One-shot 1989*

With story and art by Bill Tulp, this is a history of El Salvador, starting before the Spanish conquest of 1524, but concentrating on events since 1976, which he illustrates using a fictional family whose members end up on both sides of the civil war. The story is told very clearly and effectively, and in a detached style that allows the events to speak for themselves. However, he weakens his credibility by never showing the rebels being anything other than merciful and disciplined. Granted, they have more incentive to behave well than the government forces do, but surely

they can behave like ordinary humans once in a while and still have a just cause? Still, well worth a read.~FC
Recommended

ELECTRIC GIRL

Mighty Gremlin: *9 issues 1998-2002**
AIT/Planet Lar: *1 issue (10) 2002*

There is a simple whimsical charm, reminiscent of Andi Watson's work, to these stories of a young girl, Virginia, able to conduct electricity. Mike Brennan isn't quite the writer Watson is, but as he develops, there's a greater sense of movement to his art. Virginia is also plagued by a friendly gremlin, apt to cause trouble around her with comical consequences, and he's the one responsible for naming her dog Blammo. In 1 and 6 there's also a three year old genius child, and Brennan frequently presents stories of Virginia at an earlier age, one of which, in 4, is the best he's yet produced. It should be stressed that despite the ability, Virginia is no crime-fighter, in fact her talent is more often more of a hindrance than gift, and her encounters with robots, zombies and fractious development scientists are far from predictable. These are good-natured stories that can be enjoyed by parents and children alike, an all too rare commodity. It's planned that future stories are issued in book format.~FP

Strikeforce Morituri: ELECTRIC UNDERTOW

Marvel: *5 issue miniseries 1989-1990*

James Hudnall and Mark Bagley re-start *Strikeforce Morituri* using the surviving characters, set ten years after the original series. When Earth was invaded by a race of aliens called the Horde, the only defence was super-powered soldiers created by a secret process that gave superpowers but killed the recipient within a year. With the war over and a fragmented planet reconstructing itself, a dead Morituri soldier manifests himself to the survivors warning Earth remains under alien control and current unrest and weird phenomena are all part of a plan to 'harvest humanity'. A pedestrian tale, padded and predictable and the open ending is tantamount to a 'to be continued' label. Very unsatisfactory.~WW

ELECTRIC WARRIOR

DC: *18 issues 1986-1987*

The rich live in the top layers of the city and have various means to keep the bottom-dwelling poor in line: from the sprinklers that spray acid to the cyborg enforcers known as Electric Warriors. This story depicts what happens when one of the Electric Warriors starts to develop self-awareness, swiftly followed by a conscience – and it's a stronger conscience than any of the humans here display. There's something bad on the way (although it's a long time before we find out what), and the city's leaders take desperate and brutal measures to defend themselves. Doug Moench has written an absorbing story, where the ideas are powerful enough to move it steadily forward, even where the issue-by-issue plotting loses focus and the dialogue creaks loudly enough to wake the whole house. The style of the artwork is set by Jim Baikie, who pencils throughout and inks 1-7. While not striking, it establishes the atmosphere and tells the story well. All in all, a sturdy piece of craftsmanship.~FC
Recommended: 1-18

ELECTROPOLIS

Image: *4 issues 2001-2002*

Electropolis is the Radiant City of *Mister X* a few years down the line. Menlo Park is a private investigator with a gorgeous female assistant on the trail of those responsible for the death of his partner. The twist to this parade of clichés, as his receptionist Anesta keeps reminding him, is that Menlo is a robot. The continuity skips from Park's read-outs to Anesta's diary. Mister X joins the cast in 3, which also features a summary of his series. Instead of concluding the series over three issues, everything was combined in a jumbo-sized issue 4. Dean Motter's excellent design sense is present throughout but the art is slight and hasty. We see occasional glimpses of the title city but its mostly facials and three-quarter shots. A detective-flavoured style exercise.~SW

ELEKTRA

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries ('The Elektra Saga') 1984, 8 issue limited series ('Elektra Assassin') 1986-1987, Graphic Novel (Elektra Lives Again) 1990, series one 19 issues 1996-1998, series two 18 issues + 2001 to date, 3 issue miniseries (Elektra and Wolverine) 2002*

There are certain characters you don't want to know chapter and verse about, and Elektra is one. Matt Murdock's mysterious ninja ex-lover from the pages of Daredevil was such a good character precisely because she was never explained. During his first run on Daredevil, and especially in the *Elektra Lives Again* graphic novel, writer/artist Frank Miller dealt with Elektra on an almost mythical level. And ever since, everyone's been doing their best to analyse, explain and generally make her as boring as most other costumed characters. If you want a reminder of how good Miller's initial stories were they're chopped out of the issues and pasted together with the odd framing page as *The Elektra Saga*. The graphic novel is a largely allegorical, out of continuity work, a distraught Matt Murdock lives through the resurrection and transcendent death of his beloved once more. Unfortunately it's slowly downhill from there.

Elektra Assassin has a slow-starting plot mixing real-life conspiracy theory with eastern mystical societies. Brushing aside all the ninja jiggery-pokery, reveals this is actually about disturbed minds. Miller asks questions about perception and reality, having Elektra mentally dominating a number of other characters, bouncing consciousnesses from body to body. She's partnered with Garrett, a half-cyborg criminal turned agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. with a recorder implanted in his head, who embodies the concept of nothing being as it seems. Miller uses various narrative voices to give multiple versions of 'the truth', employing showy techniques that may annoy some as much as the multiple visual styles Bill Sienkiewicz uses will annoy others. Sienkiewicz produces some stunning single images, but his experimental approach to panel layout and order often hinders the flow of the story rather than reflecting its rhythms as intended. Nonetheless it's a brave try. If you can get through the inclination of both creators to show off, this series offers plenty of action linked to intelligent concepts.

In his premise for the first ongoing series, Pete Milligan turns her into just another hyper-violent babe. Mike Deodato Jr gives her the big, globular tits, scowl and frizzy perm of your average bad girl arriviste. Having briefly skittered around her death and apotheosis at the hands of Miller for the benefit of newcomers, Milligan begins an uninteresting plot in which Elektra must work out her inner demons while seeking out the mysterious, fire-starting Architect, who's drawing the world's top assassins to NY for his own nefarious purpose. Frankly poor, especially considering what Milligan's capable of when he tries. Later creative teams get stuck in the 'inner demons' groove. The majority of her second ongoing series is also about Elektra questioning who she is and what she does, after a very shaky espionage plot. Brian Bendis' script has approximately one useful word in every twenty he commits to paper, and it's stiffly drawn by Chuck Austen, who's discovered how to draw people in shadow with light behind them and uses it continually so everyone looks like a mud zombie. By contrast, thriller writer Greg Rucka (who also wrote the tedious Elektra/Wolverine illustrated story – not a comic), turns in terse issues about a group of people Elektra's murders have affected, who band together to capture her and feed her mind-warping drugs. She fights back, but to recover she gets involved with a female sensei who, like her, used to belong to The Hand – making you wonder just how many secret martial arts societies and their rejects there are dotted around the states. It just seems to be returning to old ground so her ideals can be knocked down again and rebuilt. Entirely forgettable.~FJ
Recommended: *The Elektra Saga* 1-4, *Elektra Assassin* 3-8, *Elektra Lives Again*

ELEMENTALS

Comico: *Series one 29 issues, 1 Special 1984-1988, Special 1989, series two 26 issues 1989-1992, Sex Specials 4 issues 1991-1992, one-shot ('Oblivion War Special') 1992, one-shot ('Ghost of a Chance') 1995, 3 issue miniseries ('Birth of a Supernation') 1995-1996, 4 issue miniseries ('How The War Was Won') 1996, 4 issue miniseries ('The Vampires Revenge') 1996*

Through a long publishing history there's a rule of thumb easily applied to *Elementals*: if creator Bill Willingham has something to do with the issue it's probably a decent read. Otherwise it's not worth bothering with. The concept was first seen in the back of the *Justice Machine Annual*, in which four ordinary humans are chosen by ancient forces to be beneficiaries of the ancient elemental powers of air, earth, fire and water. Thus, respectively, Vortex, Monolith, Morningstar and Fathom are killed, then returned to life with the new abilities. 1-22 are sprightly superhero comics, relying as much on characterisation as supervillains, although the first special, looking at child abuse, is weak. Willingham's art develops from not quite the finished article, with skimpy backgrounds, to very accomplished storytelling with an appealing style. He's helped on scripts by Jack Herman (from 6), who will later write most of the issues Willingham doesn't. For a good character piece try 14 from the first series, 9's going-public issue, or 17's decent battle. After 22 Willingham's involvement is zero, and the only decent issue is 24's offbeat tale of the team being summoned to help Peruvian revolutionaries, written by Laurence Schick, and drawn by Jill Thompson. 1-5 were collected.

The second series is launched with a special written and drawn by Willingham, who then lets Mike Leeke and Mike Chen provide most of the art. They start off a little shakily, but develop quickly (although 12 is notable for Adam Hughes filling in). Willingham's outspoken editorials in early issues are largely spot-on, and his stories the same character led sagas as previously, with former enemy Ratman now almost part of the team. There's a major surprise in 6 concerning old villain Shapeshifter, and 11 is an odd experiment in rhyme. Most issues from 10 are leading towards 'The Oblivion War', with 15's board-meeting a highlight. 16 introduces Strike Force America, but Willingham once again leaves before he completes his story, and under Herman the title wanders into cancellation. Those wanting a conclusion will find it in the miniseries 'How the War was Won'. Tony Daniel art notwithstanding, it's uninspired, as are the remaining 1996 series. Willingham returns to write 'The Vampires' Revenge', hinging on the events of issue 9 from the second series, as a vampire council convenes to try the Elementals. In no small part a Ratman solo, it lacks the spark of his earlier writing. 'Ghost of a Chance' has it, along with an Alex Ross cover, but the interior art sucks all life from a wedding story.

There are a number of unique and commendable aspects to Elementals, the first being that the characters age and change from their introduction, particularly Monolith, who starts aged fifteen. Secondly, although his characters are in many ways superhero archetypes and there's core supervillains, Willingham moves the cast through a variety of tales, with fantasy and reality based stories. He's not afraid to acknowledge his characters have a sex life either. None of the sex specials are essential reading, but effort is made to see that beyond the bonking they tie into ongoing continuity. Don't expect much in the way of a story in most, although Willingham rather comes up trumps in the first issue.~WJ

Recommended: Series one 14, 24, series two 6, 15

ELEVEN OR ONE

Sirius: *One-shot 1995*

Quite the strange item from Joseph Michael Linsner. For a start there are no women in lingerie. A down at heel artist has a strange dream and wakes up with an extra finger. To his surprise, those closest to him don't notice the difference, but he's inspired by the experience to create a career breakthrough. The whole story is a strained metaphor, but it's decently drawn. There was a second printing in 1996.~FP

ELF-THING

Eclipse: *1 issue 1987*

It's odd to imagine that this lame humour/parody title induced such laughter among the Eclipse staff that they were compelled to publish. Perhaps blackmail was involved. Oddly enough there was no glorious career in comics ahead for the creators.~FP

ELF WARRIOR

Adventure: *3 issues 1987-1988*
Quadrant: *1 issue (4) 1989*

Half-witted fantasy, with the only item lacking being a checklist to ensure all the genre clichés have been included. Peter Hsu's artwork draws lavish praise from letter column scribes, though one wonders why when he's unable to trace a pose from a wank mag accurately.~FP

ELFHEIM

Night Wynd: *4 issue miniseries 1991-1992, 4 issue miniseries ('Volume 2') 1992, 4 issue miniseries ('Volume 3') 1992, 4 issue miniseries ('Volume 4') 1992-1993, 4 issue miniseries ('Volume 5: Dragon's Dream') 1993*

This continues the Elflord series and the adventures of Hawk Erickson and his sidhe companion, Windblade. Despite the different volumes, this is an ongoing storyline about the evil sidhe, Ichi's manipulation of King Bran and the latter's replacement by Hawk, the resulting distrust of Windblade amongst Hawk's subjects and wizard, Greylone's plans to use Ichi, Windblade and another sidhe, Kibbi, to assume power himself. Barry Blair's child-like elves are still disturbing, his use of photos to avoid drawing buildings ill-judged, and his artwork and narrative simplistic, though the themes of friendship and loyalty are distinctive.~NF

ELFLORD

Aircel: *Series one 6 issues 1986, series two 30 issues 1987-1989*
Night Wynd: *4 issue miniseries ('Return of the King) 1992-1993*
WaRP Graphics: *4 issue miniseries 1997, 7 issues 1997-1998*

Touched by controversy, as was almost everything Barry Blair went near, *Elflord* was either a substandard *Elfquest* rip-off or child pornography. Whatever its intentions, it was fairly dull and uninteresting unless you're into elfy quests enough to read any old rubbish or like to see half-naked pre-pubescents. Enough readers were, it seems – as well as the relative longevity of the original, the series was reprinted as *Elflord Chronicles* (8 issues, 1990-1991) and new material was presented in a string of *Elflore* miniseries between 1992 and 1994.~JC

ELFLORE

Night Wynd: *4 issue miniseries 1992, 4 issue miniseries 1992, 4 issue miniseries 1993, 3 issue miniseries ('High Seas') 1993*

On one level these are not particularly imaginative stories about a bunch of elves and demons. On another, they're very disturbing items. Barry Blair draws all his elves as if particularly decorative pre-pubescent boys, and they're perpetually almost naked, never mind the weather or task. Extremely sordid.~FP

ELFQUEST

WaRP Graphics: *Series One 21 issues (0-20) 1978-1985*, 2 issue microseries ('Elfquest Gatherum') 1985*
Apple: *8 issue limited series ('Siege At Blue Mountain') 1986-1988**
Epic: *32 issues 1985-1988*
WaRP Graphics: *9 issue limited series ('Kings of the Broken Wheel') 1988-1990, 35 issues ('New Blood') 1992-1996, 29 issues ('The Hidden Years') 1992-1996, 6 issue miniseries ('Wavedancers') 1993-1994, 20 issues ('Blood of Ten Chiefs') 1993-1995, 12 issues ('The Rebels') 1994-1996, 12 issues ('Jink') 1994-1996, 16 issues ('Shards') 1994-1996, 5 issue miniseries ('Two-Spear') 1995-1996, 6 issue miniseries ('Khavi') 1995-1996, one-shot ('Metamorphosis') 1996, 2 issue microseries ('Kings Cross') 1997, 2 issue microseries ('Hawk and Windblade') 1997, series two 32 issues, 1 Special + 1996 to date*

However far it's wandered from the original premise, and however much the strand of fantasy that it popularised has become debased, the original *Elfquest* series is still worth a look. Wendy Pini's story of a group of elves searching for the High Ones, their legendary ancestors, features strong characterisation and a number of sharp plot twists, even though the story itself sprawls towards the latter quarter of the initial epic, never mind the innumerable spin-offs. Against this creativity, however, you must weigh the sad sight of pudding-faced eighteen year olds with painted denim jackets and characters tattooed in the place where their bicep is supposed to be.

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* Available in a collected edition

In Cutter, the brave but youthfully indecisive elf chief, and Skywise, his older but more daring best friend, Pini created a classic buddy team. She worked hard throughout the first ten or so issues to breath life into their many tribes folk, as foolish humans burnt their forest home and drove them across the desert to the discovery of a group of sun-loving elves. In the early issues Pini was obviously feeling her way, with occasional single-issue stories and at least one plot element wound up in each chapter, rather than the longer tales more typical of the later issues. In these Cutter and his wolfriders discover first a group of less devolved elves under the influence of the evil sorceress Winnowill, who believe themselves the equals of the High Ones, and finally snow elves The Go-Backs, who're engaged in a continual battle with trolls for the mountain inside which the original elves' palace is supposed to be hidden. Later stories suggest it's actually a crashed spaceship. Throughout, the development of relationships is kept in balance with the having of adventures, and by the end of twenty issues Wendy Pini has become an accomplished heartstring-plucker.

Later series create an extremely complex continuity. First Pini continues the story of the discovery of the palace in 'Siege at Blue Mountain', but then she and numerous other writers and artists start filling in gaps. They tell stories about the wolfriders' chiefs in 'Blood of Ten Chiefs', starting with Timmoran, a high elf who turned herself into a wolf and mated with one to produce a tribe of wild elves, denying these wolfriders the longevity of other elves. To make up for their short life spans some riders take to spending long periods 'wrapped' by the preservers, annoying little fairy creatures who serve the High Ones by 'preserving' their ways. This means they can pop up during 10,000 years of elf history for various storylines about the Sun Folk. Some stories appear entirely unconnected with the main characters, in which case Winnowill will almost certainly be the missing link. The 'Wavedancers' miniseries is about underwater elves who return in the current ongoing anthology title, along with Future Quest, which follows on from 'Jink' portraying the far future where elves have disappeared and Jink, a part elven shapeshifter, wants to find out what happened to them.

By dividing the original wolf pack into several questing groups, the Pinis had an awful lot of stories going at once (and between 1994 and 1996 published a bewildering variety of mini-series that flash back and forth in time). Cutter's daughter Ember leads some riders to find a new home after the destruction of the palace in 'The Hidden Years' series, and the adventures of Cutter's old rival, the magician Rayek, are explored in 'Rogue's Story' which reappears in the current anthology title. 'New Blood' offers a selection of stories from creators new to the Elfquest universe at first, but with 11 starts a major storyline about the war between the snow elves (or Go-Backs) and the sun elves, leading into the Forevergreen stories, in which Cutter's son leads the elves to a promised paradise, only to find he's been tricked by an ageing elf kept prisoner by humans who worship him. The main problem with 'New Blood' is you never know if you're going to get a comedy or a tragedy. The main problem with all of this is that it makes it difficult for readers to penetrate the story without starting at the beginning, making *Elfquest* more a fantasy phenomenon than a comics one.

There are some other problems with the original Pini creation. Although she periodically pulls her readership up sharply and reminds them that elves are fierce, despite their doe eyes, diminutive stature and long hair, she allows altogether too much cuteness for any but the most hardened lover of ditsy fantasy. From plucking at your heart-string, she soon moves to playing showy arpeggios, and an orgy scene in 17, although hilarious, was a big mistake. If you are a fantasy fan who can, with equanimity, sit in a convention hotel bedroom at one in the morning singing about Dorsai to the tune of 'My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean' then this is probably the best comic you'll ever read. If you'd rather cut your tongue out and cauterise the stump with your Zippo than do any such thing, you probably won't be able to stomach more than a few issues, in which case the earlier the better. If you're undecided into which camp you fall and would like to try pretending to be a wolf-riding warrior in the privacy of your own bedroom, there are plenty of poems and 'filk' songs reprinted in the two gatherums (21 of the first series is also a scrapbook with poetry). Oh, and a book of bedtime stories "for young cubs, with an Elfquest twist". Oh, please.

With the latest ongoing anthology title, also called *Elfquest* just to keep everyone confused, there's an attempt to turn back the clock. 4 begins 'Dreamtime' which has Pini's original characters waking up in a wood 10,000 years after the original storyline, allowing reintroduction of the characters and a series of isolated stories about rediscovering the Elfquest world. Other major stories include 'Wild Hunt', in which a bunch of young elves sneak around the world of the humans trying to undo the evil Winnowill's magic has created, and 'Rogue's Curse', in which the dark elf Rayek battles with the spirit of Winnowill which has taken refuge inside him. The ultra-cutesy 'Fire-Eye' is solo stories about the Elfquest universe's answer to Bat-Mite drawn by Barry 'jailbait' Blair at first, and later there's 'Wolfrider', which follows the bellicose Bear Claw's adventures, some of which are drawn by Pini. Wendy Pini's art, it must be said, is great: clean, clear, bold of outline, and making good use of patterns and styles to distinguish between the different cultures the elves encounter. Within two or three issues from the off she's firmed up her style and continues to influence the many artists who now draw *Elfquest*. Most are even more fantasy/illustration-influenced that she is, except for Barry Blair. Although his elves still look like they've come from paedophile heaven, at least he knows how to get a story moving. This is more than can be said for the likes of Gary Kato, whose elves look like close relations of Yoda, or Jozef Szekeres, whose work on 'Wavedancers' is all twiddly illustration without drama or pacing. Lorraine Reyes takes the prize for making her figures look like stuffed dolls.

Elfquest is surprisingly good, particularly given its reputation. Like all good things, the more hands involved, the more watered down it becomes. Little of any lasting importance happens in strips not written by Wendy Pini, which is a useful guide to which of the innumerable spin-offs to read, but one can't help but feel that twenty great issues (reprinted by Epic over thirty two issues) and then a nice, long rest would have produced better results than this sprawling epic. WaRP graphics claim to have every Elfquest story in print in a new trade paperback series (apart from 'Wavedancers' 1-6 which can't be reprinted for legal reasons).~FJ

Recommended: Elfquest 4-6, 8-13, 17(for the comedy orgy!)

ELIMINATOR

Malibu: *4 issues (0-3) 1995*

Written by Hank Kanalz and Roland Mann and drawn by Mike Zeck, this is a meandering series about a manhunter/assassin who becomes involved with the Ultraverse's secret government organisation. Very dull, and most of note because Siren's first appearance is in 1.~NF

ELONGATED MAN

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1992*

Spinning out of the character's involvement as a member of *Justice League Europe*, this puts the stretchable sleuth, and his lovely wife Sue, in the thick of murders at a political summit. Drawn to the tiny principality of Modora, Sue is strangely intrigued by its leader, and finds herself wondering if, all those years ago, she made the right choice in her marriage.

Gerard Jones provides a charming romantic comedy about domestic disharmony and the incipient conquest of the world, while the late Mike Parobeck's illustrations evoke memories of Carmine Infantino's work without imitating it. A positive triumph, and shamefully overlooked.~HS
Recommended: 1-4

Michael Moorcock's ELRIC

Marvel: *Graphic Novel ('The Dreaming City') 1982*
Pacific: *6 issues 1983-1984**
First: *Sailor on the Seas of Fate 7 issue limited series 1985-1986*, Weird of the White Wolf 5 issue miniseries 1986-1987, The Vanishing Tower 6 issue miniseries 1987-1988, The Bane of the Black Sword 6 issue miniseries 1988-1989*

Michael Moorcock's albino warrior has proved an enduring fantasy-fiction character, and even diluted by adaptation it's easy to see why. He's a striking and unique figure, with the weakness that he's beset by illness and initially sustained only by a mixture of magic and drugs. The combination of frailty and regal poise is exceptionally illustrated by P. Craig Russell in the graphic novel, and the team of Russell and Michael Gilbert for the Pacific series is also appealing, if somewhat muted initially by unsympathetic reproduction. That series adapts the first Elric novel, scripted, as are all the sequels, by Roy Thomas. It might be assumed that Thomas carries baggage with him from years of handling a diametrically opposed fantasy character, Conan, but his scripts here are faithful and dramatic, conveying Elric's questioning and tormented nature.

Michael Gilbert teams with George Freeman as artists for *Sailor on the Seas of Fate*, but their art, while very good, doesn't quite match the delicacy of Russell's illustration. Sailor unites Elric with other Moorcock heroes and introduces the idea of The Eternal Champion, but it's not the strongest Elric story. The same team adapt *Weird of the White Wolf*, a chapter of which formed the Marvel graphic novel. It's summarised by Russell, and the series also includes work originally published in Epic Illustrated. By the end of the story Elric is without a kingdom and despised by his former subjects. *The Vanishing Tower* has Elric wandering the lower kingdoms, eventually ties back in with other Moorcock stories and is well and truly scuppered by Jan Duursema's art falling short of previous standards. In *The Bane of the Black Sword* it seems as if Elric has actually made amends of sorts and found peace and happiness, but what's the point of a tragic hero if into his life a little tragedy does not fall? Initially the art of Mark Pacella and Nicholas Koenig vastly improves on the previous series, but is very rushed by the end.~FP
Recommended: Elric 3-6

ELRIC

Dark Horse/Topps: *7 issue limited series ('Stormbringer') 1997**

With the jointly published 'Stormbringer', P. Craig Russell concluded the comics' adaptations of Michael Moorcock's original six-volume *Elric of Melnibone* series. Acolytes of Dead God, Darnizhaan, who wants Elric's soul-stealing sword, Stormbringer, kidnap Elric's wife Zarozinia. Retrieving her, however, simply sets Elric on the path to his own final destiny, preventing the conquest of the world by the Chaos Lords. Russell's faithful adaptation is beautifully designed; the result owes much to colourist Lovern Kindzierski (with Digital Chameleon) and letterer, Galen Showman. Using a variety of styles, though always fluidly ornate, Russell brings this epic fantasy to life, capturing every bitter twist of Elric's fate.~NF
Recommended: 1-7

Moebius' Airtight Garage: ELSEWHERE PRINCE

Marvel/Epic: *6 issue miniseries 1990*

Most of Moebius_ famous meandering serial 'Le Garage Hermetique de Jerry Cornelius' took place on an artificial planet called Hyacinth. It had various themed levels, complete with indiginous populations, where adventures could take place. This is a secret you don't find out until the end of the story. This new series is set on Hyacinth and features a local artist's search for the inscrutable protagonist of the previous series: Major Grubert, for whom the planet was made. So the nebulous draughtsman, whose drawings are by Moebius, is in search of a god-like figure we already know to be mortal. The story also follows-up on the masked Archer who featured in the original series and looks, satirically, like a superhero. The self-regarding scripts suffer from a lack of any real impetus, but the attractive artwork is by Eric Shanower with short back-ups by Moebius.~SW

ELSEWORLDS 80-pg Giant

DC: *One-shot 1999*

These alternate, continuity violating versions of DC characters follow the template set by DC's 1994 annuals and assorted one-shots. Bronwyn Carlton and Greg Luzniak's re-casting of superheroes as recording celebrities is witty, as is Chuck Dixon and Enrique Villagran's faked newspaper strip, and there's some good art from Aaron Lopresti, and Ariel Olivetti. On the downside, was the po-faced return of the Super Sons from 1970s *World's Finest Comics* really wise? The highlight is Kyle Baker's selection of nightmare scenarios for the infant Clark Kent's babysitter, beautifully drawn in an old fashioned cartoon style. Apparently a scene of Superbaby in a microwave resulted in most of the print-run being pulped prior to going on sale, only the stock for Ireland and the U.K. escaping, thus making this a very rare comic. If you only want that story, it later appeared in the *Bizarro Comics* hardback.~FP

ELSEWORLD'S FINEST

DC: *2 issue microseries 1997*

In Elseworlds DC re-interprets its heroes. Here John Francis Moore and Kieron Dwyer deliver a Batman and Superman adventure in pulp style. The plot centres around an archaeological chase between Clark Kent and Alexi Luthor to find the Kryptonian 'Godstone', picking up down-at-heel, soldier of fortune, Bruce Wayne along the way. Familiar characters and relationships are mixed up to good effect, as in the romances between Clark Kent and Talia, Bruce Wayne and Lana Lang. Good use is made of both what is canonical and what might have been. Dwyer tries hard to capture a 1920s feel, but much of the scratchiness in the artwork seems rushed rather than intended.~NF

ELVEN

Malibu: *5 issues (0-4) 1994-1995*

Elven is a female Prime, though her powers have a magical as well as a scientific basis. She spends most of her time angry at men, while Prime or Primevil turn up in most issues to fight her. Len Strazewski practically clubs readers with his moralising and there's really no indication that the series had any kind of direction. Very poor.~NF

ELVIRA'S HOUSE OF MYSTERY

DC: *12 issues, 1 Special 1986*

Although some very striking covers were produced to exploit the pneumatic assets of B-movie queen Cassandra Petersen aka Elvira, they were insufficient to disguise the fact that this was mainly stale inventory material from *House of Mystery*'s previous incarnation. Delivered much less than it promised.~HS

ELVIRA, Mistress of the Dark

Claypool: *114 issues + 1993 to date*

Licensed from the B-movie actress of the same persona, Elvira recounts the adventures of a TV horror-show hostess with minor mystic gifts, who becomes involved in one supernatural calamity after another. Despite her simple desires for home, hearth and fabulous wealth, she's constantly forced to battle to make the world safe for bad moviegoers! Unlike her DC incarnation, Claypool gets our heroine firmly into the thick of the action, with no monster so menacing that she can't send them packing with a blue-tinged retort. Occasional infelicitous art teams render an unqualified recommendation impossible, but it's seldom less than amusing, and in its earlier issues, frequently riotous. As the series passes its 100th issue – a considerable achievement in itself – shtick has solidified a little bit into routine, but the series remains a pleasant time-passer.~HS

Recommended: 1, 10, 17, 22, 26

THE ELVIS MANDIBLE

Piranha Press: *One-shot 1990*

Starting with the preposterous proposition that Elvis Presley's allure derived from his jawbone, said mandible disappears when he's buried at Graceland. It falls into the hands of a market analyst, and the remainder is one seemingly endless, seemingly stream-of-consciousness shaggy dog story. Unfortunately it's more the shaggy dog's arse than the shaggy dog's bollocks.~WJ

ELVIS SHRUGGED

Revolutionary: *3 issue miniseries 1992*

A parody of Ayn Rand's novel *Atlas Shrugged* by Patrick McCray. It's all about artistic integrity, illustrated here through the music business, with the 'real' Elvis as the warrior hero. McCray has fun assembling his two armies, putting Madonna and Stephen Sondheim (goodies), against Sinead O'Connor and Andrew Lloyd Webber (not goodies), but his wit is blunt, and he makes his point far more effectively in the editorials than in the story itself.~FC

E-MAN

Charlton: *10 issues 1973-1975*
First: *25 issues 1983-1985*
Comico: *One-shot 1989, 3 issues 1990*
Alpha: *1 issue 1994*

E-Man is a sentient energy mass who adopts human form on arriving on Earth, where he meets full-time student and part-time exotic dancer Nova Kane. Written and drawn with a comic lightness by Nicola Cuti and Joe Staton respectively, the Charlton series is a lot of fun, with Plastic Man an obvious influence. E-Man being able to transform into any object sentient or otherwise gives Staton the opportunity for plenty of visual asides, and Cuti packs a lot into sixteen pages, sometimes achieving an unexpected poignancy in what is an offbeat superhero strip. Michael Mauser, a private eye giving the term 'seedy' a bad name, is introduced in 3, proving popular enough to run in a series of back-ups (also by Cuti and Staton) in the otherwise banal *Vengeance Squad*, and a one-shot in 1991. In 8 Nova is transformed, making her an equal partner rather than the admittedly spunky female who is nonetheless abducted too often. After cancellation E-Man continued to appear in *Charlton Bullseye*. The Charlton series also contains some notable back-ups. Steve Ditko obviously enjoyed himself lampooning liberal ideas by way of excessive exaggeration in 'Killjoy' (2 and 4), and Rog 2000 (6, 7, 9, 10) was also popular. Created by John Byrne at the start of his career, Rog is a robot cab driver who interacts with the world as if he's human. As scripted by Cuti, there's the same whimsical nature that characterised the lead strip, and there was later a collection. 1-6 were coupled with the Mauser strips by First for a mid-1980s series titled *The Original E-Man* and *Michael Mauser*.

E-Man was a welcome revival from the then fledgling First line, but the editorial judgement was misguided. E-Man was flexible enough to cope with parodying other comics, and the joshing of X-Men in 2-3 was among the earliest and best of such stories, but the idea wore thin after a while, and neither Staton nor new writer Martin Pasko showed much enthusiasm for it. Matters improved when Staton began writing with 11. The parody element diminished, and his was a more sympathetic touch. 24 saw the return of Nic Cuti, who had been the first choice for the revival, but he was prevented from writing by other commitments. His début is the outstanding issue of the First run. Dying from gunshot wounds, Mauser relates the story of his early, and defining, years, his character cemented in Vietnam. It's a masterful personality study from Cuti, and it's to Staton's credit that drawing in cartoon style doesn't detract in the slightest from the tragic events. The final First issue introduces E-Man's sister – in as much as sentient energy can have a sister – Vamfire. She's his opposite in all respects, but mischievous as opposed to dastardly.

The Comico one-shot reintroduces all the characters in a surreal story, and restores Nova's powers, lost in the First issues, but the highlight is the Mauser back-up strip concerning a missing child. The following three issues can be read independently, but contain a continuing plot about E-Man's search for his mother. They're a return to the light-hearted tales of the Charlton series, but Vamfire is unnecessary, and extra pages make the story drag. The Alpha Productions issue is more of the same.~FP

Recommended: Charlton 3, 7, First 24

EMBLEM

Venus: *8 issues 1994-1995*

Profoundly disturbing stories by Kei Taniguchi, translated from Japanese, all twinning sex and violence. Themes in 1-6 include classroom rape, humiliation and murder. Astoundingly, the story starring in 6 and running for the remaining issues raises the level of nastiness several notches higher, portraying the abduction and brutal degradation of a schoolgirl. It's preceded by a warning that it's not intended to arouse, but rather to "portray the repercussions of certain behaviour", which is frankly, bollocks. Taniguchi is an excellent expressive artist, and while resolutely unpleasant, the story could have been told with subtlety rather than explicitly presented with all frills and bows. This is about as extreme and unpleasant a path as comics for the US market have trodden, and the questions have to be asked about anyone who'd want to read it for pleasure.~FP

EMERALD DAWN

DC: *6 issue miniseries 1989-1990*, 6 issue miniseries 1991**

Of all the late 1980s DC revamps, Green Lantern initially got one of the better deals. Rather than riding wholesale over his past history, these two miniseries are more a 'Year One' and 'Year Two' for the character, bringing his origin up to date without doing anything to upset long-term fans too much. Apart from his being given a drink problem, Hal Jordan's origin remains largely unchanged. The second series has more of its own story to tell. Hal is behind bars for drink-driving, but that doesn't stop him using the power ring to slip out whenever he feels he's needed, which turns out to be mostly when Sinestro (not yet a recognised villain) comes calling, looking for help in controlling the society he has bullied into worshipping him. The last issue, featuring the trial of Sinestro, poses some interesting questions on the Guardians' self-appointed right to interfere with the Universe.~JC

The Pirate Queen EMERALDAS

Eternity: *4 issue miniseries 1990-1991*

An absorbing and well conceived tale removing Emeraldas from the pages of *Captain Harlock* and presenting her with a series of moral dilemmas on a remote planet. On one level about emotional repression, but more prosaically concerning slave trading and planetary destruction, Robert Gibson delivers a bleak script well illustrated in manga style by Ben Dunn and Tim Eldred.~WJ

Recommended: 1-4

EMERGENCY

Charlton: *4 issues 1976*

The day to day adventures of John Gage and Roy DeSoto of Rampart Emergency Squad 51, adapted from the TV series by Joe Gill. John Byrne devotees may find his early artwork in 1 interesting. Otherwise crudely printed and unremarkable.~SW

EMPIRE

Image/Gorilla: *2 issues 2000*

Golgoth is the Emperor of the world, having used teleportation to conquer it. He keeps his ministers on a short leash, addicted to a drug called Eucharist, but shields his young daughter from outside influences, ensuring that the true nature of his rule is kept from her. Written by Mark Waid and drawn by Barry Kitson, it's well constructed, but not involving. The two issues published don't indicate much about the series' direction though there is a hefty cast and abundant plot threads.~NF

EMPIRE LANES

Northern Lights: *4 issues 1986-1987**
Comico: *1 issue 1989*

A group of stock fantasy characters, including the princess, the dwarf, the knight and the priest, transport themselves to Earth, arriving in the Empire Lanes bowling alley. They're an engaging bunch, but the innovative setting remains largely unexplored beyond a few skirmishes with the local gangs, and even then they're possessed by other-worldly demons. Writer and artist Peter Gross seemed to be pacing his story as a novel, but it was never concluded.~FP

EMPTY LOVE STORIES

Slave Labor: *2 issues 1994-1996*
Funny Valentine Press: *1 Special, 1 issue 1998-1999*

A hilarious, skilfully crafted parody of the old DC style of romance stories with dilemmas only slightly more ridiculous than those found in the originals. How can a socialite beauty and a zombie find happiness together? How can you make a comatose trauma victim fall in love with you? Steve Darnall's stories, effortlessly invoking the spirit of the originals, are lovingly illustrated by Rob Walton, Colleen Doran, Hilary Barta and other classy delineators. Most of the stories are entertaining, but a couple stand out; 'Betraying the Master Race', and 'Love Behind Bars', both from the 1998 Special, work both as parody and as edgier, thought-provoking narrative, while the uproarious cover by Ty Templeton doesn't hurt, either. For a while it looked like an issue of *Empty Love Stories* would be our annual 'treat', but sadly, that didn't come to pass, and the title is much missed. Funny Valentine Press also issued reprints of the Slave Labor issues~HS
Recommended: Slave Labor 1-2, Special, Funny Valentine 1

EMPTY SKULL COMICS

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1996*

In his introduction to this collection of Gerald Jablonski's work Jim Woodring sums it up brilliantly, writing "his comics have the hard-glass veneer of isolated intellect that distinguishes the product of a bona fide lunatic". Here's a world where Farmer Ned treats his pig to a drive-in movie, and a Martian schoolgirl is taught by an ant. The strips fall into three categories. The Farmer Ned material is laugh out loud funny, with the earnest Ned's recollections of truculent and misbehaving animals. There's a wonder of detail about a series of wordless strips about a bulgy-eyed kid and his accident-prone normal friend, but the final category falls flat. There are almost two dozen wordy one page strips about a father, quizzing his daughter about school. With the snappy dialogue Jablonski seems to be aiming at a Marx Brothers effect. It raises a smile the first time, but repetition seriously dulls the premise.~FP

EMPTY ZONE

Sirius: *4 issue miniseries ('Under Dead Television Skies') 1998*, 8 issues 1999-2000, 2 issues ('Conversations with the Dead') + 2002 to date*

The Empty Zone is an electronic 'Big Brother', established in 2018. Corinne is one of seven Tracers, a secret team created for retrieval of data using "micro-neural processing import storage implants". After killing her own team (under orders), Corinne becomes a target herself. In 'Under Dead Television Skies', Banx helps Corrine against a human form of the Empty Zone. The regular series is initially set several years before the miniseries, though by 6, with Corrine's conscience plaguing her, we appear to be back in her present, hired to retrieve a missing boy. 'Conversations With The Dead' is meant to be a five-issue miniseries and sees Corrine experiencing strange dreams and uncovering a factory of zombie assassins. Jason Alexander's cyberpunk series is difficult to follow (a proofreader would have been helpful), and, presumably deliberately, cryptic in its depiction of events, for instance in understanding how much of what Corrine experiences is meant to be real. Alexander's artwork becomes increasingly like that of Bill Sienkiewicz as the series progresses, though he also starts using just pencils in 6-8.~NF

ENCHANTED

Sirius: *3 issue miniseries 1997, 3 issue miniseries ('The Awakening') 1999*

Two bickering groups of twenty-something 'adepts' (witches and wizards to you) in New York face the dire threat of other-wordly entities. It all sounds quite entertaining in that fashion, but Robert Chang's pace is lethargic, and he'll never provide any action when a couple of talking heads can describe it. The second series is painted, which at least adds hair colour to his largely indistinguishable cast.~WJ

ENCHANTER

Eclipse: *3 issues 1987*

Intended to be an eight-part series, Don Chin and Mike Dringenberg's fantasy tale had a lot of promise. Minimal dialogue and beautifully rendered black and white artwork make it hard to understand why the story has never been finished. On the strength of these issues it looked likely to create the sort of following that *Elfquest* had.~NF

END OF THE CENTURY CLUB

Panic: *Graphic Novel 1996*
Ed Hillyer/Slab O Concrete: *4 issue miniseries ('The End'), Graphic Novel 1998*

The End of the Century Club is the feel good comic to end all feel good comics. It's set in an alternate present that slightly magnifies the paranoia of post-Thatcherite Britain with talk of identity cards, street surveillance and compulsory jobs for the unemployed. Despite this it promises that the youth of today can do something meaningful about their situation, although they have to break the law to achieve it. The story teams Bic, a bike-obsessed youth from a previous small press series by writer/artist Ilya with a bunch of other young misfits in South London, who are attempting to set up a club. All kinds of forces are against them, from local rent-a-cops to the mad Rastafarian predicting the end of the world, and they're so skint they have to steal the records for their opening night in the first part of *The End* (the title to which the miniseries is abbreviated). Reflecting the street-smart, multi-cultural lives of young Londoners, Ilya's characters are complex: sassy, confrontational, immature at times, often tender, often annoying. His art develops throughout the series, becoming increasingly loose and 'bigfoot' in style. When he lets rip, in the opening sequence of the graphic novel where Bic is stage diving, or in the fight that concludes the first part of the follow-up series, it's a delight on the eye. The wonderful thing about *The End of the Century Club* is that as it progresses you can see a talented cartoonist becoming more and more sure of himself. This isn't a splendid series from the very first page, which keeps getting better. The graphic novel was reprinted by Slab O'Concrete in 1998.~FJ
Recommended: Graphic novel, 1-4

Steven Grant's ENEMY

Dark Horse: *5 issue miniseries 1994*

Well-constructed thriller encompassing the FBI, covert government agency shenanigans and a man led to killers by the ghosts of those they've killed.~FP

ENEMY ACE

DC: *Graphic Novel 1991, 2 issue microseries 2001*

Created by Robert Kanigher and Joe Kubert, the German World War I aviator previously appeared in *Our Army at War, Star Spangled War Stories*, and a *DC Special*, but has his first star billing in George Pratt's graphic novel 'War Idyll'. It deals with a Vietnam veteran who seeks out the ageing

German pilot as part of his efforts to come to terms with the pyschological scars left by his own experiences of war. Pratt makes his points clear, but it's rather hard to believe that these men would actually be talking like this. In contrast, the 2001 microseries is set during World War II. This superb revisiting by writer Garth Ennis, never one to shun controversy, does an admirable job of forging a sympathetic hero of a man fighting for the Nazis without taking the obvious cop-out route of making him a defector and a traitor. Ennis portrays the ageing Hans Von Hammer as a patriot who doesn't want to see the destruction of a Germany he learned to love long before Hitler took its reigns. He is tired of the futility of war, but craves its adventure; a superb pilot who knows he isn't very good at anything else. As the story unfolds Von Hammer grows more and more disillusioned, until it becomes impossible to ignore that the side he's fighting for doesn't deserve to win. And yet nonetheless, Ennis enables him to maintain his integrity and honour all the way to the bitter end. The final sequence is heart-wrenchingly sentimental without being mawkish in the way that only Ennis can manage. If this wonderful series can be faulted at all, it is only that the two issues have different artists: Chris Weston and Christian Alamy in 1, Russ Heath in 2.~JC
Recommended: 1-2

ENIGMA

Vertigo: *8 issue limited series 1993**

No writers working in mainstream comics during the 1990s could challenge an on form Peter Milligan. He brought a knowing and erudite accumulation of popular culture and literary appreciation and an often concealed sense of humour to almost every title he handled. He's also a rarity in being far superior when conceiving and following through his own projects, tending to quickly lose interest when handling other people's characters, and appears to have no fear of tackling topics likely to engender controversy. Admirably, the hallmark of political correctness is of no concern in tempering his ideas. This, naturally, leads to some controversy, in the case of *Enigma* from his handling of the homosexual propensities or otherwise of his lead character Michael Smith. With Enigma he has the wit and imagination to present an innovative take on superheroes, another rarity.

Michael Smith orders his life to such an extent it's stultifying, but he's transformed by a near-death experience during which he glimpses The Enigma, the hero of a fondly recalled comic from childhood. Villains from the comic appear to terrorise reality, and Michael locates the writer of *The Enigma*, who can make no further sense of events than he. The most persistent and troublesome of the comic villains is The Truth, and the key to the entire series, although seemingly a throwaway line in the third issue, is when the comic's writer says, "I always figured The Enigma would have trouble with The Truth." Smith somehow feels drawn into and connected with the events playing themselves out, and indeed he is, although exactly how is a mystery only resolved at the death.

Enigma also charts the artistic growth of Duncan Fegredo. His first major work in pen and ink, it was begun in a somewhat cluttered and scratchy fashion, hiding a lack of confidence previously secreted behind painted pages under a multitude of lines. By the concluding issues he's confident enough to dispense with un-needed embellishments, which isn't to say the art here is substandard. Fegredo is an expressive artist who's a natural at conveying emotion and movement, and is ideal for the heady brew on offer. The final touch elevating *Enigma* to greatness is the cynical voice whose captions tell the entire story. Consistently transcending standard comic captions, they offer an extra layer of commentary, providing a fully rounded graphic novel. The identity of the narrator is unknown until the final pages and will surprise every reader. Intelligent, seductive and compelling, *Enigma* is a must read for anyone drawn to adult-oriented comics.~WJ
Recommended: 1-8

ENO AND PLUM

Oni Press: *One-shot 1998*

Terry LaBan's slacker couple here extend over a full comic. While LaBan's cartooning is as slick and professional as ever, this has the feeling of two short stories slapped together for the sake turning out a full-length comic. The frequent placement of throwaway gag strips interrupts the flow to no good effect, and all in all Eno and Plum are better sampled in the pages of *Cud*.~FP

THE ENVELOPE MANUFACTURER

Drawn & Quarterly: *1 issue 1998*

A man who owns an envelope factory is in deep financial trouble. He's paranoid about one of his employees, and is having violent fantasies that verge on hallucinations. Chris Oliveros produces a convincing portrait of someone in crisis, but it remains the only issue of a projected three issues to be published.~FC

EPIC

Marvel/Epic: *4 issues 1992*

This was an attempt by Marvel to relaunch several series that had lost their own titles, including *Alien Legion* (3), *Stalkers* (1-4), *Wild Cards* (1-3) and *Nightbreed* (1, 2), and, perhaps, to test the waters for a new regular anthology. Using primarily British artists for these strips (Dougie Braithwaite, Mark Farmer, D'Israeli, David Roach, Steve Whitaker and Woodrow Phoenix), it did them no harm but cannot have been considered a particularly commercial decision, especially given that there was a very good reason for the original failure of these titles. Of special interest is a *Cholly and Flytrap* two-parter (3, 4), drawn by Arthur Suydam but written by Bob Burden in his usual surreal style.~NF

EPIC Graphic Novels and One-Shots

Even dealing with the *Groo* and Moebius graphic novels under separate entries, Marvel's creator-owned graphic novels and one-shots make strange collective bedfellows. The poorest is *Heavy Hitters* Annual, a one-shot sampler with a story apiece of Alien Legion, Feud, Lawdog, Lester Girls and Spyke. The best is Feud (despite two pages printed out of order), and it's a meaningless codicil to the series, so don't bother unless a complete set is essential. Acclaimed science fiction author William Gibson's *Neuromancer* is adapted with very static airbrushed art by Bruce Jensen. Or at least the first part is. Epic didn't bother to complete the story, so it's not much use unless you're a major Bruce Jensen fan. And how many can say, hand on heart, that they are? More static painted art, this time from John Pierard, is found in the adaptation of Steven Brust's fantasy novel *Jhereg*. It's a slight story about an assassin with a difficult hit, but at least complete in itself.

Harvey Kurtzman's Strange Adventures isn't technically a graphic novel, rather a collection. Creating *Mad*, Kurtzman had been an innovator and the master comics satirist of his generation. Sadly, his day had passed by the time he plotted and laid out these limp genre parodies. A stellar line-up of artists including Sergio Aragonés, Dave Gibbons and Rick Geary faithfully follow the layouts, but respect outweighs inspiration. The best strip is Robert Crumb's two pages concerning Kurtzman's influence on his life and career, and yet how difficult he found it conforming to Kurtzman's exacting standards. The production department deserves full credit for designing an appealing and reverential hardback that finds space for Kurtzman's layouts.

It's a shame the in-house staff weren't as respectful when it came to *67 Seconds*, which manages to mis-spell artist Steve Yeowell's name on both the cover and the credit page (in two different ways). To add insult to injury, the editors responsible have their names on the title page, leaving the creative team anonymous until the following page. *67 Seconds* is excellent. James Robinson weaves a riveting adventure, told in flashbacks as a man contemplates his past and circumstances while he risks his life leaping for a flailing rope. Rich characterisation, a compelling mystery, a

* Available in a collected edition

well-realised fascist retro-future and top art combine for a sadly ignored story. *Someplace Strange*, though, garnered plenty of interest on release. The stunning John Bolton illustrations immediately captivate, and sent plenty of folk into enthusiasm overdrive. One suspects they didn't actually attempt to read this surrealistic modern-day fairy tale. While living up to the title, Ann Nocenti's script does little more than string together a succession of quirky happenings for an entirely unsatisfying read. But, oh, that glorious art! *Last of the Dragons* can also boast fine art, from writer Carl Potts inked by Terry Austin. Originally serialised in Epic Illustrated, there's a greater cohesiveness to the collected edition of this tale of 19th-century guardians of ancient Japanese dragons bringing them to the USA. Slightly awkward at times, it's unusual, involving and underrated.

Wearing his heart on his sleeve James Hudnall wrote *Sinking*. His intentions are good, and Rob Ortaleza's heavily photo referenced art is fine, but it's an earnest, overlong and often ponderous study of schizophrenia. The comic-sized *Seven Block* has rushed Jorge Zaffino art with plenty of ill-advised crosshatching that often turns to complete mud despite the well selected and limited palate of colourist Julie Michel. What makes this all the more distressing is that the story is a career benchmark for writer Chuck Dixon. It's a disturbing tale of medical experimentation on volunteer prisoners that inevitably goes disastrously wrong. Despite the predictability, *Seven Block* works, as it concerns mood, atmosphere and perception, but the artistic shortcomings from a generally superior creator preclude recommendation.~WJ

Recommended: *67 Seconds*

EPIC Illustrated

Marvel/Epic: *34 issues 1980-1986*

Marvel's attempt to emulate the success of *Heavy Metal*, *Epic Illustrated* had far fewer nods to the world of European cartooning. Using pretty much the same formula of serials and short stories, *Epic* relied heavily on established creators, including some whose work had appeared in *Heavy Metal*, including Paul Kirchner and Bob Wakelin.

There are some strong stories to be found: Delaney and Chaykin's 'Seven Moons' Light Casts Complex Shadows' (2), Roy Thomas and P. Craig Russell's *Elric* adaptations (3, 4, 14, 15), Ken Macklin's funny Dr Watchstop (10, 14, 17, 21, 29, 33, 34), Dave Sim's *Cerebus* colour strips (26, 28, 30), plus work by Trina Robbins (8, 16), Alan Moore (34) and Sergio Aragonés (a Groo story in 27). It's the artwork that most people will remember, however, whether the black and white linework of Mike Kaluta (17, 21, 24, 26), Charles Vess (5, 8-10, 16, 21, 22, 24, 27) and Tim Conrad (on 'Toadswart' in 25-28, 30-33), or the richly coloured artwork by Kent Williams which adorns 18-21, 29-31 and 33, while Arthur Suydam turns up in 1, 8, 10, 13, 14 and 34, and John Bolton has work in 7 and 15. He also illustrates Marada The She-Wolf* (10-12) in black and white, then in colour (22, 23). Interesting artwork carried a lot of so-so short stories, but on continued stories the series was weak. They included Jim Starlin's indulgent prelude to Dreadstar, 'Metamorphosis Odyssey' (1-9), Thomas and Conrad's clunky Almuric (2-5), Rick Veitch's interminable 'Abraxas And The Earthman' – a sort of Moby Dick in space (10-17) – plus science-fiction shorts in 4-6, 19, 25, 28 and 29), Archie Goodwin and Pepe Moreno's post-holocaust 'Generation Zero'* and the utterly tedious 'Last Galactus Story' by John Byrne in 26-34, still unfinished when the title was cancelled.

Slightly more interesting, but still only average, were Vaughn Bodé's Cobalt 60 (27-31), Doug Moench and John Buscema's Weirdworld (9, 11-13) and Dean Motter and Ken Steacy's Catholicism-vs-pure-evil-in-outer-space epic 'The Sacred and the Profane'*. Of the European reprints, only Zoran Vanjaka made more than a couple of visits, including various appearances by his science-fiction detective Gideon Plexus (12, 15, 23, 28, 29, 31). Leo Duranona was in 1 and 11, Mirko Ilic in 1 and 5, and Paulo Serpieri in 34.

Alongside strips, Epic included portfolio pages and interesting articles on various aspects of comics. Of note are Maurice Horn on fantasy in European comics in 2, the Barry Windsor-Smith interview in 7 and a Basil Wolverton retrospective by Ron Goulart in 12. *Heavy Metal* wasn't great during this period, but it still outshone Epic Illustrated.~NF

EPIC LITE

Marvel/Epic: *1 issue 1991*

Patchy humour anthology. On the plus side there's Evan Dorkin's TV sitcom parody 'The Murder Family', Scott Saavedra's satire on macho rednecks and some nice art from Hilary Barta. Kyle Baker's on autopilot for a lesson in comics economics, and Jim Valentino returns Normalman in order to get some venom about TV companies off his chest. Richard Rice's Bob The Alien is simple stuff and Mike Kazaleh occupies eight pages to no good effect.~WJ

EPICURUS THE SAGE

Piranha Press: *2 Graphic Novels 1989 & 1991*

Bill Messner-Loebs takes a whimsical look at the heyday of ancient Greek philosophy. It's an unlikely subject, with an unlikely hero, the moderate and reasonable Epicurus, who despairs of the rhetoric and weird notions flying among his fellows. Let's not forget that Plato thought everything existed in a big cave, and that our 'reality' was just a reflection of that cave. In volume 1 Epicurus sorts out the dispute between Demeter and Pluto over his kidnapping of Demeter's daughter, Persephone, hindered by the young Alexander the Great, and in vol 2 he tackles Zeus' various peccadilloes. The historically minded among you will already have noticed that Messner-Loebs plays fast and loose with history and mythology to create a rich fantasy Athens in which philosophers act like Tom & Jerry characters, as well as taking clever pops at each other's ideas. Unfortunately if you haven't had the benefit of a classical education many of these are too obtuse to be funny, which is a problem when addressing a twenty-something audience. Sam Kieth illustrates the whole slickly, drawing mythological monsters with great dash, and throws in lots of visual jokes to keep the story moving, but ultimately *Epicurus the Sage*, like *Deadface*, can only be fully appreciated by a limited audience.~FJ

Recommended: Vol 1

EPILEPTIC

L'Association: *1 volume + 2002 to date*

A major work equal to any comics yet seen in the English language. The title refers to the condition suffered from childhood by the brother of creator David B., here dropping the alias and referring to himself as Pierre-Francois. The main thrust of the book is a young child attempting to understand the distress and reactions of his brother, who undergoes traumatic experimental medical treatment, then alternative healing that works for a while. When he reverts to regular daily seizures his parents resort to ever more unconventional sources, hoping for a permanent cure. These sequences are powerful enough on their own, but what raises *Epileptic* a notch above is the way in which the narrative diverts to encompass unrelated topics. Large chunks of family history are covered, macrobiotic diets explained, and the harrowing experiences of others are spotlighted. We have the World War I memories of David B.'s grandfather, along with Algerian war recollections of comic writer Jacques Lob. There are also threads connecting *Epileptic* to *Maus*, a work with which it's not shamed in comparison. Discussions ensue with David B.'s parents concerning the suitability of revelations about family history, and the manner in which the older generation considers they'll be interpreted.

The book is drawn in a very adaptable simple blocky style that's powerful and up to portraying anything required. It's packed with memorable images. Styles of art familiar from historical cultures are incorporated to depict the battles that interested Pierre-Francois in childhood, and David B.'s version of Eastern imagery appears frequently. The epilepsy is given weight in the form of a ghost, and there are literal

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* Available in a collected edition

interpretations of phrases such as "circle of doctors". Mention must also be made of Kim Thompson's superb translation. There's never a moment when it occurs this was originally produced in French. In France the entire story is being published over six volumes, and this reprints the first three. Anyone with a series interest in comics should read it.~FP
Recommended

EPOXY

Epoxy Press: *3 issues + 2000 to date*

"A pictogrammatic Bohemian Rhapsody; three movements composing one nutty song" is how creator John Pham endearingly describes *Epoxy*. He's a rarity in comics: a born storyteller, with everything he does sucking you in, down to the short paragraphs summing-up people in 3. 1 begins three stories, with the most dramatic being 'Elephantine', concerning one-armed boxer Jack, who hates his seedy life participating in illegal contests. There are elements of a crime story as well, not fully fleshed out with the strip absent in 3. This is the only strip not influenced by Vietnamese culture. 'Modesto' simply drips with it, starring industrious and inventive teenager Olive, forever creating new ideas and fantasies. 'Shiva' is a world where humanoid robots and dragons mix with ordinary humans, absent in 2, but returning to monopolise the ambitious squarebound 3. When that issue starts not with the continuation of the story from 1 (which does appear later), but with a long allegory, Pham is good enough to dispel any disappointment from the opening pages. Later that issue a series of strips combining the design techniques of Chris Ware with Hergé's simple style unites cartoon versions of his lead characters. Pham's art starts as overly-rendered, but, admirably, he selects different approaches appropriate to each of the stories. By 3 he's stripped down to the essentials for a very appealing set of simplified styles. Pham is tremendously talented and improving all the time.~WJ
Recommended: 1-3

EQUINOX CHRONICLES

Innovation: *2 issues 1991*

This is reminiscent of nothing so much as *T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents* with its mixture of limited super-powers and hi-tech agents in an otherwise real world. Equinox Research Group creates technological advances, but when the father of the corporate attorney is first framed for the robbery of their new electron laser accelerator, then abducted, it's clear there's trouble at t'mill. This is well plotted adventure by Jeff Hendricks, well drawn by then promising penciller Mark Jones. The only shame is that it was never finished.~WJ

ERADICATOR

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1996*

One of the four pretenders to Superman's throne during that gentleman's temporary demise, the Eradicator is a Kryptonian personality overwritten on a dead human psyche. This series explores the conflict between his two aspects, and is sensitively written by Ivan Velez Jr, with pleasant, if static, art by Roger Robinson. It's thoughtful, but ultimately a bit solipsistic for your average reader.~HS

EROS Graphic Novels

We have a lot to thank Eros comics for, not least keeping Fantagraphics, America's most experimental, quality comic publisher afloat. While keeping our right to read hastily drawn, virtually plotless fuckfests to the fore, they've also managed to dig up one or two interesting talents. Chief among these is Molly Kiely, whose breezy graphic novels set among polymorphic folk in the flatlands of the South, are full of loose sub-Jaime Hernandez linework and cheerful sex. In *Tecopa Jane* the eponymous protagonist recalls a failed relationship while living with her ex's transsexual 'brother', who has the hots for her. *That Kind of Girl* features an uninspired writer on a road trip through Nevada to visit her artist boyfriend and, after meeting Ruby Justice, a very southern cowgirl, tell him their relationship's finally over. The porn element's not so much in the freewheeling sucking and fucking that goes on, but in the fact that the characters seem emotionally unattached to their sexuality, waving each other off, accepting the sudden start or end of relationships without a blink. It's very pretty, and it's exultant about sex, rather than furtive and unhappy, as so many erotic novels seem to be.

Head of the Class, written by Hernan Migoya, with slick, cute cartoony art by Ruben del Rincon, manages to be both horny and look at the implications of our sexual culture. Nina's a college student, popular with the boys and the object of German's virgin crush. She also happens to be a very professional whore, like her mother. Her two identities clash when she finds herself drawn to the sweet, sexually active, but spiritually pure, world of boyfriends. It's thoughtful as well as sexy. Equally interesting, although almost impossible to read due to the pale printing, is Wilfred Santiago's *Pink*, in pink ink on pink paper. Santiago's a gifted draughtsman who draws in a smudgy style somewhere between Jose Muñoz and Ho Che Anderson, and writes authentic-sounding stories about casual sex among his range of ethnic characters. Very much porn for 2002 to counterbalance the outpouring of stale fantasies seemingly left over from the 1960s. He also co-wrote and illustrated *The Thorn Garden*, with Meroe Elahi, stories set around a modern fetish club, which set out to be realistic about the BDSM lifestyle.

Ron Wilber has long been a mainstay of the Eros line, churning out endless weakly humorous stories involving unfeasibly top-heavy totty. His *Bondage Cop* graphic novel features a fat female cop who can be transformed into the lithesome superheroine Bondage Cop (during which transformation the bulk of her body weight seems to shift to her chest) by wanking herself on a magic truncheon. Ahem. Equally feeble is *Karate Girl*, poorly illustrated psuedo-manga that manages to have the pages printed in the wrong order. *Lady X*: 'Lust's Captive' belongs to the old-fashioned tradition of European adventure porn. Giovanni Degli Esposti draws in a highly detailed, measured style and depicts the sensuous, ornate world of pre-revolution France, as Madame de Beaufluer, now a nun, tells the story of her former life as mistress and murderer among the nobility. Rather a surprise in this company is Ernie Colón's *Strip Search*, decidedly sketchy and old-fashioned even with the concession of a few tattoos, nipple rings and ponytails on otherwise bald men. It concerns a private dick hired to find the runaway wife of a millionaire. Credit Colón with trying to provide a proper story, though, and one of the most grotesque demons even to adorn a gate. One might also imagine Matt Howarth's sparse, stippled cartooning, and discursive plots to be entirely unsuited to erotica. In *Tryx*, though, he comes up trumps. Including a giant in full proportion, a shapechanger, and three more randy android sex toys, under the command of a seemingly uptight and definitely inexperienced new captain. Howarth's plots are imaginative and witty, while offering the full complement of sexual permutations.

Erotic comics tend to fall into two categories – so specialist you wonder if there's an audience, usually reflecting the artist's own little peccadilloes, or a quick spin through every combination a *Sun* reader could conceive of, i.e. a little anal, a blowjob or two, a threesome and a gang bang to finish, with plenty of cum shots. Here's the original *Sun* selection. *Hummers* has a suspiciously large-breasted analyst subjecting her equally juglicious patient to regressive hypnotherapy in the hope that she'll be cured of her nymphomania. Cue lesbian hotties in Egypt, more lesbian hotties in the Renaissance (oops, missed a straight bang in feudal Japan), a threesome in Paris and an all-girl orgy at some unspecified date and time. The chapters read like individual stories that have been shoehorned into the structure at a later date, and the art, by Scorpio, is incredibly old-fashioned, sixties style erotica over which random airbrush shading has been added in black and white. Dawn's *Little Black Book* pretends to be the real-life escapades of a sexual adventuress. It takes in everything from phone sex lines to orgies. For straightforward short sex stories drawn in a fluid manner that are actually quite pretty try *Insatiable* by Fernando Caretta, collected from *Selen*.

Sexus, not to be confused with Eros miniseries *Beta Sexus*, is a not terribly inventive, but fetish-laden, story of a rich young man whose analyst turns out to be a top dominatrix, who swiftly works out how to deal with his frustrations. What stands out about it is the art. Creator Markku Virta draws women who look like sociopathic drag artists and puts in the incredible amount of detail only someone in love with fetishistic clothing can be bothered with. He also draws several hundred individual body hairs on all his male figures, making them look like they've been carpeted. Even more specialised is the work of Kono Yaro and Suke Bei. Their *Lust in Space* is westernised manga featuring androgynous women with huge nipples and lots of multi-tentacled monsters. If that particular combo's your thing, get stuck in!

For more extreme sex try *Harem Nights* by Michael Lacombe and Yanick Paquette. Tatia's a slave who has to get it on every day or die due to some magic spell. Obviously this makes her rather desperate to have sex with just about anything, animal vegetable or mineral. *Tana's Secret World* also features fantasy elements, as the young daughter of a Peruvian shaman comes to America, chiefly it seems to discover new positions to have sex in. Surely it goes without saying that she's beautiful and highly sexed as well? Of course there's a good reason for all the sex – she's using the energy to enter a kind of x-rated dreamtime. Or there's *She-Dom*, 'The Awakening of Clara Rosenberg' by Roberto Baldazzini and Pes. Straighter than most of Baldazzini's fantasies (the heroine basically discovers she's a switch and is submissive to her husband, but sadistic to her boyfriend) it contains a fair amount of violence, as well as a lot of detailed fetishwear, drawn in Baldazzini's distinctive, heavy outlined, even lined style, reminiscent of Moebius with access to a few less pens.~FJ

The EROTIC Worlds of Frank Thorne

Eros: *6 issues 1990-1991*

Good old Frank Thorne, never afraid to dress up in a silly costume to get his picture taken with a large-breasted fan. Many (including Wendy 'Elfquest' Pini) flocked in chainmail bikinis to impersonate Frank's heroines and are shown here. 1 contains two Ghita of Alizarr adventures; the language is colourful – "Out of my way, Bumhole, or I'll pry loose your junks with this nutpick'" – but the pictures rarely match what's being said, making it read like a bad translation. The art's much more carefully composed than the loose line suggests and you'll either like his pouty-mouthed, wide-eyed women or not. 2 and 3 feature Moonshine McJuggs: *Li'l Abner* with added incest, hick stupidity and carnal knowledge of cows. For 4 it's strap on your oxygen helmet (and not much else) for a continuation of the sci-fi graphic novel *Lann*, while 5 reprints the Danger Rangerette strips he did with Ted Mann and 6 features Red Sonja. Several worlds, pretty much the same character.~FJ

ERT!

Caliber: *1 volume 1995*

With his deceptively simple stick-figure characters Matt Feazell was an inspiration to creators of minicomics throughout the 1980s, although few matched his rate of productivity. 126 pages of work prove that Feazell's reputation stands not only on his productive nature, but also on his being a reasonable gag writer. His primary characters Stupid Boy, Cute Girl and particularly The Amazing Cynicalman are amply represented, and you're unlikely to come across the minicomics today, so this is worth looking for.~WJ

ESC <escape>

Comico: *4 issue miniseries 1996*

ESC attempts to pass itself off as something for the newly sophisticated comics fan ready for real science-fiction rather than mythology, which is insultingly patronising to start with. This is based on some Hollywood chancer's screenplay in which he feebly attempts to paste some trendy virtual reality ideas onto an out of control vigilante story not fit for one of Arnold Schwarzenegger's more low-rent efforts. Bad draughtsmanship smothered in post-Bill Sienkiewicz flashy effects doesn't help it at all. Appalling rubbish.~GK

ESCAPE

Escape: *9 issues 1983-1986*
Titan: *10 issues (10-19), 2 Graphic Novels 1986-1989*

The British self-publishing scene of the early 1980s was healthy and vibrant, and *Escape* began as an attempt to present the best of that material to a wider audience. Eddie Campbell, Glenn Dakin, Phil Elliott, Hunt Emerson, Myra Hancock and Rian Hughes are all well represented in the first seven digest-sized issues, which are a 50/50 combination of text and strip. The interviews with the likes of Leo Baxendale and Raymond Briggs are illuminating and the articles, largely on the work of European comic creators, are informed, but the bite-sized pieces of comics are unsatisfying. This changes when the title switches to magazine size with 8 and broadens its remit to include longer strips, more eccentric North American contributors, and translated work from respected European creators such as Baudoin (15), Mattotti (11), Muñoz (10), and Varenne (18). Phil Elliott and Paul Grist's 'Absent Friends' in the uncharacteristically sub-par issue 11 exemplifies the charm of *Escape*. A guy bumps into the nutter who used to live on the roof above his flat two years after they'd last met, and attempts to explain to his girlfriend the mixture of threat and allure he exuded. In this eloquent and well-observed story tension, wit and a twist in the tale are combined by two top-notch creators whose work is sadly under-appreciated.

The glorious eclecticism of Escape permits the publication of such astonishingly diverse and uncharacteristic material as Brian Bolland's introspective and questioning 'Mr Mamoulian' (11-19), Simon Bisley's fashion illustrations (15), and Howard Chaykin's biography of Lester Young (18). The Pleece Brothers' hilarious pastiche '70s Cop' is in 19, as is the prologue to the graphic novel *London's Dark*. The title is a reference to the blackouts observed to confuse enemy bombers during World War II, and James Robinson and Paul Johnson weave a tale of romance and dirty dealings amid a convincingly portrayed 1940s. The creators might handle aspects differently with more experience, but it's an assured début for both. The same can be said of *Violent Cases*, by Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean. It's a recollection of a childhood encounter with Al Capone's osteopath, and in turn the osteopath's recollections of Capone, in which a child's puzzled acceptance of the world is vividly evoked.~FP

Recommended: 7-10, 13, 14-16, 18, Violent Cases

ESCAPO

Horse Press: *One-shot 1999*

This contains two chapters in the life of escape artist, Vic, dealing with his escape, firstly from death, and then from love of Aerobella. Paul Pope's drawings continue to amaze in this meditation on the mythic themes surrounding the fear of love and death.~NF

ESPERS

Eclipse: *5 issues 1986-1987*
Halloween: *6 issues 1996-1997*
Image: *7 issues 1997-1998*

In the Eclipse 1-4* a pan-continental group with paranormal abilities are gathered to rescue hostages from Beirut-based terrorists. Writer James Hudnall concentrates on personalities more than powers, with the Espers remaining in civvies throughout, and artist David Lloyd proves very able at conveying emotion through posture. These issues form a good self-contained thriller very much tied to the real world, but the proposed second story is stillborn, with 5 notable for being the only American comic drawn by British master artist John M. Burns. It's eventually told in Interface, which bridges the first and second series of *Espers*. By the Halloween issues the cast are a more confident and experienced outfit, and the focus is largely back on them, but as seen through the eyes of a new teenage member. Artist Greg Horn is very good, and his technique of avoiding the inking process works surprisingly well.

The Image series incorporates Brian Marx from *Chiller*, and thereby introduces sorcery to Espers, albeit largely in the form of more super powers. 1-4, though, are very much flash and thunder to the exclusion of all else. Matters improved thereafter with a run of single issues enabling more time for the cast to breathe, but cancellation was premature.~WJ

Recommended: Eclipse 1-4

THE ESTABLISHMENT

WildStorm: *13 issues 2001-2002*

Take several lose ends from the WildStorm universe, add a UK version of the Authority made up of three Midwich Cuckoos, a doctor with Bride-of-Frankenstein hair, an English gent, a voluptuous killer, and a dead homosexual sharing bodies with a live, flatulent ex-copper – all led by hard-nosed, no-nonsense agent Jon Drake. Stir in some Vertigoesque British strangeness, incorporate a plethora of UK pop references and nods to such diverse television shows as *The Prisoner*, *Grange Hill* and *Fawlty Towers* and you'll end up with *The Establishment*. Thought-provokingly written by Ian Edginton and lovingly illustrated by Charlie Adlard, this wonderfully entertaining series combines the paradoxical aspects of time-travel with an intricate plot involving pocket universes, alternate realities, invading aliens, and Venusian nanites. Oh, and a sentient, omnipotent god-like machine that wants nothing less than to reconfigure the universe in its image. The many ideas and plot twists crammed into the story ensure that it improves with each re-reading; one can only hope that a sequel is not out of the question.~JC

ETC

Piranha Press: *5 issue miniseries 1989*

Tedious pseudo-sci-fi female Frankenstein story that looks half-drawn with broken ballpoints and painted with old bath sponges by a commercial artist having his first go at comics. Writer Tim Conrad's sub-Anthony Burgess or William Burroughs attempts at future language and science are laughable.~GK

ETERNAL ROMANCE

Best Destiny: *4 issues 1997-1998**

Romance stories with a twist as narrated by vampire, Destine, whose oßwn tale of date mix-up is included, as she arranges to meet a vampire, werewolf and zombie on the same night. Otherwise these are about couples brought together by or rising above the difficulties of the supernatural to find love. Janet L. Hetherington's stiff artwork is somewhat offset by her ornate inking and the nostalgic feel and charm of the strips just about carries them off.~NF

ETERNAL WARRIOR

Valiant: *50 issues, 2 Yearbooks 1992-1996, one-shot ('Wings of Justice') 1995, 2 issue microseries ('Fist and Steel') 1996*

Spinning off from the *Unity* crossover, this became the continuity backbone of the Valiant Universe, and uses the entire history of the world as a backdrop to the story of Gilad Anni Padda. He's the oldest of three brothers born before the time of Gilgamesh, an immortal warrior pledged in service to the Geomancer, a hereditary spokesperson for the Earth. This is a cracking good adventure series managing to mix the best of historic action with superscience, crime fiction, and espionage intrigue. The artwork varies from acceptably workmanlike to excellent, and the variation in settings often used to highlight a contemporary adventure works well over and over again. Another big plus is that despite a potentially huge back-story, individual issues are surprisingly approachable with almost any story being a jumping-on point.~WW

Recommended: 1-4, 6-15, 18, 24-27, 36, Yearbook 1

ETERNAL WARRIORS

Acclaim: *6 issues 1997-1998*

A succession of one-shots that introduce the Forever Family to the Acclaim Universe. Art Holcomb and various artists tell extra-length tales of Ivar, Gilad and Aram/Armstrong who have lived for thousands of years and created a secret society of immortals who all but run the world. The first issue, 'Time and Treachery' tells of a civil war in the society as members of the family are being murdered. 'Digital Alchemy' then delves into Armstrong's past as a lost love uses lost arts to attack the world's gold reserves. 'Archer and Armstrong', 'Blackworks', 'Mog' and 'The Immortal Enemy' all deal increasingly with the rift between the three brothers as Solar, the God-like Man of the Atom comes ever closer to ending the world. Although starting well, the series degenerates into a clearing house for plotlines running through the rest of the Acclaim Universe, but is still generally a good read.~WW

ETERNALS

Marvel: *19 issues, 1 Annual 1976-1978, 12 issue limited series 1986-1987, one-shot 1991, one-shot 2000 ('Apocalypse Now')*

The Eternals was the highspot of what was an unhappy return for Jack Kirby to the company his dynamic art and exciting plots had a major part in establishing. It concerns itself with familiar Kirby themes. Two races who've lived among humanity since the dawn of time are the god-like beings who've inspired myths of the Greek deities, and the ugly Deviants existing beneath the planet's surface. The impending arrival of the Celestials, creators of mankind, to sit in judgement on humanity draws the immortal beings into open conflict. Unfortunately, great plots, wonderful ideas and expansive artwork are monumentally flawed by Kirby's often terrible dialogue. The best samplers of the original series are 11, in which the Soviets attempt to topple a Celestial while the Eternals gather to communicate, and the annual. Stay away from the saga of the cosmic-powered Hulk in 13-16, though. It's a stinker. Dangling plotlines from the prematurely cancelled first series were resolved in *Thor* from 272.

For the revival writers Peter Gillis and Walt Simonson and pencil artists Sal Buscema and Paul Ryan wisely opt not to imitate Kirby, and settle on political intrigue and the pursuit and responsibilities of power as themes. It starts well, but drags over twelve issues. The 1991 special, 'The Herod Factor', is plain daft. Among other plot holes you could drive a bulldozer through, everything hinges on the deceit of someone who had no way of knowing the information that sets events in motion, there's silly expository dialogue throughout, and Mark Texeira's figurework is very lax. The 2000 one-shot was obviously intended as an X-Men style resurrection, and introduces a bunch of new Eternals amid the machinations of Apocalypse. There's little to the new cast beyond names and design, and the lack of follow-up indicates its success.~FP

ETERNITY SMITH

Renegade: *5 issues 1986-1987*
Hero: *10 issues 1987-1988*

Sent back from the future to the 1980s, Smith has to prevent the future that spawned him, but there are already those in place whose task it is to ensure his mission fails. Smith is helped by future technology, but there's no way he'll be returning, and a previous visit to the 1960s produced a daughter, now a renowned rock star and reunited with her father. That's the premise of the Renegade series, which is concluded in the first Hero issue. It's a well-conceived science-fiction romp, but whenever matters begin to become absorbing there's a tedious, intrusive fight scene. Once the initial plot is concluded, the series meanders for a horror story set, for some strange reason, in the Antarctic, and dull back-ups spotlighting the supporting cast.~WJ

ETHEL & ERNEST

Jonathan Cape: *1 volume 1998*

This is Raymond Briggs' biographical tale of his parents' meeting, as milkman and parlour maid before World War II, and their subsequent life together, including his own birth,

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* Available in a collected edition

growth and leaving home, and their deaths. Their relationship is depicted as a rock against which the constantly changing world washes, but can't weaken. Providing an interesting social history as well as a moving tribute to his parents, Briggs tends towards a sentimental view, particularly with the deaths first of Ethel and then of Ernest, but his simple text and drawings underscore the tenderness of his approach, making this moving and affecting rather than maudlin.~NF
Recommended

THE EUDAEMON

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1993*

Mark Nelson is an excellent action artist. Unfortunately Nelson's talent as a writer is ordinary, and this tale of the renewal of an age-old battle between demons is only noteworthy for the art.~FP

EUROTICA Graphic novels

When they took over Catalan Publishing's back catalogue, NBM inherited most of the best European erotic artists around, most notably Guido Crepax, Milo Manara and Georges Pichard. They created the specialist Eurotica line as their output began to expand, whether to make it easier for book dealers to shuffle out the smut or simply to make things more manageable for themselves. So at ground level the line had creators interested in more than packing as many blowjobs into forty-eight pages as possible, people who regarded erotica as a worthwhile creative pursuit rather than as a quick way of making some money. And you had a breadth of interest, everything from hardcore S&M to voyeurism to sexual comedies of manners.

Of the three, Crepax is the most exceptional stylist, with his elongated women, scrawny men and experimental page layouts, as well as awareness of line quantity, from frenetic, scratchy pen to loaded brushwork. He is the only artist who can convincingly draw an orgasm simply by depicting the movement of lips or a sequence showing the tightening and spasming of an anus. *Story of O*, dealt with separately, and *Venus in Furs* are probably his fetish masterpieces, and he also brings something new to his version of the notorious skin flick *Emmanuelle* (two volumes). He supplies an elegance and fetishistic grandeur that the film lacked. Volume 1 has a particularly useful introduction for new readers, including samples of Crepax's art from his different periods. Less satisfying are the *Anita* collections, erotic encounters based around TV and video technology. For some reason the first two-thirds of *Anita Live* are in one volume, with the conclusion and another, shorter story in volume 2. As *Anita* is somewhat fluffier and less plot-driven this is not an insurmountable problem and the reprints retain the partial use of colour that's about the only innovative aspect of the strip. NBM took longest in reprinting the first segments of Crepax's early masterwork, *Valentina* (two volumes), the erotic adventures of a pretty female photographer. Surreal and full of 1960s iconography, as well as fabulous sado-masochistic imagery, they're drawn in a less linear style than the later works. At this stage Crepax is just finding his artistic feet and pushing at the boundaries of the strip format, making for some incredibly exciting art.

Some people will find Crepax's interest in sado-masochism a little disturbing. If so, they will not want to come within a hundred miles of George Pichard's more extreme efforts. *Marie Gabrielle* is a fake picaresque morality tale in a nunnery where women are tortured to punish them for their sins. There's a strong anti-religious undercurrent and a number of digs at social and religious hypocrisy to the tale, which excellently captures the voice of the genre it pastiches. However, one suspects that most readers will be buying it for the rampant sadism and not therefore be too worried about the soft-peddle translation and cuts in the English version. *Madeleine* is a less convincing retake on the theme, set on an alternate earth where women who commit sexual crimes are incarcerated and punished. The second, more extreme volume was never published in English. *The Red Countess* is a particularly detailed account of the outrages committed by Elisabeth Bathory, whose story gave rise to a number of vampire legends. She was outstandingly cruel even by the standards of her day (16th century); Pichard delights in recreating her excesses in pointillist detail. *Ulysses* (two volumes) is an early work, adapted by Lob from The Odyssey, from the period when the artist was less obsessive about the female form, the art giving a nod towards Greek painting. Although Pichard again adapts his drawing style for *The Illustrated Kama Sutra* (two volumes, text and illustrations rather than strip), it's still very clearly his work. The Indian liking for fleshy women fits in well with Pichard's own particular interest in well-curved victims. Bridging the gap between these and Pichard's later style is his 1981 rendition of *Carmen*, an earthy tragedy much closer to Prosper Merimée's original than the operatic story we're more familiar with.

Milo Manara proved to be a huge money-spinner for NBM, and frankly who can resist his gorgeous, long-legged nymphets and good-humoured tales? Manara is so pretty and cheery in his approach that it's easy to overlook the rapes, bestiality and humiliation he slips in from time to time (should such things bother you at all). As well as the seminal *Click!* series there's two volumes of *Butterscotch* to enjoy, in which a man discovers an ointment to make himself invisible and does what most men would do under the circumstances: uses it to spy on, tease and torment beautiful women. Then a team of bank robbers thinks of another use for it...

Hidden Camera and *Shorts* are collections in the same vein, a series of shorts with a peeping tom theme. Manara's touch is always light. He has an eye for the way a skirt flips or a woman inadvertently exposes herself climbing out of a car reminiscent of photographer Roy Stewart, and his first love is clearly voyeurism. However his later works explore more hardcore kinky themes, including his version of the *Kama Sutra* (a narrative involving a young woman who discovers an ancient Indian charm). *The Art of Spanking*, probably the most beautiful NBM collection, has him providing sepia wash illustrations for Jacques Enard's ruminations on bottom-reddening. Much less edifying is the recent *WWW.*, about sexual game playing among three girls staring in a live web cam sex stream, the manipulative man who runs it and the supposedly abusive boyfriend of one of them. It tries to explore interesting new territory while maintaining a slapstick comedy element (the girls think they've killed someone and attempt to cover it up during the moments between the web cam refreshes), but get sidetracked by extraneous sex. Beautiful to look at, of course. As is *The Model*, Manara's history of women modelling for famous paintings, although it's a little peculiar to see him drawing in styles reminiscent of old Masters, Impressionists and Symbolists. All are easily identified as Manara pictures, however, as he can't sublimate his style that much.

One of his most expansive and freely drawn efforts of the 1990s, *Gullivera*, gave rise to a string of imitators. He turns Swift's satirical hero into a nubile girlie, managing to keep some of the point of the original story while finding creative uses for a giant snatch. In a similar vein, and equally lightweight, we have Leroi and Gibrat's *Pinocchia*, a dirty version of the wooden-boy story, in which a lusty Gepetto carves himself a wooden mate who is brought to life by magic. Of course it all started with Vittorio Giardino's *Little Ego*, a saucy takeoff of Little Nemo in which Giardino apes McCay's drawing style perfectly, but substitutes less innocent dream imagery. *Gullivera* provoked a trend in the European softcore magazines, and Eurotica recently published Eric Maltaite's *Robinsonia*, an engaging romp through the plot of *Robinson Crusoe*, with a feisty redheaded babe replacing the rather maudlin sailor of the original. The blowup on the cover makes his artwork look rough and crude, but inside it's fluid and very sexy. Even better is his, *The 1001 Nights of Scheherazade*, where he's got cracking storytelling to base the work on, and visually stimulating subjects. In a similar retro porn vein there's also Gregory Baisden's attempt at adapting Lord George Herbert's *Night in a Moorish Harem* in two volumes, with each of the harem ladies' stories illustrated by a different artist. The result is unfortunately pedestrian storytelling and artwork of patchy quality.

In the past five years there are been fewer great discoveries, although Spain's *El Vibora* and *Kiss* have provided some interesting fare. The Eurotica editors seem to have hedged their bets by taking on some very stylised creators (i.e. Juan Emilio, Ignacio Noe) while also putting out very staid, old-fashioned looking stories. Emilio's painted artwork on *I Can See You Comin'* (short stories) and his first *Minerva* volume staring a Latin lass who likes well endowed men can only be described as volumetric and voluptuous (great pity it's in black and white). Another interesting artist is Spain's Paya, who uses heavy brush outline on figures with limited wash shadowing. It works well for sex, less well for scenes where background detail is more in demand. In Hypocrites!, with a very dull plot by Revilla, a group of sluts bring their straightlaced friend to a strip joint for a hen party and tell her stories of their sexual hi-jinx. This enables the creators to tip their hat to every major fetish in turn. His two solo volumes of *Nina* stories pretty much dispense with plot altogether. Nina likes sex. A lot. Nuff said? Noe's *Ship of Fools* features particularly ugly men and plastic Barbie women, all coloured very orange for some reason, enjoying kinky sex when a space freighter's bored crew accidentally release a bunch of sex maniacs being transported on their ship. Too ugly to be sexy, everyone looks like they carry a super size bottle of Mazola with them at all times. All this sliminess is toned down a little in *Convent of Hell* (lots of demon fucking and sacrilege, if that's your bag), and exploited to comic effect in *Doctor! I'm Too Big*, about a girl who wants to be a model but is just too curvy – her medical cure turns her into a nympho, a la *Click!*. If you particularly like cartoony artwork, and like fantasy mixed into your sex check out Richard Moore's *Horny Tales*, collecting material from *Radio Comix* and *Anthill Comics*. Tony Luke's *Sin 7* belongs, stylistically, in the Amerotica camp, using extensive montage and photo reference techniques as it does. Full marks for a plot about a whore whose nether regions lead to another dimension!

In the old-fashioned camp is *Lethal Orgasm*, by El Gringo, memorable only because it features high flying business women and sex with a corpse – you can't say the line doesn't feature something for everyone – and *The Lady and the Vampire*, subtitled 'A Saucy Vikki Belle Romp'. It looks about as retro as the title, even though it was drawn in 1999 by Colin Murray. The style is reminiscent of Gray Morrow, all sturdy women with pointy tits and bare midriffs (in a small English town, we're asked to believe). Very *Carry On Vamping... Emily's Secret* is pedestrian Belle Époque erotica, in which two young girls visit a faintly sinister aunt and get caught up in kinky sex games. Prettily, if sketchily, drawn. If you want genuinely good historical erotica, look no further than Massimo Rotundo's *Ex Libris Eroticis*, actually the third volume in a series, the first two being published by Cha Cha. This man understands proper debauchery. While most of his tales are set at the turn of the century, here he has a noblewoman retired to a monastery entertaining her sisters with tales of her family's rampant sex life during the 19th century, for which he adopts a more dynamic illustrative style than in his often cold previous volumes. The story is a load of old tat, but is dryly told. "This event decisively compromised the relationship of my parents," says the narrator, describing her mother's drugging and castrating of her father.

If you enjoy the clear line style, you will no doubt be panting to enjoy *Casa Howhard* by Baldazzini (one of Moebius' faves), which shows his mentor's influence in the very even, measured line weights, small features and use of decorative pattern. Unfortunately the book's a fairly plotless set of encounters between a load of ladyboys in an apartment block, which seems dedicated to putting them up in some style. If beautiful women with very neat genitals don't float your boat, *Casa Howhard* is unlikely to be your first pick after all. Finally, if you're looking for something truly beautiful and weird, there's *Angel Claw*, a collaboration between Moebius and Jodorowsky, consisting of full-page black and white illustrations and short accompanying text. What's peculiar, apart from the overtly sexual nature of the pictures, is that Jodorowsky constructed the order and story after Moebius had done the drawings, creating an artificial excuse for us to have a look at Moebius' fantasies. Needless to say the drawing's very fine indeed, and the symbolism is revealing – particularly the woman carefully sewing together her own cunt lips.~FJ

Recommended: *Angel Claw, The Art of Spanking, Gullivera, Little Ego, Marie-Gabrielle, The 1001 Nights of Scheherazade, Robinsonia, Valentina* 1 and 2, *Venus In Furs*

EVANGELINE

Comico: *2 issues 1984*
Lodestone: *1 Special 1986*
First: *12 issues 1987-1989*

The concept of a sexy killer vigilante nun neatly encompasses a variety of comic archetypes in a single package, and should, therefore, have been enormously successful. The scripts from Charles (more recently Chuck) Dixon show he's studied his action movies, and Judith Hunt's art, if a little static at times, moves the Comico issues along nicely despite the shoddy colouring. They're reprinted with additional codas as the Lodestone special, and the First series picks up from the conclusion. Evangeline's background is presented in 2 and 8. She works for the Vatican, distressingly still wielding power and influence in the 23rd century. The period is never well evoked, and with Evangeline back on Earth for most of the series it might have carried more punch with a contemporary setting. Dixon's plots hold up throughout, but Evangeline, despite her background of inherent contradictions, rarely transcends a blank slate. Hunt goes with 7 and the spirit of the title departs with her. Never previously exploitatively handled, the final issues by inferior artists have plenty of gratuitous poses. As an undemanding action/adventure title this is better than many.~WJ

E.V.E. Protomecha

Image/Top Cow: *6 issue miniseries 2000**

This bog-standard robo-babe sci-fi strip owes a large stylistic debt to the dystopian Japanese comic *Akira*, although its reliance on cliché and stock characters means it never approaches the same visionary heights. Dazzling, state-of-the-art computer colouring is used to disguise the deficiencies in Ale Garza's pencilling, which veers erratically between big-eyed cartooning and over-muscled superheroics. Hormonally excited teenage boys will, however, be pleased to learn that the female lead character has the regulation hyper-inflated breasts that are a hallmark of the Image school of gender studies.~AL

THE EVERYMAN

Marvel/Epic: *One-shot 1991*

Bernie Mireault and Madman creator Michael Allred feature familiar themes of death and rebirth. A murdered witch is resurrected as a hermaphrodite and given the chance to avenge her death. When the job is done, her personality recedes, allowing other restless souls to take over the body. As yet, their stories remain untold.~JC

EVIL ERNIE

Eternity: *5 issues 1991-1992**
Chaos!: *4 issue miniseries ('The Resurrection') 1993*, 4 issue miniseries ('Revenge') 1994-1995*, one-shot ('vs The Super Heroes') 1995, 5 issue miniseries ('Straight to Hell') 1995-1996, 5 issue miniseries ('Encore Presentation) 1996-1997, one-shot ('Vs The Movie Monsters) 1997, 9 issue limited series ('Destroyer') 1997-1998, 10 issues 1998-1999, one-shot ('vs The Super Heroes II') 1998, 3 issue miniseries ('Depraved') 1999, 3 issue miniseries ('War of the Dead') 1999, one-shot ('Untold Tales') 2000, one-shot ('Pieces of Me') 2000, one-shot ('Returns') 2001*

Despite writer Brian Pulido claiming he's created something different, other than a slapdash attempt to explain a murderous personality as the result of childhood abuse, Evil

Ernie is identical to the horror movies it's inspired by. So, in the same spirit... the Eternity series (later subtitled 'Youth Gone Wild') has one guy ripped in half, two eyeballs poked out, the pneumatic personification of death in a bikini, a swimming pool of blood, the storming of the White House by killer zombies, dozens of corpses, ten ribs, a nutty-dream reading machine, graveyard-fu, zombie biker-fu and square-jawed psychiatrist pushed too far-fu. Heads roll, eyeballs roll, truckers roll. Half a breast, no beasts unless you count Ernie, no dwarves. The earlier Chaos series are much the same, except in colour with four fewer ribs, and there's an Adventure Comics reprint of the first Eternity issue, and a Chaos reprint of the Eternity series titled 'Youth Gone Wild: Encore Presentation'.

From 'Destroyer', well-drawn in places by Kyle Hotz, there is a marginal improvement, as Pulido co-plots with other, usually better, writers. Fans of David Quinn's work might want to check 7 of the ongoing series (although no-one else should bother), and Pulido's back thereafter.~WJ

EVIL EYE

Fantagraphics: *9 issues + 1998 to date*

This is a showcase for Richard Sala's wonderful creations. 'Reflection in a Glass Scorpion', due to finish in 12, is a complex mystery along the lines of 'The Chuckling Whatsit' (serialised in *Zero Zero*). Would-be photographer, Kasper and Judy Drood, Girl Detective, team up to solve a number of murders that seem to involve a scientist, Massimo Ibex. He's trying to unravel the secrets of longevity by experimenting with glandular fluids, but is being hunted by Auntie Azalea and her crew of girl pirates as well as Herr Schpook, a war criminal. In the back-up strip, Peculia is a young woman whose evening strolls attract the attention of the masked Justine, as well as various zombies and other scary creatures, but her butler, Ambrose, usually appears out of nowhere when things become too dangerous. Both Obscurus, a strange hunter/protector, and Dr Trepan seem to believe that Peculia can survive an examination that involves looking at four photographs, which have terrified everyone else. There's also a *Peculia* paperback reprinting strips from this series with a new colour story. Sala's characters exist in a twilight world where something menacing is always just a shadow away, and very few emerge unscathed. His artwork is both grotesque and whimsical; it's very much his own, but shows the influence of Aubrey Beardsley and Edward Gorey amongst others. The humour is delightfully black and the twisted plots as labyrinthine as the tunnels under the city into which Judy stumbles.~NF

Recommended: 1-9

EVILMAN!

Moonstone: *One-shot 1996, 2 issue microseries ('Tentacles, Toasters & Terror') 1997, one-shot 1999*

Evilman resembles a big peanut with teeth and limbs. With such imagination expended on the design there was obviously none left for the stories. Or maybe there was none in the first place.~DB

EX-DIRECTORY:THE SECRET FILES OF BRYAN TALBOT

Knockabout: *One-shot 1997*

This collects short strips by Bryan Talbot from hither and yon, three in collaboration with Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman. These are the highlights of the comic, and well worth the purchase if you've not come across their original printings in *Food For Thought* and *Knockabout*. The other strips are decently drawn, but show little hint of the good writer Talbot would become.~FP

EXCALIBUR

Marvel: *125 issues, 2 Annuals, 1 Graphic Novel ('Weird War III'), 6 Specials 1988-1998*

Anyone wishing to dip into *Excalibur* should be aware immediately that if an issue has the hand of Alan Davis as artist or writer it's a decent superhero story or better, whereas those with which he has no involvement veer from acceptable to mediocre. *Excalibur* debuts as an uneasy mixture, bonding *Captain Britain* and Meggan from the Marvel UK *Captain Britain* (written and drawn by Davis) with three surplus to requirements X-Men Nightcrawler, Phoenix and Shadowcat. The team unite in a special later re-issued as 'The Sword is Drawn', taking their tenuously X-Men linked name from *Captain Britain*'s Arthurian origins and British base of operations. The debut is ordinary, but the ongoing series hits its stride immediately, merging a far lighter tone than writer Chris Claremont was adopting for his contemporary X-Men work with the meticulous storytelling, humourous artistic asides and splendid pencilling of Alan Davis, well matched with Paul Neary's inking. That mixture is best sampled in 4-5 featuring a daft set of old Captain Britain villains and the only slightly less daft X-Men foe, Arcade. 11 begins 'The Cross-Time Caper' in which the team are bumped through a series of other-dimensional Earths either being transformed themselves or encountering variations of familiar characters. It drags on until 24, having long outlived its welcome, and with Davis and Neary wise enough to have effectively bailed out with 17, although possibly out of guilt for their part in starting the mess they return to finish it in 23 and 24. The parade of fill-in artists don't offer anything other than filling pages, even the odd combination of Barry Windsor-Smith inked by Bill Sienkiewicz in 27, and Claremont's best post-Davis issues are the *St Trinians* homage in 32-34, reuniting Shadowcat with her team-mates.

Davis returns to write and pencil from 42, in the company of polished inker Mark Farmer. Until 67 they provide the best run of Excalibur issues, introducing interesting new characters (particularly Kylun The Barbarian and the Technet, inept alien bounty hunters), restoring a sense of humour to the series, and providing inventive excellently drawn superhero stories. Davis also has the consideration to wrap up mysteries introduced in the earliest issues. Highlights of his run include a telling time for Phoenix from, of all people, Galactus in 61, and in 66-67 an finely crafted sequel to the fêted 'Days Of Future Past' story from *X-Men* 141-142. 94 offers a far lesser dabble in the same waters. After Davis there's a very rapid plunge into mediocrity, as *Excalibur* becomes more closely integrated with *X-Men* titles, although there's a slight blip back to quality for Scott Lobdell's touchingly written 71 tying up an *X-Men* loose end concerning Colossus, marred by some unsightly artwork. Later fan favourite Joe Madureira debuts in 57 and 58, but he's still learning here.

83 is a step back up. The introduction of writer Warren Ellis prompted fanfares, but the attractive art of Terry Dodson and W.C. Carani is equally worthy of note. Sadly they only last the single issue. The jarring inconsistency to the art lasts for the remainder of the run, and it's a damning statistic that in the five years post-Davis no penciller manages more than four consecutive issues. David Williams in 89 and portions of the following two issues is very good, but it's the unappealling Ken Lashley who draws more issues than anyone else, and the one period of relative stability is when Casey Jones or Carlos Pacheco pencil all issues between 92 and 103. Both styles have an appeal, with Pacheco specialising in pneumatic women. Ellis brings a bleak sense of humour to the title, along with his trademark chain smoking Englishman who projects an offensive personality, but is sound underneath. In this instance it's Pete Wisdom, mutant covert agency operative. Beyond his alterego, Ellis isn't very interested in Excalibur other than Shadowcat, and she monopolises the majority of issues he writes, but he does evolve the title adding the homeless Colossus and Rahne Sinclair to the team. Super-villains are few and far between in the Ellis issues, except when punctuated by four issues of *X-Calibre*, a forced tie-in to the ill-conceived marketing-led 'Age of Apocalypse' story running in all *X-Men* titles. Ellis' issues are best sampled as *Excalibur* is prodded into become proactive once again in 97-100, which reinforce the team and re-introduce the Hellfire Club. Ben Raab is the writer who sees the title into cancellation, never bad, but with no spark to distinguish his scripts, his best being the final issue. Those who enjoy

sentimental superhero gatherings will be rewarded by the sloppy everything including the kitchen sink wedding of Captain Britain and Meggan.

Despite their number, *Excalibur* has been very poorly served by the graphic novels and specials distinct from the ongoing series. None of them are the complete article, with 'Air Apparent' and 'Possession' total stinkers to be avoided at all costs, although it one would be extremely curmudgeonly not to be captivated by Art Adams' art for 'Mojo Mayhem'. Shame about the script, though. Scott Lobdell's on better form for *Excalibur Vs the X-Men*, in which they are shunted around time and matched against the original X-Men. It just about merits the designation 'Special' despite some of the artists, each of whom handle a chapter, being decidedly below par. Both annuals contain a decent short back-up tale, but only masochists will wade through the remaining tosh to get to them.~WJ

Recommended: 3-5, 42-43, 61, 66-67

EXCRETA

Slab-O-Concrete: *1 volume 1999*

Taking bodily fluids as a theme, Danish cartoonist Ole Comoll Christensen turns out half a dozen short strips commenting on human nature. They're whimsical, funny and drawn in a slightly more jagged Kurtzman style. This won't change the way you look at the world, but is worth a look if you come across it.~WJ

THE EXEC

Comics Conspiracy: *One-shot 2001*

A tale of corporate power that actually turns out a lot better than expected from the cliched opening sequence and characters. In a near-future world corporations are unrestrained, and resolutely corrupt in achieving their aims, so someone has to change things. You can almost imagine Bruce Willis starring in the film version. There are connections with previous Comics Conspiracy releases *Operator 99* and *Taxman*.~FP

Mack Bolan THE EXECUTIONER

Innovation: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

The man who provided the template for Marvel's Punisher transfers from paperback novels to the comic page. He arrives with the considerable coup of his author Don Pendleton (and wife Linda) adapting the first *Executioner* novel 'War Against the Mafia'. It's a serviceable action thriller that sees the vet marksman revenge the murder of his family by infiltrating the Mafia, and it's serviceably drawn by the team of Sandu Florea and Mike Deodato Snr. The first issue in particular, though, suffers from time and diluted copies rendering Bolan cliché-riddled, and despite being the original article, the concept isn't strong enough to withstand that.~FP

EXILES

Malibu: *4 issue miniseries 1993, 11 issues 1995-1996*

The Exiles are a group of superpowered youths whose abilities have been triggered by the Theta Virus. Corporation head Malcolm Kost is planning to use the virus to create an army and the Exiles are out to stop him. Unfortunately they haven't the experience and after recruiting Amber Hunt most of them are killed in an accident caused by her reckless attempt to activate her powers. Written by Steve Gerber, *Exiles* is rather frantic, and serves as a prelude to *Break Thru*. Ghoul survived this title to become a member of Ultraforce. After Marvel's absorption of Malibu's Ultraverse, The Exiles name is re-allocated to the group of characters from both companies' universes lost and thrown together on an alien world. The new line-up is Juggernaut, Reaper, Siren, Blaze, Shuriken, Amber Hunt and Warstrike (renamed just Strike). As with all the Ultraverse material after the Marvel takeover, it's not worth the effort.~NF

EXILES

Marvel: *20 issues + 2001 to date*

The promotion for this series described it as "Like the TV show *Sliders* with mutants", so one could readily be forgiven for muttering "Sweet Zombie Jesus", swearing off superheroes for life, and stomping off to look out those back issues of *Katy Keene*. It would be more accurate, though, to describe the series as "Sliders done right", and it manages, from an unpromising premise, to be an upbeat, entertaining comic. Our dimensionally-orphaned heroes travel across parallel worlds, trying by their actions to undo the twists in time that left each one of them as a chronological 'loose end', without a reality to return to – hence the series' name. The stars are Blink, an alumna from 'our' *X-Men*'s 'Age of Apocalypse' storyline, and a rag-bag accumulation of alternate-earth X-people, none of whom were seen before. We have no good reason to care about them, but scripter Judd Winick is skilful enough to make us care, which makes it doubly interesting when the first fatality occurs at the end of 2, and further cast changes and upheavals become a feature of the series. Mike McKone's clean, pleasing linework is adventurous without being needlessly cluttered, or ever sacrificing clarity for style. Despite starting as a collection of genre stereotypes – the orphan-of-war, the big strong guy, the jester, the slutty chick – the deft and lively handling of the characters enables the series to transcend its apparent limitations. An entertaining read with a touch more depth than most super-hero fare.~HS

EXIT

Taxi: *8 issues 1992-1994**

Caliber: *6 issue miniseries 1996*

A triumph of design over content, this highly acclaimed series by Nabiel Kanan is possibly one of the most oblique comics ever. The introductory issue is the most impenetrable, with captions and dialogue balloons sprinkled almost randomly over the pages. It's a story of people discovering the lies they've told to and about each other, with a backdrop of one young man's obsessive quest to get to America, and the sudden outbreak of war.

Granted, any series which opens a couple of issues with sophomoric poetry deserves a degree of condemnation, but nevertheless there is much to commend here. From 2, while the story-telling is as deliberately ambiguous, the art is much stronger, with striking and lovely images grabbing your attention. Nevertheless, virtually the entire series is talking heads or conversational set-pieces, with an elegant avoidance of anything actually happening that isn't related in conversation. Just when you think this is the only way Kanan can tell a story, an unconnected little tale, 'Accident; The Recovery Room', appears in 4, and is clear, concise and punchy. So all this floaty, woolly stuff must be a deliberate choice, then. Ah, well. Later issues are told with single horizontals over double-page spreads, which enhances the already considerable visual appeal. The Caliber series exaggerates the faults of the first, with Karl and Louise returning. There's a continual feeling of being short-changed as admittedly nicely drawn static illustrations accompany blocks of text. The conclusion is even worse for having hardly any text, and very little story.~HS

EXIT 6

Plastic Spoon Press: *3 issues 1998-1999*

Here's a crying shame. Sean Tiffany is a talented writer with an intriguing story to tell about supernatural occurrences in a little town. The cast is good, the plotting's good and the artwork is very good and far better than you'd expect from anyone producing their first three comics. And it improves visibly over the three issues. It was well promoted, and well received by those who got to see it. And the advance orders for 3 came in at under five hundred copies. What is wrong with comic readers?~WJ

EX-MUTANTS

Eternity: *Series one 8 issues 1986-1987*, series two 15 issues, 1 Special 1988-1989, series three 18 issues 1992-1994*

Ron Lim's first comics work was this daftly titled idea of a bunch of genetically created humans being the only non-mutates in an otherwise devastated world. Don't bother. The second series was subtitled 'Shattered Earth Chronicles', and revives all the characters for another go round. It's no better. The third series was a relaunch as part of Malibu's superhero line, with the fantasy and horror aspects toned down. There's some cross-pollination with *The Protectors* in later issues, but this remains undistinguished in every respect.~WJ

EXO Squad

Topps: *1 issue (0) 1994*

Intended as the prelude to a miniseries, and based on an animated science fiction series, in this issue, Len Wein and Joe Staton introduce the Exo Squad as a police force battling space pirates and the man-made, Neosapiens, whose unsuccessful rebellion led to the force's creation. It's garish and very dull.~NF

EX-PARTE

Lone Star: *2 issues + 2002 to date*

The title is a legal term referring to an appeal or injunction on behalf of only one party in a court case, and Janine Porter is a lawyer who represents costumed characters. It's written with some wit by Bill Williams, as Porter defends an arrogant undersea monarch in 1 and copes with a hero who draws his powers from animals in 2. The sources are obvious, but the treatment isn't, and anyone who likes superhero comics with more than fights should enjoy this.~WJ

EXPLORERS

Explorer Press: *3 issues 1995-1996*
Tapestry: *3 issues 1996-1997*

Xenology, Inc. is a team of troubleshooting investigators of strange phenomena, led by Alex and Anita Hunt, with their sons, Trex and Chico, Leon, brother of Alex and a pet dinosaur, Stan. The team's nemesis, Kimberley Wolcott attacks them with mechanoids in 1 and supplies the tools for an apparent trip to the Wild West in 3. Investigation of a government installation leads to the discovery of Primate, whom they eventually rescue in 1-2 of the Tapestry series. The last issue sees them unearthing some Aztecs from a lost city. Written by Terry Collins and with artwork from Bill Neville (1-2) and Brian Hodges (3, 1-3), Explorers has a *Jonny Quest* approach and appeal, though the adventures themselves are more reminiscent of those from the *X-Files*.~NF

EXPOSURE

Image: *4 issues 1999*

Doctor Lisa Shannon and Officer Shawna McMatta Diaz quit their respective jobs to fight monsters and the supernatural as paranormal investigators. But also, and much more importantly, to shed their clothes as often as possible. If your main interest in a comic is near-naked females you can find much better-drawn ones than those presented by Al Rio.~DB

EXQUISITE CORPSE

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1990*

An exploration of the psychology of a sex-murderer. Designed so the issues can be read in any order, it has the feel of an eastern European experimental film: clarity and resolution not a priority, but it leaves something behind in your head.~FC

THE EXTENDED DREAM OF MR. D.

Drawn & Quarterly: *3 issue miniseries 1998-1999**

This is purportedly a visual interpretation of the dreams experienced and later transcribed by a man who lapsed into a forty day coma. The logical and convenient conclusion rather argues against this. Whether or not it's the case is irrelevant, though, as Spanish cartoonist Max weaves dreams within dreams and sustained ethereal intrigue in the manner of a Thomas Pynchon novel. His expressionistic art suits the fables, and he adapts his style as necessary. This is far more about mood than the linear exposition of a story, and will therefore not appeal to many. Those who value instinct above logic and let the heart rule the head should investigate.~FP

EXTINCT!

NEC: *2 issues 1991-1992*

The comics equivalent of a Dr Demento show, or the *Golden Turkey Film Awards*, this reprints preposterous or offensive, or bizarre, or hilariously wrong-minded stories from the 1940s and 1950s. See racial epithets thrown with abandon, wife-beaters, murdering mothers, seductive robots, teenage sex clubs and much, much more lovingly compiled by editor Larry Boyd. He also provides a good article about the sanitising effect of the Comics Code on reprinted tales. The most preposterous story of the lot is about the man-size killer cactus plant in 1. Some will see this material as just plain bad, with no redeeming features, so only approach if your kitchometer is set high.~WJ

EXTRA!

EC: *5 issues 1955**
Gemstone: *5 issues 1999-2000**

When EC could no longer publish tales of zombies and ghoulish revenge they cast around for fresh, action-packed genres and came up with the glamorous and dangerous world of news reporting. *Extra!* was largely created under the aegis of Johnny Craig, who drew the lead story in each issue and edited. In his hands the stories owe more to newspaper adventure strips than traditional EC fare, with no tendency for shock/suspense endings or ghostly goings-on creeping in. Unfortunately they're also among the dullest stuff EC ever produced.

Unlike most ECs, *Extra!* established a regular set of strips. Craig's 'Dateline' featured fearless newshound Keith Michaels (oh for the days when Keith was a heroic name!) travelling the world with his assistant Vicki to follow up rumours of secret conspiracies and hidden Nazi treasures. It should have offered plenty of variety, but many of the stories are pedestrian; but they're nowhere near as contrived as the adventures of Slick (later wisely changed to Steve) Rampart, photographer, who always seems to be bumping into assassins disguised as snappers (1) or taking pictures of things he shouldn't (2). John Severin's artwork was bold and assured, if a bit roughly inked, especially when compared to Reed Crandall's super-smooth efforts on the third regular, 'Geri Hamilton'. Being a woman was pretty much Geri's only gimmick; inevitably as well as having Far East adventures she ended up investigating sob stories, as in 3's eponymous tale of a young hood who's convinced his dead father must have been someone important. It's dire, but not as bad as 1's 'Holiday For MacDuff', in which a Scottish reporter stumbles upon a scientist hidden from enemy nasties on a tiny Scandinavian island. Much "hoots, mon"-ing and "wee while"-ing ensues. The Gemstone issues are facsimiles and a hardcover black and white book collecting 1-5 was published in the 1980s.~FJ

EXTREME DESTROYER

Image/Extreme: *2 issues 1996*

Parts one and nine of a story running through other Image Extreme titles, pretentiously mislabelled Prologue and Epilogue but in fact, of course, the opening action and climax. It's dedicated to Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, which is presumably meant to excuse the whole thing being not much more than an overblown rip-off of the first Galactus story. However, in this version, the Silver Surfer analogue gets to knob one of the busty superheroines, which is the sort of fine idea available to you when you have twenty-one people on the creative team.~GK

EXTREME JUSTICE

DC: *19 issues (0-18) 1995-1996*

An ugly and ignominious end to the inventive and lighthearted version of the Justice League introduced in the 1980s, seemingly introduced to copy the violent Image superhero titles then extremely popular. Considering themselves constrained by the Justice League's ties to the United Nations, some members wanting to take a more proactive role against villains form their own group.

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* Available in a collected edition

Predictably enough these include the gung-ho Maxima and Captain Atom, but the lack of consideration given this title is exemplified by the further inclusion of the previously lighter Blue Beetle and Booster Gold. The only creator to last longer than half a dozen issues is writer Dan Vado (0-7), and he's obviously ill at ease with the premise. Possibly again in a misguided emulation of Image, the art is ugly and distorted throughout. Horrible.~WJ

EXTREME SACRIFICE

Image/Extreme: *2 issues 1994-1995**

Mind-bogglingly awful multi-title crossover from Rob Liefeld's Extreme Studios. There are demons, immortals, and superheroes trying to sort out a cosmic game between the infernal Mr Graves and the recently deceased Chapel, but everyone involved seems as baffled as you will be. The comics to beware of are *Extreme Sacrifice Prelude, Supreme* 23, *Bloodstrike* 18, *Brigade* 16, *Newmen* 10, *Team Youngblood* 17, *Prophet* 10, *Extreme Sacrifice Epilogue* and *Youngblood Strikefile* 11 which promised to slaughter prominent characters presumably in a bid to boost sales and revive interest. Not enough and way too late.~WW

THE EXTREMIST

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

Peter Milligan wrote an interesting story, which jumps back and forth in time, concerning hidden desires and frankness in sexual relationships, vigilante killings, racism, seduction, corruption and hairdressing. Probably a little too much was attempted in such a short run, and the whole may seem slight because of it, but it's very readable indeed, not unprovocative. Additionally, Ted McKeever produced throughout some of the best of his blotched, smeared and scratchy (to great effect) high-contrast art. It's an all-too-rare serious piece of work, and Patrick/Pierre, the memorably sarcastic, campy, manipulative, bisexual (at least), Marquis-de- Sade-quoting, immoralist, cigarette-holdered presiding villain, is more self-consciously extreme than any of the soppy characters who wear the Extremist bondage uniform. That might be the point of it, or part of the point of it. Interesting.~GK

THE EYE OF MONGOMBO

Fantagraphics: *7 issues 1989-1991*

Imagine if you will Indiana Jones played by Donald Duck. That's the thrust of *The Eye of Mongombo*, played strictly for laughs by Doug Gray. Renowned archaeologist Cliff Carlson pisses off the wrong witch-doctor and is transformed into a talking duck. Before searching for a way out of his situation he decides to follow an unscrupulous colleague who's stolen a map purporting to reveal the location of the legendary eye of Mongombo. It's deep in the Amazon jungle, so that's where our cast head. When each issue's recap and page-numbering systems are a delight in themselves, you know you're on to a good thing. Unfortunately, Gray was obviously tempted away by the thought of earning money somewhere, and leaves the story incomplete. What there is, though, is consistently and astonishingly funny in a slapstick and wisecracking fashion.~FP

Recommended: 1-7

THE EYEBALL KID

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1997*

Ed 'Ilya' Hillyer illustrates an action-packed story that spins off from Eddie Campbell's *Deadface.* Written by Campbell, it originally appeared in *Dark Horse Presents* and stars the multiple-eyed grandson of Argus, who stole Zeus' power and slew all the Greek gods except for Bacchus and Hermes. This series takes up the story after a particularly nasty group of mythical brothers, the Telchines (rendered in Campbell's updating as corporate nasties), have in turn stolen the power, using the Stygian Leech. After a whistle-stop tour of the Eyeball Kid's origin, there's a madcap, knockdown fight between Hermes and his Big Hand (don't ask) and the Telchines for possession of the leech. Ilya does a good Eddie Campbell take-off on the art, and the script is amusing if slight.~FJ

EYEBEAM

Double Diamond: *5 issues 1990-1993*

Reprints of humourous newspaper and magazine work, most of which is three-panel or one-page in format. Sam Hurt's stuff is good on the whole, as he has the offbeat thinking needed to crack the three-panel formula. Even the fact that he can't draw that well doesn't matter much, as the ability to be funny on paper is far rarer than the ability to draw.~DB

E.Z. WOLF'S ASTRAL OUTHOUSE

Last Gasp: *One-shot 1977*

E.Z. Wolf goes on a journey through the astral plane, a plot device creator Ted Richards used to avoid thinking more than four pages ahead of the page he was drawing. His lumpy cartooning is great, and your reading pleasure might increase if you're on the astral plane yourself, but don't bank on it.~FP

F-III Bandit

Antarctic: *10 issues 1995-1996*

Single or two to an issue fantasy stories about changing points in ordinary lives, like evolving a tail, transforming from man to woman, losing an image from the mirror and meeting a werewolf, meeting Peter Pan or falling in love with the personification of death. Ippongi's Bang strips are sexy and humorous in her light-touch manga style. These are multi-faceted tales; not perfect by any means, but enjoyable.~NF

FABLES

DC/Vertigo: *6 issues + 2002 to date*

The surviving inhabitants of the myriad magical realms have settled on Earth as a secret society of refugees, driven out of their own worlds by The Adversary. Creating the new community of Fabletown, with King Cole as Mayor, they hide their true natures from humanity. 1-5, by Bill Willingham and Lan Medina, concern Sheriff Bigby Wolf's attempt to solve the disappearance and apparent murder of Rose Red, Snow White's sister, whose apartment has been wrecked and is covered in blood. Suspects include her boyfriend, Jack of the Tales, Prince Charming and Bluebeard, the last of whom she had agreed to marry. 6 is the start of the five-part, 'Animal Farm', by Willingham and Mark Buckingham, set on the Farm where the fables that can't pass as human are forced to live. These fables, however, are tired of their imprisonment and resentful of the rest of Fabletown. Willingham has created an entertaining and clever premise, with scope for a wide range of stories, and the characters seen so far, as well as the politics of their world are well drawn. Medina and Buckingham are both fine artists and this is shaping up to be a series to savour, and 1-5 have already been collected.~NF

FABULOUS BABES

Drawn & Quarterly: *1 issue 1995*

Anthology title by Rozanna Bikadoroff, Fiona Smyth and Maurice Vellekoop that seriously lacks direction. It has the feel and contents of a fanzine behind a deluxe colour cover, and trots out some very tired ideas (fake ads in which Charles Atlas becomes Charlene Atlas, for instance). There are more illustrations than strips, and while Fiona Smyth's work is very pleasing on the eye, it doesn't tell a story.~FJ

THE FACTOR

About Comics: *5 issue miniseries (0-4) 1998-1999*

First seen in *Negative Burn* 29-31 (reprinted in 0), writer Nat Gertler's good idea is to focus a comic on a superhero rarely seen, so leaving him open to assorted interpretations. Gertler's stories highlight those affected by the superhero either directly or otherwise. They're admirably varied in approach, will often surprise and there is one gem in each issue. On the art front there's less consistency as enthusiastic amateurs mix with the likes of Matt Feazell, Carla Speed McNeil (both 2), Ted Slampyak (3) and Joe Staton (1). The artistic find, though, is Janine Johnston (0).~FP

FACTOR-X

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1995*

X-Factor became *Factor-X* for the four months of 'Age of Apocalypse', which thrust the X-characters into an alternate Earth where their enemy ruled supreme. Probably the best of the Apocalypse books, the root of the story here is the jealousy between Alex Summers and Scott, the brother whose shadow he can never hope to escape. It's easy to see the characters we know in these darker versions of themselves, a tribute to the skill of John Francis Moore and Steve Epting, at the time the 'real' X-Factor's regular creative team.~JC

Recommended: 1-4

Incredible FACTS O'LIFE Sex Education Funnies

Multi Media Resource Centre: *One-shot 1972*

Information about sex and related topics by the top underground cartoonists of the day. Thirty years on it remains a paragon of non-patronising good sense, although a stellar list of contributors fall short of their best work. Gilbert Shelton starts off with 'Fat Freddy Gets the Clap', and also on board are Robert Crumb, Shary Flenniken, Gary Hallgren, Bobby London and Ted Richards.~WJ

FADE FROM BLUE

Second 2 Some Studios: *4 issues + 2002 to date*

Four young half-sisters are forced into hiding when their mothers are killed and their bigamous father disappears. Now, nine years later, Iya's finding it hard to stay in a job, Elisa's in acting school and starting to date, Christa is a freelance writer and Marit is a police sergeant, still trying to find their father and their mothers' murderer. Myatt Murphy and Scott Dalrymple are producing a terrific comic with realistic dialogue, well-drawn characters and smooth, realistic artwork (hints of John Byrne, but better).~NF

Recommended: 1-4

FAFHRD AND THE GRAY MOUSER

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1990-1991*

Howard Chaykin might not have been the obvious choice to adapt veteran fantasy writer Fritz Leiber's light-hearted sword-and-sorcery stories, but his scripting is deft, witty and faithful to the source material. 1 adapts *Ill Met in Lankhmar*, explaining how the sophisticated barbarian Fafhrd and dapper cutpurse The Gray Mouser come to be partners. Thereafter each issue contains two stylish stories of swordsmanship, thievery and magic. Mike Mignola, inked by the great Al Williamson, does an excellent job of capturing the decadent atmosphere of Lankhmar and the nightmarish, almost surreal quality of the magic permeating every scene. Credit should also go to Sherilyn Van Valkenburgh, whose colouring ensures that the look of the work as a whole is richly rounded. A fine example of how to get adaptations right.~NF

FAIRY TALES OF OSCAR WILDE

NBM: *3 volumes 1992-1998*

Quite what the great man would have made of these comic adaptations of his famous fairy tales we can only guess, but he would surely have appreciated the love and care that have gone into them. Artist and adapter P. Craig Russell has always been a subtly beautiful illustrator, and his art here does not disappoint; it is pure elegance and grace. As an adapter, he is perhaps a little too true to the text but, although the strips are rather wordy, they move along briskly none the less and the stories are in any case classics. That said, there is a melancholia that underpins many of the tales, and Wilde tacks on some positively heartbreaking endings to stories such as 'The Selfish Giant' (in volume 1) and 'The Infanta' (in vol 3), so they are unsuitable for more sensitive children.~DAR

FAITH: A Fable

Carbon-Based Books: *Graphic Novel 2000*

The salvation of jaded and disgraced journalist Roy Westerly comes via a 12 year old girl with a remarkable capacity for connecting with people to help them overcome their problems. Bill Knapp produces a far better drawn book than might be imagined from the poor cover, and his exploration of humanity's need for reassurance is warm and touching. He's not skilled enough, however, to avoid the made for TV movie sentimentality infusing his story. This is a debut of enormous promise, though, and Knapp's progression should be worth monitoring.~WJ

The FALCON

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1983*

Quality adventure as Jim Owsley turns Captain America's black sidekick into a strong, positive, heroic force in the slums of New York. Paul Smith and Mark Bagley illustrate tales of gang-bangers, giant robots, civil unrest, supervillains and multiple kidnappings of Ronald Reagan. Great fun.~WW

FALLEN ANGELS

Marvel: *8 issue limited series 1987*

This is a New Mutants spin-off. Roberto Da Costa attacks a friend in a moment of anger, decides instantly that he must be an evil person just like his father, and runs away to New York to make a start on his life of crime. The mutant group Fallen Angels invite him to join them, and despite themselves they end up teaching him about friendship and loyalty and stuff like that. The series is probably intended as humour (what else can one make of the lobsters that are part of the group?) but there aren't nearly enough jokes and the few that there are should never have been stretched over eight issues. Highpoint: the origin stories for the lobsters from issue 3, pencilled by Marie Severin.~FC

Recommended: 3

FALLING IN LOVE

DC: *143 issues 1955-1973*

Another long-running DC romance title, *Falling in Love* had the usual stable of consummate craftsmen working on the stories: Mke Sekowsky, J. Scott Pike, Gene Colan, John Romita, John Rosenberger et al. One odd thing, though, is the bizarre medical fetish present from the early 1960s onwards. This title could hardly claim sole licence on the trick, of course, but it does seem that *Falling in Love* had a particular fondness for stories depicting a crippled/blind/disfigured heroine tearfully confronting or fleeing from the man she loved! The Editor-In-Chief must have spent a lot of time in hospitals about then. Dying in dignity in 1973, without reaching the frantic hysteria that its sisters attained trying to keep an audience in more permissive times, *Falling in Love* is remembered by those who remember it at all as a solid, craftsmanlike title with many exquisitely illustrated stories.~HS

FALLING MAN

Image: *1 issue 1998*

On the anniversary of his wife's death, a man starts falling through one plane of reality after another, for reasons undisclosed, though one theory is advanced. His understandably confused reactions become a bit annoying, and the lack of background and context makes the whole exercise a little too cryptic for its own good. Cancelled before completion.~HS

FALLOUT

G.T. Labs: *1 volume 2002*

The third of Jim Ottaviani's distillations of scientific achievement in comics form. Whereas *Two-Fisted Science* and *Dignifying Science* presented biographical snippets, here Ottaviani takes on the development of the atomic bomb from the conception of theory to the fallout. It's a clever title, referring to political consequences in later, more suspicious times rather than the obvious association. The primary artists, Janine Johnston, Steve Lieber, Vince Locke, Bernie Mireault, and Jeff Parker all turn in creditable pages, while Eddie Newell's portraits of the major players are excellent. This, though, is a very dry tome packing in detail, but often unintelligible without reference to the copious notes at the back, thus defeating the purpose. The best part, Oppenheimer's later problems, benefits from the inclusion of significant amounts of text, highlighting the problem that this is perhaps a story that cannot be told effectively in comics.~WJ

FALLOUT 3000

Caliber: *1 issue 1996*

As Mike Deodato's popularity increased in the USA, Caliber reprinted old strips never previously seen in English. This is his first published work, illustrating a florid and tedious exposition on the end of humanity, written by his father. It's drawn well enough, but hardly in the style that accelerated his fanbase.~WJ

FAMILY MAN

Paradox Press: *3 issue miniseries 1995*

The second of Paradox's series of mystery novels, Family Man is written by noted thriller-writer Jerome Charyn and drawn by Joe Staton. It's set in the near future, when New York is a ruined city, the police are out of control and the Mafia families have all been wiped out. The Family Man is Alonzo, haunted by the murder of his wife and children. His brother Charles is the leader of the police force and is coming ever closer to total power in the city. When Charles orders a round-up of all 'criminal' elements into a makeshift prison camp, the various plots start to come apart and only Alonzo can save the city. Charyn is a good writer and this is some of Staton's best work. The result is not perhaps the best thriller ever written, but it's certainly worth a look.~NF

FAMILY TREE

Diva: *One-shot 1994*

Collection of a gay comic strip sequence with a 'pretend family' of friends visiting the *Gay Games*. Amusingly written and roughly but appealingly drawn, this was planned to launch an ongoing title that never materialised.~HS

FANBOY

DC: *6 issue miniseries 1999**

Mark Evanier and Sergio Aragonés are on good form in this amusing series featuring the life and times and vivid imagination of geeky comics fanatic, Finster. He has the best job in the world – he works in a comics store! He takes his comics very seriously, so much in fact that his mind drifts into imaginary adventures. These segments are drawn in relevant style by some of the industry's finest talents. Great to see Russ Heath on Sgt Rock again in 4. But what a shame we'll never see Gil Kane on Green Lantern again as we did in 2, or Dick Sprang on Batman in 5. An ongoing plot involves our hero lusting after a pretty young girl, who scorns his advances, but failing to notice the young lady who does admire him. We can probably see a bit of ourselves in our young hero so when it ends happily, there's hope for us all. Other notable contributors include Neal Adams, Brent Anderson, Dave Gibbons, Mike Grell, Frank Miller, Marie Severin, Dan Spiegle and Bernie Wrightson to name a few!~HY

Recommended: 1-6

FANG

Sirius: *3 issue miniseries 1995, 4 issue miniseries ('Testament') 1996-1997*

Fetishistic wankathon poorly drawn and badly written by Kevin Taylor. The first series lets Taylor achieve the treble with shoddy colours as well.~FP

FANNY

Knockabout: *4 issues 1991-1993*

The flagship title of the British Women's Comic Collective, each issue has a different theme. *Ceasefire* dealt with women and war, mostly the then current Gulf conflict, and the topic of *Voyeuse* was sex. *Dissenting Women* covered religions, and 4's *Night Fruits* related women's experiences with dreams, prophesies and the general supernature. The title got off to a slow start, and was originally something one bought to be seen to be doing the right thing rather than with expectation of enjoyment; nevertheless there were always one or two good pieces. By 4 Fanny had become a solid, thought-provoking read.~HS

FANTAGOR

Last Gasp: *4 issues 1970-1972*

An underground anthology put together by Richard Corben, whose own contributions are by far the highlights. All issues feature beautiful and occasionally fully painted Corben art, but it's only 4's 'Space Jacked' that has a memorable story.~DAR

Recommended: 4

FANTAGRAPHICS Graphic Novels and Collections

Looking back over Fantagraphics' output of graphic novels it becomes apparent that editors Gary Groth and Kim Thompson have always chosen carefully no matter how schizophrenic their tastes may have seemed at the time. Their line shows no inclination to jump on bandwagons, and it is clear that, given the limited financial options available to them, they have consistently tried to introduce new reading experiences to the audience, including handsome reprints of vintage artists such as Otto Messmer *(Felix the Cat)* and their *Red Barry* collection. Initially the output of original material was intermittent, beginning with a reprint of Gil Kane's violent *Savage*. Recently they were able to unearth Kane's 1974 sword and sorcery creation *Blackmark*, originally published by Bantam Books, and reprinting not only it, but also a second, unpublished volume. There were early anomalies like *Children of the Night*, a volume containing two black and white fairy stories, both written by Jan Strnad. His long-time collaborator Dennis Fujitake drew the first strip, about Winston, a bored dragon, and Tim Solliday illustrated 'Goblin Child' entirely in pencils. Both are competent but unexciting.

Given the volume of material issued by Fantagraphics, it's easiest to separate them into categories, although some defy that gesture. It should also be noted that many collections are dealt with in separate entries covering the comics as originally published.

UNDERGOUND

Ignoring the many collections of comics already published by the company, from the first year or so three distinct strands to Fantagraphics' graphic novel output become obvious. The first is the production of collections of material by single creators, largely underground cartoonists, collecting strips from obscure sources accompanied by bibliographical material and strong introductions. The most notable of these, in both hardcover and paperback editions, is The Complete Crumb series (16 volumes to date), which starts with Crumb's earliest attempts at anthropomorphic strips and chronologically prints every strip and published piece of artwork since. Accompanying it are a series of sketchbook volumes, nine so far, and the themed collections The Book of Mr Natural and The Life and Death of Fritz The Cat. Equally wonderful is Love That Bunch by Aline Kominsky-Crumb, his wife. Her autobiographical strips about growing up fat and Jewish are no less brutally honest than her husband's more famous work and feature several jam strips between them. As the cover says, there's something for everyone: 'Sex, food, death, pain and romantic adventure.' Three Kim Deitch collections, All Waldo Comics, A Shroud For Waldo and Beyond The Pale, offer a broad sampling of his work. All Waldo collects the early strips about his eponymous cat hero plus appearances in Raw and Weirdo, while A Shroud collects weekly strips from the LA Reader, and Beyond The Pale selects material from two decades of cartooning. It offers a fascinating insight into Deitch's creative development from a rough, sub-Crumb style to his smooth, doll-like images today. Deitch is a painstaking stylist, but few artists approach the obsessional attention to detail evident in the work of the Friedman Brothers, who comment on modern life via the iconography of trash culture. They're not afraid to show their teeth either, lampooning everyone from Bob Hope to Tor Johnson in two collections, Warts and All and Any Similarity To Persons Living or Dead. Fantagraphics have a strong history of collecting of Zippy the Pinhead material, and have lavish reprints of Bill Griffith's Sunday pages in *Zippy's House of Fun*, while *Get Me A Table Without Flies*, Harry selects from Griffith's sketchbooks.

The collection of Spain Rodriguez' Trashman strips, Trashman Lives!, is less successful because Spain's work hasn't really moved over the twenty years covered in the collection. It depends on whether or not you're interested in his dystopian politicking in a series of stories set in a grim future where America has divided into self-governing states. His *My True Story*, is a mix of autobiography and historical accounts of key political movements such as the Paris Commune. Equally stuck in time is the work of Vaughan Bode, the quintessential spaced out illustrator and erotic asphyxiation enthusiast. A strong seller to the spaced-out-hippy club still (and there's a new generation along every ten years or so, eager to recreate the peace and love generation) there are three volumes of *Erotica*, three volumes of sketchbooks, two volumes of *Junkwaffel*, which contains the first *Deadbone Erotica* pages. *Deadbone* has most of them all over again, plus *Schizophrenia*, which kicks off with the title story, a psychedelic painted monologue about... life, the universe and not much. Bodé's most enduring character is Cheech Wizard, and there are two volumes collecting stories originally from *National Lampoon*, plus various colour strips and some new material. Scraping the barrel for the last time there's *Lizard Zen*, combining early college drawings with some of the creator's last doodling. Bodé work is colourful, phantasmagorical and rather cutesy, heavily influenced by drug taking, and the narratives tend to dribble on rather. However, he died in possibly the most entertaining way a comic artist has managed, so he should be forgiven a lot.

Optimism of Youth collects Jack Jackson's often horror-inspired underground work, including the infamous Leather Nun stories, and *God's Bosom* concentrates on his work about Texas, whether historical or satirical. While credited with producing the first underground comic, Jackson never really received the attention he deserved. Quietly fascinating is *Housebound with Rick Geary*, which sees Geary examining the minutiae of everyday life including illustrations of motel bedrooms, intermingled with a few murders. Great if you like his lumpen illustrative style. Less exciting is Howard Cruse's *Early Barefoots*, a collection of old underground work which features all the standards – sex, drugs, rock'n'roll – but lacks the smooth sophistication of his later work. Basil Wolverton was an inspiration for the underground cartoonists, and there are also two bits of Wolverton material from the 1950s and 1960s: *Wolvertoons*, a mind-boggling selection of grotesques, and *Powerhouse Pepper*, collecting strips about the dumb, but kind-hearted, strongman. The most recent underground collection is Robert 'Outsider Art' Williams' *Hysteria in Remission*, which collects much of his classic work from *Zap*, *Snatch* et al, and includes thirty pages of hotrod art done for the legendary Ed 'Big Daddy' Roth.

Fantagraphics have continued to show commitment to exploring the history of comics and regularly produce standout volumes of criticism and coffee-table reading. Among recent offering there are two books on Arnold Roth; *Arnold Roth: Free Lance* collects many of the noted editorial cartoonist's most brilliant illustrations, spanning thirty years of contributing to some of the most famous magazines in American publishing. He ranged widely, from *Sports Illustrated* to *TV Guide* to the *Saturday Evening Post*; the companion volume features two years of his syndicated strip, *Poor Arnold's Almanac* from 1959-1961, which commentated on fads and news items of the day.

NEW DISCOVERIES

Fantagraphics' second strand is the publication of initially lesser known creators, many of whom have not produced regular comics, being editorial cartoonists or illustrators instead. In their race to be experimental, a few don't actually succeed in producing comics at all, missing the storytelling point, but these are few and far between among some startling talents. Peter Kuper was introduced to a wider public with *New York, New York*, a series of meditations on life in the big city drawn in a variety of styles à la Spiegelman. Later came *World War 3 Illustrated*, collected writings and drawings from the magazine of the same name he edited from 1980 to 1988. It was followed by a volume of autobiographical stories collected from *Bleeding Heart* and *Wild Life*, called *Stripped*.

The most illuminating newspaper discovery of recent years is Tony Millionaire. His two volumes of *Maakies* strips (*Maakies* and *The House at Maakies Corner*), feature pairs of newspaper strips. The upper tier takes place on board a strange ship, and concerns the nihilistic adventures of an alcoholic crow and his jaded ape companion, who often wind up shooting themselves in the head, while the lower is a cynical gag strip (Woman to man "What do you look for in a relationship?" Man: "Two things: absolute monogamy and plenty of lying.") Brilliant. If *Maakies* isn't quite depressing enough, take a look at *Haw!* by Ivan Brunetti, a beautiful little package of single panel gags that push bad taste to the max, but are presented in such a self-deprecating manner that it's hard to dislike them. Brunetti's an amazing cartoonist anyway, and genuinely does push the boundaries both here and in his comics. If you're ever asked to define nihilism, just show Brunetti's work.

Like Brunetti and Millionaire, Steven Weissman's frame of reference seems to be strip cartoons. He continues the adventures of his large-headed, weird named kids from *Yikes in Champs* (dealing with their obsession with bike racing) and Don't Call Me Stupid, where each of his kid gang has a turn in the spotlight. The latest work, *White Flower Day*, explores the idea of getting revenge from three different angles. The repetitiveness of the action in many of the strips, and the quirks that characterise his kid gang, are reminiscent of *Peanuts*, but drawn by someone with a much more unwholesome take on childhood than Schulz. The stand out among new talents of recent years, though, is Dave Cooper. He's produced two excellent original graphic novels. *Suckle*: 'The Status of Basil' begins with Basil being born (or perhaps born into) a surreal world where plants have strange sexual overtones and strange creatures appear from nowhere. He finds his way through this confusing world, encountering more and more people and learning more about how to behave, until he reaches a city and begins to learn the pitfalls as well as the pleasures of civilisation. A bit like "What if *Pilgrim's Progress* were told by Jim Woodring", Suckle creates its own fascinating version of the world. *Dan and Larry* is an even stranger, and more intense, study of the nature of interdependent relationships. Dan is a rather dumb, sarcastic duck, lacking in confidence, and Dan is a mushroom-headed half robot who's managed to convince him he's really cool. As the strip progresses it becomes apparent that Dan is much older, cannot form relationships with adults, and is sexually attracted to Larry. Brain-bending, superlative stuff.

Santiago Cohen is another breath of fresh air, working in a very different style and to very different ends. His *The Fifth Name*, based on a story by Stefan Zweig, a pacifist who supported a united Europe and committed suicide in 1942 in exile, develops like an Arabian religious tale, but turns into a fable about humility and the inability of the pious to disassociate themselves from the world in a responsible manner. Beautifully told, it's drawn in a broad brush style with duckegg blue washes, and seems clumsy at first until the eye becomes accustomed to its particular visual language. There's also the Raw -inspired Kaz (*Buzzbomb*, *Underworld*, *Sidetrack City & Other Tales*), whose sophisticated, but simple, style illustrates skull-headed creatures, tales of Satan and such uplifting stories as 'Demis-O, The Clown Of Death'. Very much in the same vein is Henrietta Valium's *Primitive Cretin*, an oversize comic format featuring increasingly schizophrenic page layouts. Imagine if Julie Doucet were even weirder than she is... And for *Raw* completists there's Mark Beyer's *Dead Stories*, a luxury hardback reprint of one of his early *Amy and Jordan* adventures.

LESS GOOD

Leaving aside matters of individual taste, Fantagraphics should be saluted for producing consistently engaging, confrontational and experimental material, as well as keeping classics in print. Their output very much reflects the interests of a well-rounded comic fan (apart from a notable lack of superheroics), and they are never afraid to try new formats and let creators lead the way. With Fantagraphics, you really don't know what you're going to see next. They'll put out *The Theatre of Cruelty* by Marc Tessier and Alex Lafleur, which is about as big a muddle of mystical nonsense as you can find, with dream sequences, hallucinations and lots of eastern inspired decorative touches to the art, and then they'll soften you up with the immensely likeable *The Moon Looked Down* and Laughed by Malachy Coney and Paul Holden. That's a blarney-filled, nicely rounded story of murder and redemption set in small-town Ireland, drawn in a style reminiscent of a less experimental Paul Grist. And while you're in a mellow mood they'll hit you with a non-linear work like *The Big Wheels* or *The Most Important Thing*, both by Graham Chaffee, which are more meditations on big city life using clips from random narratives than straightforward graphic novels, drawn in a style somewhere between Toth and Alex Varenne. If that isn't enough to mix you up, the next Fantagraphics graphic novel might be something like *Trosper*, a beautifully packaged Frank spin-off, by Jim Woodring, a gorgeous little picture book with accompanying CD by Bill Frisell.

Fantagraphics are admirably open to the idea that the feel of a volume, its paper, printing process, weight and format are part of the reading experience, hence the numerous different shapes and sizes among their output. Without their willingness to put their money where their mouth is, the independent comic boom of the 1980s might have taken a very different path, and many creators we now regard as major figures might have remained obscure scribblers and scratchers. However, for all the successes there are always going to be some experiments that didn't quite make it. Among the less successful offerings are Jim Blanchard's spoof pinup book *Glam Warp*, which shows impressive mastery of technique, but makes you think 'why bother'? and Pat Moriarity's *Popcorn Pimps*, drawn in a variety of styles. Under some inkers it looks very slick, but it suffers from slight subject matter and the fact that Moriarity's style seems to change to ape that of other more successful Fantagraphics creators like Peter Bagge. Richard Lupoff and Steve Stiles' take off Jules Verne in *Professor Thintwhistle*, which seems to have nothing much to say about anything.

Never unwilling to experiment with the idea of what actually is a comic book, there are unusual projects such as *The Seduction of Mike*, a spoof biography of a supporting character that treats comics as though they're films, and shows Mike appearing in all manner of genres. Written by Michael Smith and R. Sikoryak, and illustrated in suitably aped styles by Sikoryak. It's slight, but fun, for half an hour or so. By contrast you could spend days poring over Ted Jouflas' two graphic 'novels', *Filthy* and *Scary*. Although obviously very talented, Jouflas defeats the object of the exercise by writing in a loop-heavy, shaky hand, with lines following the contours of his subject matter, squashed in wherever there's room. And then compounds it by writing in somewhat forced verse. Filthy is a long, stream-of consciousness poem that winds its way among some exemplary drawings, done in a naive style with extreme passion. Individual images are astonishing, but have little function as part of a narrative. *Scary* is a little easier to read, but still makes you work hard to decipher the interlinked tales about Winkie, a fading actress, her pets and lovers. It's not a cheery picture. Much more successful an experiment is Chris Lanier's *Combustion*, a scraperboard comic strip without words where fire connects an interlinked set of stories.

As well as publishing various books of autobiography and illustration by Barry Windsor Smith under the title *Opus*, Fantagraphics issued the curious *Adastra in Africa*, originally drawn as an X-Men story featuring Storm. Adastra is one of the cosmic heroes the Young Gods (who comes from the planet Orgasma, oh dear), who winds up bringing succour to a starving, but very attractive looking, African tribe by giving them belief in the old mystical ways after the white man's raped and pillaged the land blah blah blah. The heavy glossy paper does his detailed, textural artwork few favours and the slender hardback is bulked out with an 'interview' with the character. Indulgent in the extreme.

Many volumes in the Fantagraphics library have a strong social conscience, and aim to comment on modern-day America. Alongside his erotic work, Fantagraphics also published culturally aware graphic novels by Ho Che Anderson. *King* (two volumes), is an attempt to humanise the lionised black leader. It begins with contemporary reminiscences, followed by a series of incidents displaying racism in America today, before plunging into the story of Martin Luther King's early life, especially his eye for the girls. It's an uneven structure, but an interesting experiment. Much more compelling is the later *Young Hoods In Love*, a series of tales about young black people in the city. It starts with a superb story in which a young couple are bickering about whether to take their baby to work with them. As the story progresses you realise they're about to rob somewhere.

Andrew Zaben tells tales of big city life and ordinary people crushed by the modern world. *Dream Big Dreams* is about a bar owner thinking of selling up, *Queens Blvd*, the everyday life of three bookmakers, and Tuesday and Thursday about a civil servant who commits a crime because he thinks his life is in a rut. While the writing is of passing interest, the art is of the sort that fanzine editors rejected routinely, trying to be realistic, but with little sensitivity to line or shading (or indeed what things look like). *A Sleepyhead Tale* by Jeremy Eaton, uses dreams to satirise America, and in his equally heavy handed next effort, *The Island of Dr Moral*, there's a microcosm nanny state, although interesting to look at. Ralph Steadman's *America*, by contrast, is a sharp road trip of observation by the great British satirical cartoonist, whose work stands squarely beside the three volumes of Jules Feiffer's *Collected Works* issued alongside his well-regarded *Tantrum*. Far funnier and fast moving than *Falling Down*, it has a businessman overcome by modern life, throwing fits until he finally regresses to infancy.

Mail Order Bride is like a parable specially constructed for comic fans. Of course Mark Kalesniko knows who's chiefly going to be reading it... Monty, who owns a comic shop and collects just about everything he can get his hands on, sends for an Asian mail order bride because he's obsessed with certain manga characters and the presentation of Asian women in comics as tiny giggly girls. But Kyung Soo doesn't begin to fulfil his stereotypical expectations. For a start she's far too tall and strong, and she despises his job/hobby as childish. She too has expectations, and finds the west a letdown. The novel follows their struggles to find a way to adapt their dreams to real life, drawn in a beautiful, ethereal style that references manga yet emphasises the difference between solid reality and desire. Previously, Kalesniko produced *Why Did Pete Duel Kill Himself?* which deals with childhood depression and its effects in later life, as the narrator looks back on the dreams and fantasies he readily accepted, only to find that nothing, especially cowboy heroes, are what they're cracked up to be. It's written with an affecting sense of longing, and drawn in a light, almost ghostly style that itself reflects the impermanence of reality.

Jeremy Pickle Goes To Prague takes a New York art student, fed up with his dead end job as a guard in an art gallery, and relocates him to exotic, bohemian Prague to teach English. However Andrew London's hero soon finds he can't cope in what he reacts to like a third world city, where they eat hamburgers for breakfast and the language sounds "barbaric". While the contrasts between Eastern Europe and the bloated US are cleverly drawn it's not exactly a novel point. The art, however, is intriguingly dense. Initially it appears deceptively child-like but takes on a demonic dimension as Jeremy's world begins to disintegrate.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Looking at their overall output, you have to say "What is it with Fantagraphics and biography? Or even worse, autobiography?" Other companies publish autobiographical and semi-autobiographical comics and books, but Fantagraphics seem to have become the cynosure for the genre. In no other medium is navel gazing so frequently lauded as art. Carol Tyler's *The Job Thing* is barely long enough to qualify as a graphic novel; it's a fun collection of "stories about shitty jobs", including various cartoonists' recollections of spectacularly awful ones, but it's hardly groundbreaking. *Can of Worms* by Catherine Doherty chronicles her search for real parents, using silent panels and official documents. Yawn. And while *Monkey Food* by Ellen Forney, about being seven in 1975, is cute, it's also the paper equivalent to those *I Love 19*** programmes infesting British television schedules. Mary Fleener has a stronger eye for comic situations than most people who mine their own lives for material. *Her Life of the Party* has a refreshing lack of whining or point making. It covers her adventures in the 1970s party scene and recaptures the daffy hedonism of the pot-fuelled period without glorifying it. Everything is drawn in her characteristic 'cubist' style, with multiple planes and distorted figures, which you will either warm to and which will seem natural after a few pages of reading, or it'll be something you cannot get around and read sufficiently to enjoy these observational stories. One of the most powerful exponents of the genre is Penny Van Horn, whose tales of nervous breakdowns, fat neighbours running off with jailbirds, and obsessive boyfriends in *Recipe For Disaster* seem torn from her, just as her scraperboard art is gouged and chiselled angrily into the page.

Rich Tommaso's road trip stories, *Let's Hit The Road*, have him and his buddy drive a lot, eat snacks, have trouble staying awake etc. and finally get to his old flat to collect some furniture. Or maybe it's post. You'll lose the will to remember after about forty pages of buddy banter and meandering conversation. A big disappointment after *Clover Honey*, a hard-boiled detective thriller about Abigail, an aspiring hitwoman, who has to track down her old mentor who's absconded with Family funds, drawn in an expressive sub-Hernandez style. But star of the navel gazers is *Daddy's Girl* by Debbie Drechsler. It's a harrowing series of vignettes about growing up with sexual abuse. Far funnier than you'd think possible, it's also deeply moving. Her follow up volume about a young girl coming to terms with her sexual identity in a new town in the late 1960s, *Summer of Love* is well observed but less emotionally gripping.

Not quite biographers, but miners of human experience, UK/US collaborators, Simon Grennan and Chris Sperandio draw in a kind of naïf catalogue illustration style, recounting real stories. Most of their work is commissioned by art galleries and councils – smart move lads, turning comics into exhibitions. These include *The Bradford One Hundred* (for The National Museum of Photography), an offbeat collection of one pagers in which people from Bradford (which the Fantagraphics blurb-writer hopefully describes as a "small English community") describe their everyday lives and *Dirt*, commissioned by the Museum of Fine Art, Boston as an exhibition and comic. It looks at fame through the stories of four ordinary people who have a brush with celebrities, from a girl chosen to help a child star demonstrate her new workout video on TV to a basketball player's housekeeper. London's ICA did a similar exhibit, based on stories from their members in *Cartoon Hits*. If that's not enough there's still spooky true-life incidents in *The Ghost on the Stair* (with Tate Liverpool), Invisible City for The Public Arts Fund about behind the scenes city workers and finally *Crime Story*.

The most celebrated real life cartoonist to emerge in recent years is Joe Sacco, who's part of a movement to turn comics towards reportage, covering big issues and making people notice them due to the novelty of the format. His masterwork to date is *Safe Area Gorazde*: 'The War In Eastern Bosnia 1992-1995'. In it, he demonstrates the strengths that comics have for war reporting. Initially one might think very few, but in an age where video streaming, satellite links and blanket TV coverage mean real pictures often do little to excite or touch us, the emotional overtones of drawings serve to communicate both the big picture and the little stories beautifully. Sacco spent months in the last civilian 'safe zone' the UN maintained, having paved the way for wholesale slaughter when the two others in Srebrenica and Zepa were declassified due to political wrangling. He learned the stories of ordinary people, watching how they adapted to life with enemy guns all around them, waiting to find out if they to would be sacrificed in the complex chess game being played among the numerous ethnic factions and peacekeeping countries. The art's not fancy; it's honest, straightforward storytelling with powerful characterisation, simple page layouts making a direct appeal. The real skill is in the script, weaving political events and the lives of the large band of friends Sacco quickly makes together with vignettes illustrating the absurdity, the sudden eruptions of violence and the horrifying tales of genocide. Completely engrossing from cover to cover – we should throw out the history texts and give kids this sort of thing to read if we want them to understand modern history.

Sacco honed his eye producing *Palestine* (see separate entry), following visits to the Palestinian territories in the early 1990s, and in that work you can see the stirrings of the surety with which he handles materials in *Safe Area Gorazde*. Most recently Fantagraphics have released *Notes from a Defeatist*, which collects his early work, some of it reportage, plus autobiographical musings and satirical strips. He chronicles touring Europe with his local punk band, tells war stories and pores over his own life and reactions honestly, but it's his eye for recording the small details of the big picture that he'll be remembered for.

FOREIGN

The third early thrust of Fantagraphics' graphic-novel line was the translation of outstanding European graphic novels from outside the adventure and erotic traditions favoured by most American publishers. They've continued, intermittently, to pursue this line, but with several other publishers specialising in translations, they have chosen carefully and looked way outside the mainstream. The first was *Barney & the Blue Note*, Philippe Paringaux's extraordinarily haunting account of the life of a fictitious jazz genius told in flashback, as pieced together by an admirer, drawn in a flat, blocky style by Jacques de Loustal. It was followed by Muñoz and Sampayo's *Billie Holiday*, again about a jazz great, again written from the point of view of someone looking back. One big problem with a number of translations is the difficulty of translating idiomatic or linguistic devices in the original language into contemporary English. By using three translators who're clearly as familiar with the language of comics as they are with the source language (Katy MacRea, Robert Boyd and Kim Thompson), *Billie Holiday* has a fresh, lively voice.

Fog Over Tolbiac Bridge, an early attempt to popularise Jacques Tardi (which cause would later be taken up by Cheval Noir), is a difficult, stimulating thriller featuring his observant turn-of-the-century detective, Adele Blanc-Sec. They also published Tardi's collaboration with French thriller-writer Leo Malet, *Nestor Burma*, featuring his eponymous iconoclast detective. *Lea* is a morality play about under-age sex, wordy but clever. Christian Rossi creates rounded, modern characters and Serge LeTendre's lanky artwork suits the world of self-satisfied, arty folk in which the story's set. And finally Ana (1991), the story of a young woman caught up in a violent political struggle against a fascist state. Writer Gabriel Solano Lopez systematically tramples his characters' idealistic notions into the mud, while his son F. Solano Lopez, better known for his soft porn, draws the ugliness in grim detail. After these initial attempts to introduce some of the more literate Mediterranean creators to American audiences Fantagraphics has concentrated on other areas, specifically Scandinavia. An early discovery was Max Andersson, who'd already developed a strong underground reputation by the time Fantagraphics brought out *Pixy*, drawn in a style reminiscent of George Grosz more than most comic artists. Andersson creates a twisted world in which his protagonists are harassed by phone calls from their aborted child, Pixy, from the kingdom of the dead, and wind up bringing him back to earth despite having set off to kill him all over again. Perverted desires, living houses that can be killed or turn on their occupants and eat them, money farms and time running backwards all spiral together into a confusing but never confused ride.

All of their Scandinavian cartoonists are good but, true to unfortunate stereotype, few are happy bunnies. Take Thomas Ott, another frenzied scratcher of depressing messages whose drawings look like they're been torn from his suffering psyche. All his stories centre on violence, unavoidable, deep-seated prejudice, and death, and his anger is apparent in the scribbled, tortured drawing. *Greetings from Hellville* and *Dead End* are both strong collections, the former slightly better, and much of the latter having seen print less lavishly in Spx Expo 2001. Jason is one of Fantagraphics' greatest recent finds. No doubt there are many brilliant cartoonists in Scandinavia, but it's not often we get the pleasure of reading their work in translation. *Hey, Wait* starts off following the picaresque adventures of two young boys (represented as anthropomorphic characters) passing the summer, each page a little vignette. Just when you think you're in very charming but unchallenging Calvin and Hobbes territory, Jason pulls the carpet out from under you and you realise the slow build up has been towards the pivotal moment in one of the boy's lives. Afterwards it begins a despondent spiral as we see how one mistake affects the rest of his life. It was swiftly followed by *Sshhhh!*, collected short stories which show the same mix of charm, humour and fatality.

The one happy bunny in the group is Lewis Trondheim whose McConey series features, you guessed it, a bunny. *Harum Scarum* and *The Hoodoodad* were huge hits in Europe, and Fantagraphics so expected his quietly humorous, but involved, anthropomorphic mysteries to be as popular in the States that they reputedly swapped all their rights to Chris Ware for him. How wrong they were. The charming thrillers, starring a rabbit detective and his journo sidekick, Richie the cat, undeservedly bombed. The drawing is simplistic, but extremely eloquent, and the script is sharp – a delight from start to finish.

Finally, two must-have collections that don't really fit in anywhere else. In *The Best Comics of the Decade* (two volumes, 1990), editors Gary Groth and Kim Thompson were willing to make enemies as well as friends by selecting the best creators. And there's very little to disagree with in their choices, from huge commercial successes like Matt Groening to near-forgotten scribblers of genius like Dori Seda.~FJ

Recommended: *Ana, Any Similarity to Persons Living or Dead..., Barney and the Blue Note, The Best Comics of the Decade Volumes 1 & 2, Beyond the Pale, Billie Holiday, Clover Honey, The Complete Robert Crumb 5, 6, 9, 10, Daddy's Girl, Dan & Larry, The Fifth Name, Harum Scarum, Haw!, Hey, Wait, The Hoodoodad, Love That Bunch, Maakies, Mail Order Bride, New York, New York, Safe Area Gorazde, Suckle, Trosper*

FANTASCI

Warp: *5 issues 1986-1987*
Apple: *4 issues (6-9) 1987-1988*

Terrible title for a poor black and white anthology that unimaginatively mixes fantasy and science fiction. For the record, *Fantasci* contains three continuing features. There's Don Lomax's tiresome superhero skit Captain Obese (big fat bloke becomes a costumed do-gooder for 'the common man' and, er, that's it), a laugh-free dwarf comedy 'A Hero Named Harold', by Kevin Davies and Steve Stirling, and an atrocious science-fiction adventure from Mark Stadler and Dave Hoover entitled 'Hunter XX'. The good news is that the latter is gone from 7.~AL

Basil Wolverton's FANTASTIC FABLES

Dark Horse: *2 issue microseries 1993*

Wolverton is best known as a master of the 'ugly mug'. His obsessively rendered headshots 'graced' the covers of *Mad* and *Plop!* amongst many other mags. This two part series usefully collects a variety of Wolverton's comic strip work. There's relatively straight space opera like 'Meteor Morgan', goonery reminiscent of Wolverton's 'Powerhouse Pepper', and, most interestingly, a series of full-page pen and ink drawings done for an illustrated Bible series. Wolverton cross-hatches the *Book of Revelations* into an astonishing catalogue of torment and misery; the end of the world has never looked so gorgeous or grotesque. These stories are collected, along with Spacehawk, in *Basil Wolverton in Space*.~AL

FANTASTIC FIVE

Marvel: *5 issues 1999-2000*

Based in the alternative universe of M2 where a new team of the Thing, Human Torch, Ms Fantastic, Psilord and Big Brain, offspring and survivors of the original Fantastic Four gather to solve the mystery of what became of Reed and Sue Richards. Tom DeFalco and Paul Ryan pick up where they left off during their tenure on *Fantastic Four*, but they really shouldn't have bothered.~WW

FANTASTIC FORCE

Marvel: *18 issues 1994-1996*

This Fantastic Four spin-off title joined the adult team's teenaged son Franklin Richards with another two superpowered youths and an other-dimensional warrior who claimed somewhat dubiously to be his aunt. The comic never really raised itself above being just another teen hero book, and despite later additions of more established and more popular heroes from the mother book – both the Human Torch and She-Hulk were members at one time – it suffered badly from clichéd dialogue and uninspired plots. It's not until the last issue that any depth is given to the characters. As Franklin reflects on mistakes which have led to the break-up of his team and the pressure he is under to live up to his parents' legend there's a hint that perhaps, underneath everything, this did have a story to tell. Unfortunately, by then it was too late.~JC

FANTASTIC FOUR

Marvel: *Series one 416 issues, 27 Annuals, 6 Giant-Size 1961-1996, series two 13 issues 1996-1997, series three 63 issues +, 4 Annuals 1997 to date*

Hot on the heels of the DC (then National Periodicals) superhero revival, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby launched the *Fantastic Four*. A more mature approach to comics, with strong characterisation and soap-opera plots to counterbalance the action, the comic revived the flagging fortunes of the company which had, until then, been Atlas but with *FF* 1 was renamed Marvel. The exact history of that first issue has been lost in apocrypha and legend. Debate rages on how much creative input came from Lee and how much from Kirby, and on the (still uncertain) identity of the uncredited inker. What is certain is that *Fantastic Four* changed the face of the industry, and presented the 1960s comic reader with sophisticated stories that have given the comics themselves a remarkable endurance.

1 tells the story of brilliant scientist Reed Richards who, determined to beat the Commies into space, blasts off ahead of them. This is despite warnings from his best friend and pilot, Ben Grimm, that the effect cosmic rays may have on their rocket has not been sufficiently researched. Grimm's caution is vindicated: the rocket hits a cosmic ray storm and crashes back to Earth, giving its crew (Richards, Grimm, Richards' fiancée Sue Storm and her brother Johnny) fantastic powers. As all upstanding citizens do, they soon agree to use these powers to fight evil and save the world. Early issues have a look and feel reminiscent of the monster comics which were popular at the time and on which Lee and Kirby had both worked. It is not until the distinctive blue costumes are introduced in 3 that the title becomes unmistakably a superhero comic. *Fantastic Four* 1 and 2 mark an evolution between these and the superhero comics DC had started to revive. It's speculated this was a deliberate attempt not to compete obviously with the superhero titles of National Periodicals, on whom Marvel then relied for distribution.

Kirby and Lee's remarkable 102-issue run is unparalleled in comics, both for the scope of characters and situations introduced and for the sheer quality of the art and writing. Almost all of the villains who will reappear over the next four decades are introduced in the first twenty issues, creating a formula few writers have tampered with since. The Thing vs The Hulk battle (25-26) is considered to be the classic slugfest by readers who like that sort of thing. It is around the mid-30s, however, that Kirby and Lee really hit their stride, and by 44, the first appearance of Gorgon of the Inhumans, the comic is in a golden age. The Inhumans storyline leads straight into the 'Galactus Saga', arguably the title's greatest moment. Kirby and Lee keep the quality high throughout the next twenty issues, and even when the partnership begins to run out of steam the quality is still above average, such as the Prisoner-inspired issues 84-87.

Without Kirby's creative input after 102, Stan Lee's scripts were never enough to carry the comic alone and 103-125 are best avoided. Once Lee had left, an unimpressive run by Archie Goodwin was followed by strong stories from Gerry Conway, and Roy Thomas which lifted the comic over the following fifty issues. High points were the alternate-world tale in 160-163, The Thing vs The Hulk battle in 167 and the George Pérez/Joe Sinnott art on most issues between 164 and 192. By this time, however, the quality of the stories was already starting to drop and rarely climbs above mediocre again until the arrival of John Byrne, sporadically from 209 and permanently in 232-293. Byrne brought back much of the classic feel of the 'old' *Fantastic Four* and his run is generally considered to be a second golden age. It's worth noting that Byrne was one of the first writers to tamper with established Marvel continuity, changing the Fantastic Four to suit his own vision even when this didn't necessarily fit in with what the creators between him and Lee/Kirby had done. While not as drastic as the effect Frank Miller had on Daredevil, Byrne's tampering nevertheless changed the book and ensured its success into the 1980s. The Byrne stories are amongst the most popular in the comic's long history. Those around 250, packed with guest-stars such as the X-Men and the Avengers, are worth mentioning, as is the plot concerning the death of Galactus in 244, 257 and 261-262*. Not afraid to challenge the status quo, Byrne replaced The Thing with the She-Hulk (for whom he had always had a particular fondness), and proceeded to have the character's long time girlfriend, Alicia Masters, fall for and marry the Human Torch. The soap opera implications of this added a new undercurrent to the title under Byrne and his successors, and it is almost a snub to Byrne that Marvel eventually decided to reveal that it was not the real Alicia but a Skrull impostor whom the Torch had married. Other major changes he made to the series were to seriously upgrade the Invisible Girl's powers (and change her name to the Invisible Woman), and alter the team's costumes for the first and only time, albeit mildly. Byrne's last issue comes halfway through a storyline finished admirably by Roger Stern and Jerry Ordway, 293-295.

After the following twenty-fifth-anniversary issue, the *FF* enters what must be the nadir of its run, suffering often ludicrous plots and competent but uninspired art from issue 297 for pretty much the next hundred issues. The only notable exceptions are 334-350, written and sometimes drawn by Walt Simonson, which at least attempted to try something new, although the offbeat direction doesn't always hit the mark and some issues are incomprehensible. One of his better stories teaming Ghost Rider, Hulk, Spider-Man and Wolverine as a new FF in 347-349 was collected. Around the late 380s, the regular creative team of Tom DeFalco and Paul Ryan start to get well enough acquainted with their cast to produce stories which, while by no means classics, are at least good fun, and more readable than most of the previous runs had been. The 'Nobody Gets Out Alive' storyline in 387-392* is the closest this period gets to a highlight.

By the time Marvel decided to turn to flavour-of-the-Nineties writer-artist Jim Lee for a revamp and continuity overhaul, the *Fantastic Four* was in dire need of a new direction. Marvel's flagship title had never really recovered from Jack Kirby's departure, with subsequent creators building on old glories, but never able to move on nor bring much originality to the series. The early issues show him sticking tightly to the old continuity while updating the stories for a more demanding 1990s audience. For instance, Richards now takes his fiancée and her teenaged brother with him because the rocket is owned by their father and they are needed to initiate its launch sequence, not just because he thinks it's a good idea. Lee's take on the team is fresh and vibrant, making it the one 'Heroes Reborn' title that didn't outstay its welcome. Unfortunately, the saying "you can never go home again" has rarely held true in the Marvel Universe and so it's soon back to normal with a new number 1, although nothing much resembling a new direction.

The first three issues of the third volume, by Scott Lobdell, Alan Davis and Mark Farmer are enjoyable, standard superhero fun with a slightly lighter touch than Marvel have generally allowed on their first family in the past. While hardly setting the series alight, the creative team were certainly doing no wrong, which is more than can be said about Chris Claremont, who arrives with 4. By the late 1990s, Claremont was so far past his sell-by date that it's hard to remember a time when every word balloon and plot he produced didn't seem like a tired old parody of himself. His *FF*s are execrable, mainly due to his inexplicable desire to ignore the Fantastic Four themselves and instead insert into their adventures the least interesting supporting characters from his days on *X-Men* and *Excalibur*. Thus the FF end up as little more than supporting characters in their own title while a bunch of Claremontites rampage across the omniverse. Thankfully, we've been rescued from this drivel by 33, starting an entertaining fill-in by John Moore and Salvador Larocca, followed by the arrival of Carlos Pacheco who soon puts the series back on its feet. While clearly a dedicated fan determined to play to tradition, Pacheco manages to add new spice as he reintroduces much missed old favourites such as the Baxter Building, royal blue costumes, the Negative Zone and the Inhumans. There is an overwhelming feeling that he understands the FF's strengths and knows how to play to them while at the same time being careful not to simply retread old ground. His run on the series is an absolute joy, with 35-39 collected, and a very hard act to follow. Luckily, Adam Warren's 57-59 don't embarrass themselves.

Mark Waid takes over with issue 60, a 9 cents promotional issue, in which he crafts a lovely stand-alone tale that leaves long-term readers in no doubt that he completely and utterly understands the appeal of the Fantastic Four and how to make the best of this. His four issues so far are yet to put a foot wrong.

The first of the 1974-1975 giant-size issues was actually titled *Giant-Size Superstars*, and there have been numerous reprint packages of the classic Kirby and Lee *FF*s over the years, most notably in *Marvel Collectors Item Classics* (*Marvel's Greatest Comics* with 23), which ran ninety-six issues from 1965 to 1981. The hardback volumes of *Marvel Masterworks* reprint 1-50 along with annuals 1-3, while 1-63 along with the first four annuals are available in three black and white collections of *Essential Fantastic Four*.~JC

Recommended: 1-6, 10, 19, 25, 26, 38-51, 84-87, 150, 160-163, 234, 239, 261-262, 267, 285, 292-295, series three 45, 54, 60

Marvel Action Hour: FANTASTIC FOUR

Marvel: *8 issues 1994-1995*

Marvel Action Hour presents adventures taken from the television show of the same name with Joey Cavalieri adapting TV scripts broadly based on the early Lee/Kirby tales improbably and uncomfortably illustrated by European veteran Alcatena. Nobody's finest moment and best ignored by all.~WW

FANTASTIC FOUR Miniseries and one-shots

Marvel: *One-shot (Fantastic Four Roast) 1982, 4 issue miniseries (vs X-Men) 1987*, 2 issue microseries ('Atlantis Rising') 1995, 3 issue miniseries ('Fireworks') 1999, one-shot (The Fantastic 4th Voyage of Sinbad) 2001, 4 issue miniseries ('1234') 2001-2002**

The Fantastic Four Roast may have seemed a good idea around an editor's desk, celebrating twenty years of continuous publishing by having humorist Fred Hembeck and a jam of creators lambaste the team at an awards dinner. It's painful in execution, intolerable to fans and impenetrable to the casual reader. In the X-Men team-up Chris Claremont and John Bogdanove do a decent job. Reed Richards' lost journal seems to indicate that rather than accident the tragedy that formed the FF was a deliberate act by a cold hearted genius. Can such a person then be trusted when asked by the X-Men to cure one of their number of a potentially fatal scientific phenomenon?

'Atlantis Rising', further subtitled Alpha and Omega, are mediocre bookends for a truly dire crossover event (*FF* 401-402, *Fantastic Force* 8-9, *Warlock and the Infinity Watch* 41-42) which has the Sub-Mariner's sunken homeland rise from the sea to become the prize in a mindless squabble by various factions of the Marvel Universe. It is supplemented by an unusually informative and well-packaged Preview Special which includes three chapters of the classic Stan Lee/Jack Kirby 'Tales of the Inhumans' from *Thor* 146, 149 and 152. More familiar stories are in 'Fireworks', which begins a trend of rehashing the glory days. Jones' Gerard and Jeff retell and refit the tale of the Human Torch and his Inhuman girlfriend Crystal from their first meeting to his quest to find and free her from the impenetrable Negative Zone (FF series one 44-58).

The FF and their children are kidnapped by a Djinn from a Magic dimension in 'The Fantastic 4th Voyage' and blackmailed into gathering mystic talismans with which to breach the barriers between worlds. Can the ingenuity of the legendary Captain Sinbad tip the scales in their favour before all reality is lost? Chris Claremont, Pascual Ferry and Scott Hanna reveal all in a surprisingly engaging piece of eye candy, whilst Grant Morrison, Jae Lee and Jose Villarrubia play dystopian mind games with continuity in the darkly ponderous '1.2.3.4.' . Dr Doom attacks the FF using his time machine and the reality-altering powers of his Prime Mover robot. A thorough grounding in FF history is vital to even comprehend this, but older fans should enjoy the stylish re-examination of the canon.~WW

FANTASTIC 4 2099

Marvel: *8 issues 1996*

If you ever fancy a series in which Marvel's original superteam is transported to the future in order to re-run old plots try to find one other than this. A different artist almost every issue doesn't give a damn, and even Karl Kesel's initial enthusiasm has departed issues before he does with 6. Wretched.~WJ

FANTASTIC FOUR UNLIMITED

Marvel: *16 issues 1993-1996*

Quarterly specials focusing on one character and/or telling a self-contained story. Started at a time when the monthly title was at its most tired and formulaic for years, these 'extra' stories have been no better and the series is best avoided. If you're an Ant-Man fan there's big changes in 9.~JC

FANTASTIC FOUR UNPLUGGED

Marvel: *6 issues 1995-1996*

Unbelievably poor low-price, lower-quality FF stories from new (and mostly never to be heard of again) creators. Most issues are self-contained, all are best avoided. If you really have to sample, 4 is so ludicrous it's funny. The Human Torch's estranged shapechanger wife disguises herself, chats him up and is then pissed off when he uses the same chat-up lines he lavished on her first time round. It reminds you that here are two characters so stupid they deserve each other. Or maybe don't bother.~JC

FANTASTIC GIANTS

Charlton: *1 issue (24) 1966*

This is a giant-rampaging-monsters comic, formerly *Konga*, which only ran for one issue in this incarnation. All four stories are drawn by Steve Ditko: there's Konga (huge gorilla in London), Hogar (alien robot in South Africa), Gorgo (sea-reptile in London again), and 'The Mountain Monster' (hooded creature in central Europe). They're all off-the-shelf stories, but he does bring a lot of character to Gorgo.~FC

Ganbear's FANTASTIC PANIC

Antarctic: *8 issue limited series 1993-1994, 8 issue limited series 1995-1996*

Japanese creator Ganbear (Satori Yamasaki) is a decent artist, and populates his story with characters either brimming over with enthusiasm or experiencing the pits of despair. That's when they're not stepping out of character to supply supposedly comic moments. The first series has the cast journeying towards a tournament to choose a hero to defeat the big bad villain, but is so discursive it will irritate all not in tune with Ganbear's sense of humour. The second is no better.~FP

Don Marquez's FANTASTIC STORIES

Basement Comics: *2 issues + 2001 to date*

Don Marquez would be Frank Frazetta, even, embarrassingly, to the point of imitating elements of his signature. Artistically he obviously doesn't match Frazetta, and would benefit from looking at other artists besides to improve already very talented pages. He produces old style anthology stories, again harkening back to Frazetta's time in comics, which while perfectly acceptable pastiches are hardly novel. Each issue also contains an adaptation of a Conan-Doyle *Professor Challenger* story.~FP

Frank Frazetta FANTASY Illustrated

Quantum Cat: *8 issues 1998-1999*

The limit of Frazetta's personal contribution is covers and a first issue editorial, while his art is showcased in 4's article. Since the magazine's intended to be a tribute to his genius and inspiration, the editors really should have found better material with which to fill this second-rate *Epic Illustrated*. There are some well-drawn stories, but precious few are well written. Wendy Pini's Elfquest tales in 1 and 4, therefore, are a pleasant surprise, as is Moebius in 2, albeit a wordless story last seen in *Moebius Comics*. Fantasy artwork then from Richard Corben (1, 3), Joe Jusko (1, 3), Tony Daniel (1), Tony Harris (2), the Hildebrandt Brothers (2, 3, 5, 6), Charles Vess (3) and Alex Niño (7, 8). Maybe you just have to be in the right mood for today's fantastic stories.~NF

FANTASY ILLUSTRATED

New Media: *1 issue 1982*

Partner to *Adventure Illustrated*, this too only saw the one issue published. Written by Steve Englehart, 'The Djinn' is an old-fashioned pulp adventure set in Cairo with hints of mysticism and secret societies, while Steve Ditko in black and white, inked by Steve Leialoha is great to look at. This was given another chance in Marvel's *Coyote*. Another artist whose work is a revelation in black and white (after the terrible printing in many of Charlton's titles) is Tom Sutton. His illustrations for Don McGregor's 'Alexander Risk' are intricate and atmospheric, as befitting a strip paying homage to *Sherlock Holmes*. After a King Arthur text story with a couple of P. Craig Russell pictures, the final strip is Mark Evanier and Mike Sekowsky's Ryder, continuing from *Adventure Illustrated*. This is a stronger issue than *Adventure* and fans of Ditko and Sutton won't be disappointed, but it's not compelling.~NF

FANTASY MASTERPIECES

Marvel: *Series one 11 issues 1966-1967, series two 14 issues 1979-1981*

The first series is an odd selection of reprints largely unavailable elsewhere which are useful as samplers of otherwise expensive material from the 1940s and 1950s, although it's monster stories in 1 and 2. The Sub-Mariner and Human Torch clash – regarded as a 1940s highlight – is in 8, and the original Human Torch's origin is in 9. Captain America occupies 3-6, and the Black Knight reprints in 11 have some fine Joe Maneely artwork. The 1940s Marvel team the All-Winners Squad is in 10, and the remaining issues star Sub-Mariner. The reprints continued backing up a new story as the title changed to *Marvel Superheroes* with 12. Series two reprints the first fourteen issues of the 1960s *Silver Surfer* series and, from 8, Warlock's appearances in *Strange Tales* 178-181 and 9-11 of his own title. The reproduction is shoddy and you're better advised to seek out *Marvel Masterworks* volumes for the Silver Surfer stories and the later 1980s reprint for Warlock.~WJ

FAR WEST

Antarctic: *4 issue miniseries 1998-1999*, 2 issue microseries 2000*

At first glance this looks horrible, because of the indistinct grey tone art in the second series and all the tawdry garish covers. However, the stories, about a tomboyish elf bounty hunter and her talking bear sidekick in a fantasy/wild west setting, by Richard Moore, are quite readable and even occasionally witty. The first series, with adequate black and white line art, is the better. The puerile dwelling on the exposure of the elf's buttocks will not appeal to everyone.~GK

FAREWELL TO WEAPONS

Marvel/Epic: *One-shot 1992*

Akira creator Katsuhiro Otomo story about cyberwarriors of the future being slaughtered by an automated combat drone. A neatly written, beautifully illustrated parable on the futility of war.~HS

Recommended

FARSCAPE: War Torn

WildStorm: *2 issue microseries 2002*

Written by Marv Wolfman, this series perfectly captures the spirit of the TV series while Robert Teranishi's detailed, decorative artwork accurately portrays the actors' likenesses. The premise of *Farscape* is that Earthman, John Crichton is thrown through a wormhole into an unknown universe where he accidentally joins a number of escaped alien prisoners (Zhaan, D'Argo and Rygel) on a living spaceship (Moya), who are trying to find their way home. In the main story here, the crew find themselves caught between two races warring over the right to populate a planet they each believe is theirs by divine right. A backup story drawn by Carlos Mota features Chiana helping a group of her homeworld's rebels.~NF

FASHION IN ACTION

Eclipse: *One-shot 1986, one-shot 1987*

Spinning off from back-ups in early issues of *Scout, Fashion in Action*'s 1986 appearance was subtitled a summer special, and the 1987 version was a winter special. John K. Snyder's strip is more typical of European adventure strips than American, concerning a team of women acting as celebrity protection agents. The second is better than the first, focusing on team leader Frances Knight, as she recalls an episode of US 'special forces' having been involved in an African state in the past, while having to deal with another plan of arch-enemy Dr Cruel in the present. There are some nice original touches in both – Dr Cruel's sympathetic henchman in the Winter Special for one – but overall the characterisation of the leads isn't good enough to engage reader sympathy.~WJ

FAST FORWARD

Piranha Press: *3 issues 1992-1993*

According to a first-issue text page, *Fast Forward* is 'a free-form forum' for "today's brightest talents". More accurately, it's a hotch-potch anthology, each issue loosely assembled around a different theme. 1 is Phobias, and leads with a long strip entitled 'A Glass of Water', by Grant Morrison and Dave McKean. A lengthy monologue from a spinster librarian only threatens to become interesting. McKean's sinister artwork is a technically impressive mixture of treated photos, photomontage and linework, but often feels inappropriate when accompanying Morrison's resolutely ordinary script. There are also some minor fillers from Andy

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* Available in a collected edition

Helfer and Glenn Barr, David Quinn and Gil Ashby, Alec ('overrated') Stevens, and Russell Braun. The Family-themed 2 leads with a peach of a strip by Kyle ('underrated') Baker. 'Lester Fenton and the Walking Dead' is an inventive, funny zombie farce, rendered in Baker's beautifully offhand style. Lester's father returns from the dead, and proceeds to mess with his son's teen love life. Average work from Bob Rozakis and Stephen DeStefano, Dean Motter, Douglas Michael, Mark Williams and Brian Stelfreeze, and John Figueroa and Kirk Etienne rounds up the rest of the issue. The third number, Storytellers, is dominated by two lousy short stories with a few illustrations, a pointless rip-off for something sold as a comic book. William Messner-Loebs and Sam Kieth slightly redeem things with one of their entertaining yarns featuring philosopher Epicurus the Sage, but Steve Purcell inexplicably wins the cover slot for his overly cute fantasy 'Toybox'.~AL

Recommended: 2

FAST WILLIE JACKSON

Fitzgerald: *7 issues 1977*

Fitzgerald Periodicals had a modest success with their *Golden Legacy* series of educational comics about famous figures in black history, launched in 1966 and reissued periodically. Wanting a regular newsstand comic to 'cross over' into the mainstream market, they devised Fast Willie Jackson, best described, forgive me, as Archie in blackface. In the decade of 'blaxploitation', it may have made some kind of sense, but taking the most whitebread comics series ever, and setting it in the cleanest ghetto on record, seems like a predestined money-loser in retrospect. Fast Willie and his teenage chums were as bland as their white counterparts, but their supporting cast were bizarre, including a racist cop with a heart of gold, a fat fortune telling mama who regularly invoked the name of Satan, and a white feminist named 'Jane Fronda', who hadn't realised she should move the hell out of the neighbourhood! This melange of clichés would have been offensive enough if Archie had decided, patronisingly, to produce a comic "just for all the coloured folks out there", but coming from a company that established itself by promoting black heritage and dignity, it's nothing short of deplorable. In the final issue Fitzgerald played the shabbiest scam ever on their readers, when a "See Yourself In The Comics" contest winner – step forward Jimmy Moore, of Brooklyn – was portrayed as Fast Willie, with Willie's name whited out of an obvious inventory story and Jimmy's inserted. Talk about lazy rip-off tricks. Shortly thereafter, Fitzgerald stopped publishing. My money's on a disgruntled Jimmy Moore visiting the offices at midnight with a kerosene can...~HS

FAT DOG Mendoza

Dark Horse: *1 issue 1992*

Scott Musgrove's *Fat Dog Mendoza* is a completely off-the-wall slice of whimsy that will have any right-minded person falling off the chair with laughter. Some, of course, won't get it. Plot is minimal, but jokes are plentiful as Fat Dog roams about impersonating the Pope and being trapped under a tree. It's a joy to see fellow Loose Teeth alumni The Fruitheads return, and Musgrove also introduces a new character, overweight superhero The Whoosh, who leads The Squad Patrol. In the latter assemblage are some of the most preposterous supertypes ever conceived, complete with listings of superpowers and exploits. If you ever see Ol' Pops Pimple run for it. Fat Dog returns in *Dark Horse Presents* 116, set prior to his equally funny animated series. Catch the animated series as well.~FP

Recommended

FAT FREDDY'S CAT

Rip-Off/Knockabout: *7 issues* + 1978 to date.*

Frederick Freekowski, Esq., the nutritionally unchallenged member of the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers, gives his feline companion free rein in these short stories, which show the feline species at its finest: puking, crapping, lazy, vicious hairballs. Mostly half-pagers culled from various underground newspapers, the longer stories which front each issue add occasional surreal touches (the Cockroach Wars in 5 for example), but it's the short strips which are the funniest, when our hero is behaving most like a cat and least like a human Everyman. The "Just wait till he puts on his stereo headphones" gag is still a classic.~HS

FATALE

Broadway: *6 issues 1995-1996**

Introduced in *Powers That Be* and *Shadow State*, Broadway's leading lady rapidly spun off into her own title. Reminiscent of the X-Men's Rogue in that she leeches strength and knowledge from others on skin contact, she significantly differs in that she can choose to 'drain' others or not, and as a consequence revels in her power. The product of experiments by a sinister organisation called The Brotherhood, Fatale spends most of her time fleeing from the organisation's various warring factions. Attempts have been made to cast her as a superpowered Modesty Blaise, complete with eccentric supporting cast and at least two romantic interests. The blatantly voyeuristic nature of the art, held in check in the early issues, becomes increasingly creepy as the series progresses, robbing the strip of its initial appeal.~HS

FATALIS

Caliber: *1 issue 1999*

The immortal Wilde, his band of helpers and the Fatalis Corporation investigate a series of murders in Los Angeles with supernatural associations. Mark Chadbourn's script is too knowing and somewhat pretentious whilst Vince Danks' photo-referenced artwork, despite many attractive features, is too dark and one-toned. Intended as a two-issue series, only the first appeared.~NF

FATE

DC: *17 issues 1994-1995*

The disembodied power was formerly affiliated with Dr Fate, but the events of *Zero Hour* rendered this relationship redundant, and it seeks a new host. Unaccountably it selects a chain-smoking thug with guns and an attitude. This series tramples the ideals of Dr Fate into the ground for no good purpose, as, the questionable association aside, this is to all intents and purposes a new character. Worse, it does so incompetently. It's worth a look at almost anything rather than this.~HS

FATE OF THE BLADE

Dreamwave: *3 issues + 2002 to date*

In 2035 drug dealing film executive Vic Richardson purchases a genetically engineered woman who meets his every requirement. Implanted with false memories, Mya is programmed to love him, but after a year becomes frustrated with her life anyway. Although the covers picture Mya as a warrior woman with sword the series has yet to reach that point, but writer Chris Sarracini has an intriguing enough, although sparse, plot going. Penciller Job Yamen has mastered mood and style before anatomy, but not to the point where it detracts from the story. This is very finely poised, though, and could yet turn out to be just another chick with a blade comic.~WJ

FATHER AND SON

Kitchen Sink: *4 issues 1995-1996**

Bad Habit: *One-shot 1998*

Inept and cynical grunge cash-in from writer/artist Jeff Nicholson. Uptight straight Richard Schultz is perpetually at war with his slacking son Christopher. Dad believes in hard work, talent and integrity, while Son is an idle moron who sponges off his hard-working old man. In almost every strip, Dad is shown to be more sophisticated than his couch-potato offspring, a curiously reactionary message from a comic clearly trying to grab some of that 'alternative' Seattle action (five years too late, but never mind). Perhaps it's all highly sophisticated parody, and Nicholson is a fierce satirist baiting his intended audience. However, none of the characters, situations or locations are especially well observed, the humour is strictly sitcom fare and the drawing amateur.~AL

FATHER CHRISTMAS

Hamish Hamilton/Putnam: *1 volume 1974*
Hamish Hamilton/Penguin: *1 volume ('Goes on Holiday') 1975*

These are short stories for children about a grumpy Father Christmas, bemoaning his lot while preparing himself and his reindeer for the busiest night of his year, but proving to have a heart of gold after all. His holiday takes in France, Scotland and Las Vegas, as he looks for warmth, but has to move on when children begin to ask whether he is Father Christmas (though the rich French food upsets his stomach and he doesn't like the cold in Scotland). Raymond Briggs' droll scripts go some way towards keeping adults as well as children entertained, and the slight stories are nicely observed, letting the artwork carry much of the narrative. The volumes are more generally found combined these days.~NF

FATHOM

Comico: *3 issue miniseries 1987, 3 issue miniseries 1992-1993*

Two dull miniseries spun-off from the briefly popular Elementals. In the first, slightly superior, instalment, writer Lawrence Shick ponderously recaps our aquatic superheroine's origin – sailing accident leads to Rebecca Golden's reincarnation as 'Wet! Wild! Webbed!' Fathom, acolyte of watery deity Aqua – before sending her to a strange underwater city where she's literally treated like a Princess. Artist Jill Thompson here blandly mimics the work of series creator Bill Willingham. In the 1990s story Fathom is summoned by Aqua to battle the dreaded Dera Aeshma, "despoiler of the world's pure waters", a turgid eco-thriller from David DeVries and Tim Eldred.~AL

FATHOM

Image: *15 issues + (0-14), 2 Swimsuit Specials 1998 to date*

Once a passenger on a cruise ship that went missing for nearly 10 years, the orphaned Aspen Matthews graduates as an expert on all things aquatic. She is swept up in the world-threatening schemes of Killian, an undersea terrorist, and his adversary the secretive, power-mongering Admiral Maylander. The opening nine issue story arc is seen through many eyes including Killian, a ghostly water-guardian, Killian's woman Kyla, agent Cannon Hawke who's more than he seems, hotshot pilot Chance Calloway and his brother, flatmate Tyler Kincaid and Aspen herself. When she realises she and Killian are of the same undersea race they join forces briefly, and she then finds she has powers that amaze even Killian's followers. Eventually Aspen, Hawke, Chance and the unlucky Kyla, are the only ones who can stop Killian. There is a team-up with Witchblade and Lara Croft in 12-13.

Creator Michael Turner does an admirable job of telling a story by avoiding drawing anything except pin-ups wherever possible. Despite obvious design strengths, his storytelling relies on clipped close-up detail, hardware, facials and effects. Some measure of confusion is saved thanks to the incredible colour work by Star of the Show Jonathan D. Smith, whose contribution is more of an embellishment than that of inker Joe Weems. Since 10 the colour has passed to the equally smooth Peter Steigerwald. Bill O'Neil's writing is clumsy, often intrusive and fatally impeded by concrete galoshes of expository text, but that's because its doing many of the jobs normally left to the artwork. Despite plenty of action the main character remains a buff cipher surrounded by adventure story clichés, not a sin in itself, but single issues are close to incomprehensible. 0-9 were reprinted two to a collected edition, and those issues have since been collected in book form.~SW

FATHOM: KILLIAN'S TIDE

Image: *4 issue miniseries 2001-2002*

A sister title focussing on the distinctive master villain from *Fathom*. It introduces a younger Killian and his restless group of peers, relating the whys and wherefores of their developing into ecological terrorists. Killian's agenda is complicated by his need for vengeance against his parents' murderers from the surface. As a bonus we get our first look at the secret land where Fathom is from. The comic is plot-driven with input from creator Michael Turner, penciller Talent Caldwell and scripter Bill O'Neil but the usual long expository blurbs are kept to a minimum. Caldwell's artwork has a simplified look sometimes at odds with the rendered colour but the pin-ups and facials are mercifully leavened with some decent storytelling. The upshot is that the villains in Fathom now have more dimension than the main character.~SW

FATMAN THE HUMAN FLYING SAUCER

Lightning: *3 issues 1967*

The creators of the original *Shazam!* Captain Marvel reunite twenty years on with this strange series aimed at the younger end of the market. Rotund Van Crawford is a superhero called Fatman who can also transform himself into a flying saucer in times of need, but with a tendency to be distracted by any food. Lacking the charm of *Captain Marvel*, it proves lightning doesn't strike twice.~FP

FAULTLINES

DC/Vertigo: *6 issue miniseries 1997*

Tracy Farrand is a girl in retreat, on the run from responsibility, and in fear of her sanity. Either she's having a nervous breakdown or she's the victim of telepathic episodes. So it's not her best idea to visit friends in a remote mountain college town that's a psychic hot-zone complete with romantic ghosts and supernatural killers. Lee Marrs and Bill Koeb produce a well-paced expressionistic thriller with moody, innovative art. Good Stuff.~WW

THE FAUNA REBELLION

Fantagraphics: *3 issue miniseries 1990*

The animals get as mad as hell and aren't gonna take it no more in this ecological fable by R.L. Crabb. Funny in places, and decently drawn, it runs out of steam and inspiration long before the end.~WJ

FAUST

Northstar/Rebel: *10 issues 1989-1995**

An inordinately violent psychopath with apparent multiple-personality disorder assumes a costumed identity with metal claws, eviscerating to quench an uncontrollable bloodlust. There's more to the series, but the central theme is an exploration of what occurs when the rage inside everybody bursts loose. *Faust* certainly attempts to justify the high sex and gore content with a credible, if confusing, plot, but is ultimately unrewarding on any level other than as vicarious gratification.~FP

FAZE I FAZERS

AC: *4 issue miniseries 1986*

Artist and writer Vic Bridges introduces the Fazers, a collection of superhumans with the most unlikely names in the history of comics (Non-Man and Girl-Bot being favourites). Drawn very much in John Byrne's style, they're kidnapped by aliens for no good reason. 4 features early Erik Larsen fill-in art and a splendidly bitchy publishorial about Bridges' deadline problems.~HS

F.B.I.

Dell: *One-shot 1965*

One of the many one-off titles produced by Dell in the 1960s, this is a little dated, but has some nice art by Joe Sinnott. It's probably the last comic he pencilled before becoming the definitive inker on the *Fantastic Four*.~SW

Adventure into FEAR

Marvel: *31 issues 1970-1975*

The first nine issues reprint 1950s weird / horror short stories, then Man-Thing became the cover feature running to 19. Marvel's muck monster was created by a combination of a defective supersoldier serum and the magical affinity of the Florida swamps. Captain America should be thankful. A foul, seven-foot-tall mass of rotting vegetation with no mind to speak of, Man-Thing reacts involuntarily to the emotions of those around him, fear causing him the most distress. Following his initial appearance in *Savage Tales* (first series) 1 and a handful of guest appearances, he graduated to his own strip under the masterful touch of Steve Gerber and Val Mayerik. Most issues are above par, with the outstanding 18 summarising the nature of the human race in nineteen pages. 19 introduces Howard the Duck in a slightly substandard story that concludes in *Man-Thing* 1.

In 20 Marvel jumped on the vampire vogue by starring Morbius in two concurrent series (see *Vampire Tales*). Neither lasted. In *Amazing Spider-Man* 101, Michael Morbius developed a serum from bat enzyme to cure his rare blood disease. It worked but endowed him with selected vampiric symptoms as a side-effect. Marvel's "scientific" vampire experienced revulsion at his blood-sucking antics but was powerless to break his habit. This directionless series does science fiction, fantasy, horror, detective, mystery, supernatural, and singing crabs (in 29), and does them all badly – especially the singing crabs. Four writers and seven pencillers in twelve issues provides explanation for the awful standard. Paul Gulacy's art saves issue 20, but it is hard to find a single redeeming script feature. 31's "She bit me! On the neck! What'll I tell Joey if it leaves a mark??" is the best that can be mustered. Unbelievably, some of these stories were reprinted in 1993 as *Morbius Revisited* during the heyday of the Midnight Sons. The first issue is cover-blurbed "Classic Tales of the Living Vampire". Were Marvel to be less disingenuous it might read "Ropey old reissues for a fast buck".~APS

Recommended: 18

Bissette & Veitch's FEAR BOOK

Eclipse: *One-shot 1986*

Eight very short horror stories, being early professional work done while the excellent artists Steve Bissette and Rick Veitch were at Joe Kubert's Comic Art school, and originally published in educational magazines. They're silly fun.~GK

FEAR EFFECT

Image/Top Cow: *One-shot 2000, one-shot ('Retro-Helix') 2001*

Plotted very much to formula in the style of the computer game it's based on, with a character starting a mission and overcoming a number of obstacles en route to a goal. There are thousands of better comics actually worth your time and money.~FP

FEARLESS FOSDICK

Kitchen Sink: *2 volumes 1990-1992*

Fearless Fosdick was created by Al Capp as a newspaper strip within a strip in *Li'l Abner* in 1942, and these volumes present some of the Fosdick appearances between then and 1977, when *Li'l Abner* ended. It's a cruel parody of *Dick Tracy*, in which Fosdick is an utterly moral, but naïve and stupid, detective. Running jokes include his poor pay, regular sackings, loss of pension rights and high daily body count. He is almost prescient in his ability to shoot assassins before they can shoot him, but his solution to hearing that a villain has poisoned a single can of the most popular brand of baked beans is to kill anyone he sees trying to eat beans. Other stories have him outwitted by his parrot, a plutonium-enriched bum, a Chippendale chair, and lose his fiancé, Prudence Pimpleton to his robotic replacement. Capp's cartooning is sharp and there are some blackly humorous sequences, but it's not a sense of humour that will appeal to everyone.~NF

FEDS'N'HEDS

Print Mint: *1 issue 1968*

This effervescent collection of counterculture humour by Gilbert Shelton was one of the first important underground comics. It featured early appearances by both of Shelton's much-loved family favourite strips Freak Brothers and Wonder Warthog, as well as songs, poems, posters and the legendary Oat Willie. Consistently funny, the humour has a universality that easily overcomes its hippy origins.~DAR

Recommended

FEEDERS

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1999*

Pretentious horror gibberish, written by Shane Hawks as a prelude to his indie movie *Eyes to Heaven*. Although Mike Allred's artwork is as clean, slick and attractive as ever, it's not enough of a redeeming feature to justify buying this nonsense.~DB

FELIX THE CAT

Harvey: *57 issues (62-118) 1955-1961*

Harvey Classics: *Series one 7 issues 1991-1993, series two (The Nine Lives of…) 1991-1992, one-shot (The Adventures of Felix the Cat) 1992*

Felix is a talking cat, created by Otto Mesmer for the Pat Sullivan Animation Studio in 1915. An instant world hit, the cartoons led to a long career as a newspaper strip, as well as product in many other media. Messmer wrote and drew the Sunday strip for decades before the cat made the jump to the fledgling world of comic books in 1943, with most of the material being reformatted reprints from the newspaper strips. Harvey took the title over from the defunct Toby Press, and published new tales in addition to Messmer reprints. As the cat evolved through successive movie shorts and eventually TV appearances, the additional paraphernalia of mad professors, clunky robots and the magic bags of tricks gradually became icons of the magical cat. The work retains a certain charm and many of the rapid-fire, surreal gags still find favour with the youngsters they're aimed at. With the 1990s advent of two rival TV shows starring Felix, Harvey relaunched the cat in a series of reprints from the early days of the strip. Series two features stories by Messmer, but otherwise erratic selection of material makes these for dedicated fans only. The dedicated Messmer fan should seek out the 1996 Fantagraphics hardback *Nine Lives to Live*, reprinting classic 1920s strips.~WW

FELON

Image: *4 issue miniseries 2001-2002*

Not much reading in these at three dollars a time. You'd be better off with the Parker novel by Richard Stark open on the protagonist's prison bed on the cover of 1. A hard boiled female armed robber back outside looking for the jobmates who set her up is still a novelty. It's readable, but the inconsistent art, with messy storytelling, is only saved by the colouring (except in 4, which is black and white and looks awful), as so often is the case nowadays. Balloon placement and spelling are typically careless. Never mind, the quasi-cinematic background noise (pop music, extraneous dialogue etc.) works well and a nasty chap gets his balls blown off. The question of whether we want our young people to identify with violent criminals remains.~GK

FEM FORCE

Americomics: *116 issues †, 1 Special, 8 one-shots 1985 to date*

An all woman team of superheroes, the Fem Force was assembled from the characters that AC founder Bill Black had been publishing in fanzines since the late 1960s. Having survived uneven distribution, retailer indifference and almost universal critical disdain, they've achieved their 100th issue, a feat very few independent titles can equal. Core members of the team include the ultra-patriotic Ms Victory, the feral She-Cat, the mystic Nightveil, intergalactic adventuress Stardust, and a personal favourite Synn, the Girl from LSD, a burned-out acid casualty ex-stripper whose hallucinogenic powers ensure that when she trips out, everybody trips out! The implausibly costumed and impossibly stacked protagonists are very much in the cheesecake good girl art tradition, and as such attract a negative response from the po-faced comics establishment. However, if you manage to set the enormous breasts aside –

and those puppies take a lot of setting, it has to be admitted – what you're left with is a very traditional and moral superhero title. Tragedies occur occasionally, but virtue is generally rewarded, evil is thwarted and there's a clear distinction between the bad guys and the good guys, or good gals in this instance. As such, it's a welcome contrast to the plethora of twisted, psychopathic, murderous 'heroes'. *Fem Force* is very much a curate's egg. There are a few real stinkers, particularly a run in the late 1980s drawn by Dick Ayers who not only can't draw gorgeous women, but can't manage humans, but most issues are an undemanding fun read.~HS

FERRET

Malibu: *One-shot 1992, 10 issues 1993-1994*

Spin-off from The Protectors team starring their token feral misanthrope. Mostly competent, with a few glimpses of potential, but sunk by the hopelessly derivative nature of the character. The first issue, however, has a gimmick so dumb it should be in any collection of esoterica – the cover is trimmed to match the shape of our hero's head!~HS

FEUD

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

In an otherworldly scenario four races co-exist: the Stokers are engineers, the Grunts are a hardy working race, the Kites are flying artists and the amphibious Skids are fishermen by trade. Their uneasy alliance is shattered when the heir to the Skids' throne is abducted by Kites, leaving clues implicating Stokers. With the co-dependency of the races, this is merely the old game of paper/stone/scissors transferred to comics, but it's well conceived by Mike Baron, well illustrated by Mark Nelson and hideously coloured by Ray Murtaugh.~WJ

F5

Image: *4 issue miniseries 2000**

Dark Horse: *One-shot ('Origin') 2001*

At Image covert action team F5 falls to pieces when trying to save the world from a megalomaniac intent on launching fatal germs across the globe. It's a decently drawn, in an anorexic fashion, and well-plotted thriller that *Danger Girl* fans should enjoy. Some will carp about the plethora of gratuitous underwear shots, but one presumes that for creator Tony Daniel it's part of the fun. The one-shot is poor value, with only twelve pages of story giving background on the cast padded out with cover repros of the Image series, and preparatory sketches for it.~WJ

50'S FUNNIES A Blast from the Past!

Kitchen Sink: *One-shot 1980*

A decent William Stout cover contains a largely disappointing set of strips from folk who'd become far better writers and artists. The 1950s theme is only loosely adhered to by the likes of Tom Yeates, Scott Shaw, Alfredo Alcala and Steve Bissette among others. The best strip pits Ed Gein against the kids from the Bazooka Joe strips by Bill Kelley and Rick Veitch, but even that's an awkward mix of Mad style parody and horror elements. A curiosity for the curious, but only from the bargain boxes.~FP

Big Monster FIGHT

Kidgang Comics: *2 issues (0-1) 1995-1996*

When Madame Marquis attacks a city with a giant monster (a la Godzilla), Doc Delilah uses four kids of the Science Gang to man her giant robot in its defence. The backup is a butt-kicking Alice against the Jabberwocky and Mocking Turtle. Jay Naylor's parodies should probably have been left to a single issue, though they're good-looking enough.~NF

FIGHT FOR TOMORROW

DC/Vertigo: *6 issue miniseries 2002-2003*

Grim'n'gritty martial arts tale set in the sleazy parts of a big city featuring Cedric, a Kung Fu student who is looking for love and answers to all the big questions, but is drawn into the deadly gangster-ridden world of underground street-fighting. If he's taking all the punches and kicks, why is it that his friends are the ones always getting hurt? Sharp but conventional action thriller from Brian Wood, Denys Cowan and Kent Williams.~WW

FIGHT MAN

Marvel: *One-shot 1993*

What does Fight Man do? He fights. Evan Dorkin turns out a very funny superhero pastiche starring the dimbulb crusader so beloved of Bill and Ted. With the merchandising, the alimony, sidekicks dying all the time and public protests, Fight Man's having a hard time of it. What's the solution? To fight, of course.~FP

Recommended

FIGHT THE ENEMY

Tower: *3 issues 1966*

Oh dear, oh dear. Tower's comics usually looked quite good, and so does this, with the occasional art by Mike Sekowsky, Al McWilliams and Dick Giordano amongst others, but these war and espionage stories (featuring the macho Mike Manly) leave a lot to be desired. For every story with a poignant statement, there's a matching one that's pure jingoism. There's an early Boris Vallejo story in 2, but by and large the adverts offer more enjoyment. Especially the "Man-Oh-Man! How Slim You'll look Wearing the New Commander Abdominal Supporter Belt". If only. Wonder if they're still on sale...?~HY

FIGHTIN' 5

Charlton: *21 issues 1964-1967 (28-41), 1981-1982 (42-48)*

Charlton's mid-1960s attempt at copying uniformed teams like Blackhawks and Challengers of the Unknown. The title inherited its numbering from *Space War* and the 1980s issues are all reprints. Hank Hennessy and his blue-uniformed, red-bereted task force did little to distinguish themselves in any of their lame counter-espionage adventures. Writer Joe Gill worked with a number of artists including Rocke Mastroserio and the team that became the title's mainstays Bill Montes and Ernie Bache. Eventually Peacemaker, the title's back-up in 40-41 by Gill and Pat Boyette, proved novel enough for him to be given his own title with the cancelled *Fightin' 5* as his back-up. That says it all, really.~SW

FIGHTING AMERICAN

Headline: *7 issues 1954-1955**

Harvey: *1 issue 1966*

When crippled war hero Johnny Flagg is killed by Communist agents, his timid younger brother Nelson promises to bring his murderers to justice. Military superscience transfers Nelson's consciousness into his brother's rebuilt and fortified body. With the aid of kid sidekick Speedboy the freshly minted Fighting American sets out to defeat a ludicrous array of Bolshevik villains, including Rhode Island Red, Count Yuscha Liffso, Poison Ivan and Hotsky Trotski. After creating Captain America in the 1940s, top team Joe Simon and Jack Kirby revived their patriotic superhero concept at the height of 1950s Communist baiting. Although Fighting American was a sincere Cold War warrior, Simon and Kirby's decision to play things mainly for laughs ensures this comic remains a good fun read some forty years after it was first published. The Harvey issue reprints selections from the 1950s run, plus a modicum of new material and many copies of the Marvel hardback collection were misprinted, so caveat emptor.~AL

Recommended: 3, 4

FIGHTING AMERICAN

DC: *6 issue miniseries 1994*

This is an updating of the 1950s Fighting American. A government research team combines the 'fortified' dead body of Johnny Flagg with the mind of his brother Nelson, with the aim of producing a superhero to fight communism. But by the time Fighting American emerges from the vat, the USSR is no more, and the enemies confronting our hero are all 100% American. There's the Media Circus (a 'performance art mercenary terrorist troupe'), the Gross National Product (pure, guzzling greed), and the Phoroptor

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* Available in a collected edition

(whose rose-coloured lenses produce paralysing rays of nostalgia). Obviously, you're in for a few panels of lecturing with each issue, but the touch is generally light, and the priority is entertainment.~FC
Recommended: 1, 5

FIGHTING AMERICAN

Awesome: *2 issue microseries 1997, 3 issue miniseries ('Rules of the Game') 1998, 3 issue miniseries ('Dogs of War') 1999*

Dire reconstruction of the Joe Simon and Jack Kirby classic using what looks like rejected pages from Liefeld's controversial *Captain America.* John Flag, The Fighting American, comes out of retirement just to quit and in 'Rules of the Game' he's forced out of retirement by a gaggle of old enemies plundered from the original Simon and Kirby run. He's got a shield, a dead partner replaced by a cyborg girly in a leather jacket and cycle shorts, and he's even got a thunder god and a guy in a metal suit. What he hasn't got is one single idea that hasn't been used a zillion times, so everyone concerned gives up and turns the character over to Jim Starlin and Steven Platt to begin again, again. Where are the lawyers when you really need 'em? Pitiful stuff.~WW

FILIBUSTING COMICS

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1995*

Pastiche of Understanding Comics by Dylan Sisson that is very funny at times. In the end, though, there's not an awful lot to parody and it runs out of steam well before the twenty-four pages have elapsed.~WJ

THE FILTH

DC/Vertigo: *5 issues + 2002 to date*

For all the hoopla that preceded this title, there's very much a feeling of Grant Morrison treading water, throwing in more hollow terminology and ladling on the sex to disguise the fact. Of course, even coasting, Morrison's prodigious imagination tops most other comic writers at their best. The Filth starts with an amnesiac Ned Slade, being very reluctantly retrieved from down time in a suburban identity created for him. He is an officer of The Hand, an organisation involved with paranormal cleansing of intrusions from worlds beyond most of humanity's imagination. In other words, a sort of surreal Ghostbusters. If Morrison is so far a victim of his track record, he breaks it in another respect. Throughout his pre-*X-Men* career he's been burdened with artists not only incapable of conveying the nuances of his scripts, but the likes of Chas Truog, Richard Case and, to a lesser extent, Howard Porter, couldn't even master the basics of drawing stories. Here Chris Weston and Gary Erskine are relishing the chance to step away from their previous reputations, producing detailed sleazy pages. Less than halfway through a planned 13 issue series, Morrison can still turn all expectations around, and it wouldn't be the first time.~FP

FILTHY HABITS

Aeon: *One-shot 1994, 4 issues 1996-1997*

Clay is an appalling specimen. Abrasive, misogynistic, and self-absorbed he's irredeemably old lad, with little appeal. He also manages to bring out his acquaintances' less endearing qualities to varying degrees. The aim is comedy, but the one-shot falls completely flat and is best ignored. Two years on and artist Eric Jones has refined his style into an appealing fusion of Roger Langridge and Ed Brubaker while Landry Quinn Walker's scripts are altogether sharper. The first issue has Clay on the rampage in search of a desired record, but the best story spreads over 3 and 4 as the cast is sometimes moved beyond caricature when Elmo and Diane have an unpredictable parting of the ways.~FP
Recommended: 3-4

THE FINAL NIGHT

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1996**

The year's big crossover, suspensefully written by Karl Kesel and smoothly drawn by Stuart Immonen. An entity known as the Sun-Eater heads for earth and puts out its sun. With Superman's powers depleted by lack of solar energy, the rest of Earth's heroes race against time to cope with the panicked population and try to devise a means of reigniting the sun. Green Lantern, Parallax, Lex Luthor, Superman, Brainiac 5 and Ferro are the major players in what is a better than usual annual uniting of DC's heroes. The effects spill over into most of DC's regular superhero titles and leave Superman powerless in his own titles for several issues.~NF

FINALS

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1999*

Unusual campus chaos satire featuring a sorority cult, armed hold-ups, a time machine, nuclear war and "extreme cinema verite", written by Will Pfeifer. No *Dr Strangelove* but not as dull as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* by any means. One even gets used to the hideous art and colouring by Jill Thompson and Rick Taylor.~GK

FINDER

Lightspeed Press: *28 issues + 1996 to date*

Carla Speed McNeil crafts a compelling science fiction saga, ostensibly following the enigmatic Finder, an artefact hunter in a post-apocalyptic world where humanity, and various alien races, live in huge city-domes. It's all simply a vehicle for an engaging series of explorations of personalities and the technologies that increasingly impinge upon them. 1-14* comprise one long story as the charismatic Finder explores his devastated world, eking out a living and getting closer to the secret of his seeming imperviousness to harm. With the next arc ('King of Cats') and later stories, the settings expand and even the lead character is off-stage for issues at a time, but the strong narrative and increasingly impressive drawing continue to captivate. A treasure of good old fashioned comic storytelling.~WW
Recommended: 1-5, 15-19, 23-24

A FINE MESS

Alternative Comics: *1 issue + 2002 to date*

'Aranda's Coat' is a tale of rivalry between two teachers over the greater reality of a coat or its picture. In 'Night of the Grossinator', Guard Tindell, has a night out getting drunk, also acting as a conspiratorial narrator and commentator on events. The 'Exercises in Style' are eight single-pages all describing the same event in different ways e.g. as a monologue, subjectively, as a template, as a photo comic, as dailies in a newspaper strip. Based on the work of Raymond Queneau, the aim is to produce as many variants as possible on a simple one-page non-story, with others to appear in later issues. Matt Madden's formal exercises seem very impersonal and detached. They may raise a smile at their cleverness, but don't engage the heart.~NF

FINN

Fleetway/Quality: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

Pat Mills throws up a hodge-podge of old Earth legends, witchcraft and nasty, nasty corporations, occasionally punctuating it with a couple of pages of preaching. Earth activist Finn is rather pointless in the middle of it all. The whole series is painted, very badly in places, and with a minimum of background throughout. Not a career highlight for anyone involved.~WJ

FIRE

Caliber: *2 issue microseries 1994**

This is the point at which it began to gel for Brian Michael Bendis and his noir crime stories. Here the inclusion of photographic collage, heavy black panels and oddly shadowed figures transformed from seemingly whimsical irritants to serving the text. That text is narrative heavy, and stretches a little mystery a long way, but Bendis successfully evokes a mood. That he would progress to more complex stories shouldn't mean *Fire* is completely irrelevant. Bendis significantly retouched the pages for the Image collected edition, recognising the amateur quality of the lettering, and re-writing as he corrected the deficiency. He also restored the ending as originally conceived, making for a better (and more easily located) work.~WJ

FIRE FROM HEAVEN

Image/WildStorm: *2 issues 1996*

Although only two issues were actually titled *Fire From Heaven*, the story of the same name runs through Backlash 19-20, *Deathblow* 26-28, *Gen*^{13} 10-11, *Sigma* 1-3, *Stormwatch* 35-36, *Sword Of Damocles* 1-2, Wetworks 16-17, and *WildC.A.T.S* 29-30. Far reaching in its implications for the titles it touched and their connected continuity, these two issues are the first chapter (although there are preludes) and penultimate chapter (the tale concludes in Deathblow 28). Considering the amount of creators involved in what is essentially one continued story incorporating dozens of characters, the entirety is quite an achievement, although occasional chapters fall flat. Neither of these issues ranks among the best chapters. Both written by Alan Moore, the second issue is superior by virtue of a few good jokes and Jim Lee's art scoring over Ryan Benjamin's uneven quality in the first issue.~WJ

FIRE TEAM

Aircel: *6 issue miniseries 1990-1991*

Vietnamese Grandfather Nguyen Van Tan runs a grocery store in an impoverished part of the Big City with his grandson Cam McMurphy. When local skinheads try to force them out as part of a mob-backed land grab Cam is saved from death by soldiers, old friends of his grandfather. The last time Nguyen saw them, however, they had all just died helping baby Cam escape in the last helicopter out of the jungle. The dead soldiers of the Fire Team swiftly polish off the thugs before taking Cam on their real mission, which is to rescue Cam's missing Dad and liberate Vietnam. Dubious nonsense from the normally competent Don Lomax.~WW

FIREARM

Malibu: *19 issues (0-18) 1993-1995, 30 minute video 1993, 6 issue miniseries (Codename: Firearm 0-5) 1995*

James Robinson scripts the adventures of British expatriate and ex-spy Alec Swan who ekes out a living as a private eye in a California brimming with Ultrahumans. With a reputation for mayhem and a supergun from his covert days he specialises, albeit reluctantly, in cases involving the paranormal. After destroying a ring of cannibal millionaire Ultras he stumbles through a sequence of crossovers ('Breakthrough', 'Search For Prime') and filler tales until he faces his ultimate foe in 'The Rafferty Saga' as a deranged soldier declares war on Ultras and challenges Swan to stop him from killing them all. This occupies 13-18 and numerous crossovers in other Ultraverse publications. The series launched with an issue zero and half hour video that combined, rather jarringly and unsuccessfully, to create a complete adventure before launching into a more traditional format. From the outset the strip transcends standard action fare, blending sensitivity and tension with easy grace, especially when drawn by Cully Hamner (1-6, 9) or Gary Erskine (10).

The uninspired miniseries written by Marv Wolfman and David Quinn featured Swan's old spymasters and a new 'Codename: Firearm', with Swan himself relegated to an equally uninspired back-up strip. Despite its connection to the original series the execution is so confused and clichéd it's safer and certainly preferable, to consider it a separate entity entirely.~WW

Recommended: 1-5, 9-12, 16, 18

FIREBRAND

DC: *7 issues 1996*

Drawn by Sal Velluto, *Firebrand* has a distinctive and appealing visual style not matched by the lacklustre sub-*Knight Rider* storyline. An ex-cop was blown up hunting child abusers and has returned as an enhanced vigilante thanks to a wealthy benefactor. Brian Augustyn's script doesn't work hard enough to make the full story any more readable than it sounds in thumbnail form. Those really interested in Firebrand might want to check *JSA Secret Files* 2.~NF

FIREBREATHER

Image: *1 issue + 2003 to date*

Here's a new twist on the superhero in high school hell: he's the son of a dragon. It's wittily written by Phil Hester and well drawn by Andy Kuhn, and so far the most promising of Image's new line of superheroes.~FP

FIRESTAR

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1986*

This is an *X-Men* and *New Mutants* limited series. At thirteen, Angelica Jones starts to exhibit her high-temperature mutant power. She is immediately recruited by the evil White Queen, who spends the next few years working to make the unsuspecting Angelica into her best weapon against the X-Men. The story could have been interesting, but the delivery is plodding and repetitive – it would have been twice as good at half the length.~FC

FIRESTORM the Nuclear Man

DC: *Series one 5 issues 1978, series two 100 issues, 5 Annuals 1982-1990*

After years writing for Marvel Gerry Conway moved to DC, where *Firestorm* was the best title he produced. He followed the Marvel template in creating the character and his world. In the usual implausible comic way, high-school student Ronnie Raymond attends an anti-nuclear demo and is caught when a bomb detonates near a nuclear pile. His personality is fused with the creator of the reactor, a Professor Martin Stein, and together they become the atomic-energy being Firestorm. Raymond controlled Firestorm's body, but was directed by Stein, and he was also able to separate their bodies and return them to normal. Whenever trouble was at hand Raymond would concentrate, and no matter how far apart they were, the bodies would merge to become Firestorm. For a long while Stein had no memory of what had occurred once they separated. *Firestorm* was light superhero action drawn by Al Milgrom, with soap opera, but was cancelled before it had a chance, along with a large proportion of DC's line in 1978.

Conway persisted with Firestorm, though, writing a back-up strip in *Flash* 289-304 and inducting him into the Justice League. The second solo title was called *The Fury of Firestorm*. Solidly written by Conway and well illustrated by Pat Broderick, the formula was much the same as before, with an early plot concentrating on Professor Stein's increasing instability regarding his memory blackouts. Ronnie doesn't escape mental-anguish either, as his journalist father has some very shifty friends, and dies in 16. Never mind, though, because the next issue introduces Firehawk, a female counterpart to Firestorm, who became very popular. She was a bit less popular with Ronnie, who'd been dating her as Lorraine Reilly. Still, making the best of a bad thing Firestorm and Firehawk start dating instead. How nice it is to have a girlfriend with similar interests. Ronnie now conveniently attended the college at which Stein was teaching, making transformations a little less traumatic, although the knowledge of what was going on also helped. Penciller Rafael Kayanan arrived on 19, and Blue Devil débuted in 24's insert (and for those who really care, 6 had an insert featuring The Masters of the Universe).

Conway was still producing what is in essence a Marvel-style comic with a DC bullet on the cover. There's the emphasis on soap-opera characterisation, light superheroics and the occasional bombshell, generally resolved within five issues. The Phantom Stranger drops by in 32 for an unusual teaming of light and dark. Ronnie's college nemesis, as introduced in the first series, was Cliff Carmichael, a continuing irritating presence for our young hero. This leads to a confrontation in 40, alienating his friends. Joe Brozowksi takes over the art in 43 and there's a happy moment in 50 when Ronnie's father marries again. Just as well he didn't really die in 16 after all. There's a run-through of the Raymond family history in the first annual. Conway ends with 57, by which time, although never poor, *Firestorm*'s light tone had become very familiar and slightly stale. It required a good jolt, and that's what occurred with new writer John Ostrander.

Ostrander took a far grittier approach, and started introducing more character-based plot elements, although he continued Conway's plot for the unlucky Professor Stein, diagnosed with a brain tumour. Wanting to do something useful before he dies, he and Ronnie use Firestorm to destroy the world's nuclear weapons, which doesn't sit too kindly with the Soviet Union. In annual 5 they dispatch Pozhar to deal with him, and just to make sure, detonate a nuclear missile on the pair of them. As Firestorm and Pozhar are in contact during the detonation their matrixes merge and transform, leading to the creation of a new Firestorm. This one, though, has a personality independent of his constituent parts, and can form spontaneously, making life difficult for both, but more so for Mikhail, formerly Pozhar. During his absence his family has been arrested by the KGB, and in a stressful plot he's reliant on a group of superpowered teenagers called Soyuz to pull his fat out of the fire (Firestorm being unavailable). It all comes to a head in 73.

As the series continues Firestorm grows as an entity, and resents being used only in combat. His powers are almost limitless, and he wants a greater influence on the good of the world. 77-79 form 'The Eden Trilogy', in which Firestorm's solution to famine in Africa is to replenish the soil, creating a new garden of Eden. It may seem a glib answer to a real world tragedy, but Ostrander handles it with sensitivity, making it more than just a superhero adventure. Tom Grindberg brings his Neal Adams stylings to Firestorm from 81, but is soon replaced by Tom Mandrake with 86. Having been tinkering with Firestorm and who can form him since his début on the title, Ostrander's revelation in 85 still comes out of left field. Unfortunately the idea is taken one step too far as a battle ensues in 90-93 between Firestorm and Swamp Thing, Red Tornado and the freshly created water elemental Naiad. 100 concludes the series in satisfying fashion with still more revelations concerning Firestorm's origin.

Ostrander's issues are more inventive than Conway's, but not necessarily any better. Both were well served by their respective pencillers, and both turn in solid superhero stories. As subplots tend to continue unresolved from issue to issue, noting sample issues is difficult, but the first and fifth annuals adequately showcase the differing approaches of each writer. Anyone enjoying them is likely to enjoy most issues of *Firestorm*.~HY

FIRKIN

Knockabout: *7 issues 1989-1993*

These are collections of two-page strips that originally appeared in the soft porn magazine *Fiesta*, written by Tym Manley and drawn by Hunt Emerson. Firkin is a cat, and he provides a robust commentary on human sexual behaviour. The first few strips are rather down-to-earth, in the style of observational comedy ("Hey, lads, you know what it's like when you..."), but they steadily become more and more fantastical and extravagant, as you'd expect with Hunt Emerson involved. Throughout, the attitude to sex is well-balanced. It recognises that women as well as men have sexual fantasies, and that life feels no obligation to fulfil the fantasies of either side. This is very refreshing given the sadly misogynist track record of sex comics. Not that every strip is a gem: there's a persistent weakness in the endings, and an over reliance on fart and constipation jokes (though if that pushes your buttons...). Still, there are nice touches every few panels, regardless of the story. The best issues are 4 for the *Dan Dare* spoof and the part of the time-travelling urinal saga that takes place in the Garden of Eden, and 7 for the sexual problems of various comics heroes, the survey of methods of penis-enhancement, and the little footballers in 'Words of Fear'. You will doubtless find your own favourites. 1-4 were previously collected by Virgin Books in 1985.~FC

Recommended: 4, 7

THE FIRST

CrossGen: *25 issues + 2001 to date*

In CrossGen continuity each series plays upon its own dimensional plane with occasional brief meetings between protagonists and ancillary characters. Narrative events spark in each individual series when a protagonist gains superpowers by being given a Sigil mark by one or more mysterious strangers. The First is a kind of over-series, dealing with a group of god-like (if not godly), beings who believe themselves to be the creators of the various universes. As a pantheon they borrow heavily in character from Zeus's Olympians with a heavy helping of Jack Kirby's *New Gods* thrown in. Once a united group led by the all-powerful Altwaal, philosophical dissention leads to a plot to murder the God-King. It goes awry, and as destruction escalates a raging and heartsick Altwaal ends the conflict in the only manner he can, separating the warring factions and partitioning the universe. The First were divided into two houses kept apart and in a state of enforced détente by a tremendous energy barrier called the Eidolon Rift. Should any god cross the Rift they would lose all their power. When equilibrium is restored Altwaal is mysteriously gone leaving both houses to fester and scheme in shallow millennia of bed-hopping and family politicking in a kind of *Dynasty* for deities.

The creation of the Sigil bearers rouses the First from their indolence as their house leaders meet to discuss the rise of this unprecedented threat to their supremacy. This leads to alliances being formed and the cycle of plotting and betrayal begins again. Despite its mythic premise, this is a petty and squalid affair with bullying and whining in equal amounts, and no seeming progress or learning from mistakes for any of the "superior" beings involved. It makes for a rather tawdry soap opera on steroids, and Barbera Kesel, Bart Sears and Andy Smith are responsible for this interminable nonsense.~WW

FIRST ADVENTURES

First: *5 issues 1985-1986*

Anthology featuring Blaze Barlow (comedy detective), Whisper (Steven Grant's tale of espionage, a precursor to the Bad Girls trend) and Dynamo Joe (a manga-influenced giant robot adventure series). Each strip had some merit within its genre but only Whisper and Dynamo Joe made it to their own series.~NF

FIRST ISSUE SPECIAL

DC: *13 issues 1975-1976*

As an updated version of *Showcase*, this try-out title wasn't a great success. Only Mike Grell's *Warlord* (8) and a revived *New Gods* (13) graduated to their own titles, and neither was particularly interesting. Other issues also featured revived characters, and while Metamorpho (3) and The Creeper (drawn by his creator Steve Ditko in 7) were pleasant enough, Dr Fate (9) by Martin Pasko and Walt Simonson was absolutely outstanding. Jack Kirby updated his old Manhunter feature in 5, and also produced two new strips, the mythological Atlas (1) and the kid gang Dingbats (6). None of them neared his finest work, but all were entertaining. So were two efforts by Kirby's old partner Joe Simon, The Green Team (2) and the Outsiders (10). Both were drawn by Jerry Grandenetti and Creig Flessel, both were kid gang strips of a sort, and both were completely mad. The remaining issues starred Code Name: Assassin (11) and a new Starman (12), though neither was of any note.~DAR

Recommended: 9

THE FIRST KINGDOM

Comics and Comix: *3 issues 1974-1975*
Bud Plant: *21 issues (4-24) 1976-1986*

Written and drawn in black and white by Jack Katz, this was one of the first independent comics. The earth was laid waste by war, and many generations later, the survivors are still at the Stone Age level, hunting giant lizards and fleeing man-eating ogres, clad only in ragged loincloths. But some of the gods who live on the high towers want to see change, and they have chosen the great hunter Darkenmoor to build the first city. That is to say, it's utterly standard heroic fantasy, until 4, when some utterly standard space opera gets mixed in too. The problem is that Katz cares too much. It's perfectly perfunctory hackwork, but he finds every detail of his world fascinating, and, of course, utterly necessary to the story he's telling. If only he'd had a ruthless, soulless, commercial editor to say, "This sequence is completely irrelevant", or "This is the third time you've had Fara sold into slavery", or "These panels are so crammed with detail, I can't figure out what I'm supposed to be looking at", or "I can't tell any of your women characters apart. If you won't put clothes on them, at least show some difference in the shape of their breasts." Pruned to six issues, the ideas (and they are there) would retain their vigour, and the virtues of Katz' art would not stale with repetition. He has a striking way with landscape and monumental architecture, and with eerie rituals, such as the sequence in 1 where a god is banished to hell. The sequence turns out to be irrelevant, but it casts a spell.~FC

1ST MAN

Image: *1 issue 1997*

A light-hearted superhero romp as theology student Luke Henry is forcibly merged with Apollo, a dying alien who is carrying the last thousand minds of a dead civilisation. Almost instantly he's the target for every space warrior in the galaxy. Insubstantial nonsense.~WW

FIRST SIX PACK

First: *2 issues 1987*

Bite-sized snippet previews of First's regular publications, excerpting a maximum of five pages from each title and providing text page with background information. There's a decent Dave Dorman cover painting on the first issue, but there's no other conceivable reason for buying this now.~WJ

FISH POLICE

Fishwrap: *11 issues 1985-1987*
Comico: *1 Special 1987, 14 issues (0, 5-17) 1988-1989 (5-17), 1991 (0)*
Apple: *9 issues (18-26) 1989-1990*
Marvel: *6 issues 1992-1993*

Everyone has their fifteen minutes of fame, and for a while it looked like Fish Police would stretch theirs to several hours. Steve Moncuse's easygoing funny fish comic is exactly what the title suggests, a pleasant soap opera about crime and love set in a world of talking fish, centring around the adventures of Inspector Gill. The quirk is that Gill may be a real policeman reliving his life as a fish in his dreams. The characters are pleasing, there are plenty of quirky humorous touches and it's drawn in a clean, open style with neither too much nor too little detail. But something doesn't smell right. It's just too smooth around the edges, like a glossy dramatisation of a blockbuster, specially designed not to be too upsetting or too taxing.

Fish Police had more chances at becoming a hot title than anything else that comes to mind. Originally printed under creator Steve Moncuse's own imprint in black and white, it was picked up first by Comico, who preceded their tenure by collecting the first four stories in colour as the graphic novel *Hairballs*. They then continued reprinting the previous series in colour from 5, picking up with new stories from 12. Comico also printed a 0 issue, originally designed as a pilot issue set earlier in *Fish Police* continuity. Under Apple the series reverted to new black and white stories, and after a two-year hiatus Marvel took it up on the basis of the cartoon series' popularity, and started reprinting from the original issue 1, in colour. So if you want it, it's not hard to find the start of the story.~FJ

FISH SHTICKS

Apple: *6 issues 1992-1993*

This is an offshoot of the *Fish Police* comics, and is written by *Fish Police* creator Steve Mancuse with art by Steve Hauk. It's a world much like ours, except funnier, and with everyone turned into a fish or other aquatic lifeform. The action centres around Inspector Gill, the local bar, and the reporters at the *Fishwrap* newspaper. The stories are quietly surreal, but the star is the dialogue: fresh, funny and wonderfully human.~FC

Recommended: 1-6

FISSION CHICKEN

Fantagraphics: *4 issues 1990*
Mu Press: *One-shot (Plan Nine From Vortox) 1994*

Spewed from the pages of *Critters*, J.P. Morgan's superhero chicken stories are primarily a vehicle for parodies of everything from other superheroes through H.P. Lovecraft and *Nightmare on Elm Street* to weird UFO conspiracy theories. How on earth Fantagraphics thought the character strong enough to carry its own title is anyone's guess, although some people have a sneaking fondness for the sheer daftness of it all. The back-up strip, Duck "Bill" Platypus by Kyle Rothweiler, is much more interesting. An anarchic cross between *Pogo* and *Krazy Kat*, it's full of puns, visual and literal, political satire and surreal plots. The "Chicken of Wrath" returns for a long adventure in the one-shot, fighting old enemies the Vortoxians, "marketing experts from beyond!" The usual targets are hit about quite a bit, particularly commercialism and media manipulation.~NF

5 DUCK RUSH

Alpha Productions: *1 issue 1995*

Full comic debut from Sean Bieri reprinting some of his minicomics along with new material. Bieri's cartooning is very confident, resembling the slick style of Terry LaBan, and his stories are very funny and varied. There's the tale of a dental hygienist produced in the style of Frank Miller, unconventional superheroes Cool Jerk and Homo Gal, and a number of well-observed shorter strips. By now Bieri should have progressed to being a very recognisable name in comics, so let's hope his talent is earning him a fortune at some other artistic endeavour.~FP

Recommended

FIVE STAR SUPERHERO SPECTACULAR

DC: *One-shot 1977*

No false modesty at DC when it came to titling this anthology, but honesty in calling it *Two Star Superhero Average* probably wouldn't have helped sales. There are rather pointless solo spots for Atom, Aquaman, Green Lantern and Flash, but the Batman story is the best, concluding the plots from *Kobra*.~WJ

FLAMING CARROT

Killian Barracks: *One-shot 1981*
Aardvark-Vanaheim: *6 issues 1984-1985**
Renegade: *11 issues (7-17) 1985-1987**
Dark Horse: *14 issues (18-31) 1988-1995, 1 annual 1997, one-shot (Flaming Carrot & Reid Fleming) 2002*

The Flaming Carrot is an ordinary young man, brain-damaged after reading five thousand comics in one sitting. Putting on a giant carrot mask he patrols Iron City, his favoured mode of travel is a pogo stick, protecting it from villains like the Artless Dodger and Gonzaga. There is an element of whimsy and wish-fulfilment to all of this: when Death turns up, he and the Carrot go out for a night on the town; The Bikini Teens (super—owered bimbos) seem to exist for no other reason than to hang out with the Carrot. His friends include Uncle Billy, whose 'Jungle Woman' story is told in 18, Death and Dr Heller.

The first issues chronicle adventures from his early days as a crimefighter (2, 3). The following issues take him from the bender to end all benders (and a miraculous recovery courtesy of Dr. Heller) to a dastardly Communist Revolution, engineered by Gonzaga, who has perfected a super explosive made from the cellulite of pampered American women (5-11). Of course there are a few other heroes around, too. As a member of the Mystery Men (Screwball, The Shoveler, Captain Attack, Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, Red Rover, Mr Furious, Jackpot and Bondo-Man amongst others) the Carrot helps defeat the Vile

Brotherhood's clones of Hitler's feet (16-17). It's Screwball's pet shoelace that saves the day when Flaming Carrot teams up with the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles against Frankenstein's head (25-27). The Bikini Teens are helpful when the Carrot must defeat Don Wiskerando and his flying dead dog, who has tricked Dr Who and Star Trek fans into helping an alien invasion (19-24). When Iron City secedes from the Union and becomes a Communist state, it is a hunted Carrot who must restore order and democracy. The Annual was published over two years after the last regular issue and contains a Carrot story and a preview of the *Mystery Men* series. The Carrot meets Reid Fleming when they're both guests on the Celebrity Standoff quiz show, which pits them against the likes of Christopher Walken and Luciano Pavarotti, then sees them in a chase to capture the Vampire Lassie. Written by Burden and drawn by David Boswell (except for the Carrot himself), this is a welcome reappearance of both creators.

Burden himself describes the Carrot as a "second-string, cut-rate hero of marginal glamour and dubious powers". His powers are actually non-existent, though he has a catchphrase: "Ut!" The Flaming Carrot is only vaguely sane and if, in Iron City, the extraordinary seems ordinary, the Carrot's adventures are still a constant surprise. This is one of those odd creations that may not appeal to everyone but whose wit and inventiveness will endear itself to those who like a touch of surrealism in their comics.~NF

Recommended: 5-11, 16, 17, 19-24, 30, Annual 1

FLARE

Hero: *3 issue miniseries 1988-1989, series one 14 issues, 1 Annual, 1990-1993, series two (Flare Adventures) 12 issues 1992-1993, series three (Flare First Edition) 11 issues 1992-1993*

Like almost all of Hero Graphics' output, *Flare* was good-girl art superheroics, generally using scantily clad, impossibly proportioned heroines to make up for the lack of artistic and writing quality. At least *Flare* was more honest about its intentions than some of the other Hero titles, which tried to pass their protagonists off as straight superheroes. Here there was never any suggestion that it was intended as anything other than soft porn. *Flare Adventures* and *Flare First Edition* are largely reprint, also featuring Flare's *Champions* appearances, and *Adventurers* is a flip-comic with *Champions*.~JC

FLASH

DC: *Series one 246 issues (105-350), 1 Annual, 1 Spectacular 1959-1985, Series two 191 issues +, 13 Annuals, 2 80-Page Giants, 3 Secret Files, 2 Specials 1987 to date*

The Flash of series one is Barry Allen, actually the second Flash. His comic continues the numbering of the 1940s Flash Comics (see below) which starred the first Flash, more of whom later. As written by Robert Kanigher, then John Broome, and drawn by the team of Carmine Infantino and Joe Giella, Flash proved his popularity in Showcase 4, 8, 13 and 14. By his own title a formula is already established. It involves a gimmicky villain, superspeed thrills, the odd scientific fact thrown in, and Barry Allen being late meeting his girlfriend (and future wife) Iris West, who often refers to him as the slowest man in the world, not realising his other identity (ho ho). Variations included time travel, 'inescapable' traps, visiting other Earths and bizarre transformations. Flash's foes later became known as The Rogues Gallery (holding meetings as such) and are an essential part of the formula, devising ingenious heists and deathtraps, and almost acting out conflicts instead of actually getting stuck into them. There's little effort made to explain their abilities, nor, indeed, to explain Flash's superspeed. That he was bathed in chemicals when struck by lightning suffices, as it should, apart from a lunatic and long-ignored alternative origin in 167. For ten years *Flash* was light-hearted superheroics with excellent art, and very enjoyable as such, although a little dated now. Anyone enjoying one issue pre-175 is likely to enjoy most of them, so try one of the fine reprint giants, 160, 169, 178, 187, 196, 205 or excellent hundred-page 214 and the unnumbered hundred-page Super Spectacular. DC are also producing a continuing run of hardbound 'Archive' editions reprinting the earlier stories, and the1990s *The Greatest Flash Stories Ever Told* provides a fine sample of Flash in all incarnations. 205 and 214 also contain stories of the 1940s Flash produced during that decade, but never previously printed. Particular mention should be made of 'Flash of Two Worlds' in 123. As a story it's no better or worse than average, but its importance lies in the reintroduction of the 1940s Flash, now established as living on Earth Two, a dimension separated from Earth One and accessible to the Flash if he vibrated at a certain frequency. Outstanding at the time, ironically it began the alleged complication of the worlds occupied by DC's superheroes, precipitating *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, in which Barry Allen was killed.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were not happy times for *Flash*. With 174 Infantino departed, to be replaced by Ross Andru, who, while technically fine, lacks Infantino's style and individuality. Irv Novick from 200 is more suitable. He was initially paired with Robert Kanigher, whose human-interest stories were too great a contrast to what had come before, eschewing the popular villains in favour of one-off challenges. For his best see 206, in which two people are given a second chance at life. Cary Bates became permanent writer with 210, having contributed a bizarre story in 179. He went on to be the longest-running creator on a title noteworthy for long runs. Bates reverted to old-style *Flash* stories with the accent on superspeed action and cleverly plotted battles of wits between Flash and his foes, with characterisation an afterthought. He was soon managing this as well as, if not better than Broome, and with few exceptions this remained the pattern until 275. 254-256 form a fine sample of the Bates/Novick issues, with plenty of villains and a good plot. The landmark Green Lantern and Green Arrow pairing is concluded in 217-219 (art by Neal Adams), with GL as back-up feature until 246. Firestorm occupied the back-up slot in 289-304, Dr Fate was there in 305-313, and The Creeper was in 318-323, meaning Flash was rarely allocated the full page-count in his own title. 275 is a pivotal issue as The Reverse Flash (also known as Professor Zoom!) murders Iris Allen. The story injected a dose of realism into the Flash's world, and Cary Bates proved himself as adept with the introduction of continuity and characterisation as he had been with simpler stuff. Don Heck's pencils are surprisingly good, tiding the series through until the return of Infantino with 296, on a fine offbeat story. Infantino's art had become more stylised since his earlier days, and may disappoint purists, but he had lost none of his dynamism or storytelling skills. The excellent 300 has a paralysed Barry Allen convinced his career is a delusional fantasy, but despite the death of Iris Flash remained essentially light-hearted. That changed with 324, in which the Reverse Flash returns, and in order to stop him from murdering again Flash accidentally kills him. Arrested for manslaughter, he has to lose his civilian identity, and there's little respite from a depressing storyline working its way to series one's final issue. Although successful in maintaining suspense, the story is over extended, but nearing the conclusion with Flash's trial from 340 it improves, with an extraordinary amount of well-conceived twists and red herrings, including the return of a character believed dead, but, credit to Bates, not the obvious selection. Bates, the old sap, gives everyone a better ending than could have been hoped for, which is just as well, because in Crisis 8 Flash dies.

With Barry Allen dead, his mantle was inherited by Wally West. Beginning the second series, writer Mike Baron had a difficult task. Flash had been surplus to requirements as out of step with the times, yet his successor was the long-time kid sidekick wearing the same costume. Baron has a brave stab at differentiating them. Reasoning that superspeed burns calories and energy at an excessive rate, they obviously had to be replaced at an equally excessive rate, therefore Flash needed vast amounts of sleep and food. Never mind the cost, though, because he also won the lottery. And whereas Allen almost introduced the term Mr

Nice Guy, Baron's West is a selfish dilettante and nowhere near as fast. Both characteristics alter with time. Baron doesn't resort to using the old supervillains either, but it's all just window-dressing because once West is costumed there's little difference between the new *Flash* and the old. The best samples are 9-11, introducing the intriguing Chunk and the transition between pencillers Jackson Guice and Mike Collins.

By the time *Flash* graduated to TV William Messner Loebs had been writing the comic for almost two years, arriving with penciller Greg LaRoque on 15. It's a smooth changeover. Loebs emphasises West's individuality and confidently returns the Rogues Gallery in a very funny 19. That's followed by a heavy-handed but right-minded story about the destitute involving another rogue, and an encounter with Fidel Castro in 21 and 22. The diversity sums up Loebs' tenure. He turns out consistently grabbing stories, but they could be about anyone. His only interest in superspeed is abstract, exemplified by 30's cinema assassination attempt or 54's story of how it can be used to escape a plane. For a sample try 53, with a guest appearance from Superman, an interesting revelation from reformed villain Pied Piper, and Wally at his foot-in-mouth best.

62 starts four issues scrutinising Wally's first year as a superhero, later collected as 'Born To Run'. It also premieres Mark Waid's writing. Waid's greatest professional asset is an ability to concoct plots that suck the reader in and pull them along to a generally well-conceived conclusion. Even secure in the knowledge that the status quo isn't going to be changed, at least not in the long term, Waid's plots can make compulsive reading, and it's usually his longer stories that are the most compelling. His first prolonged effort begins with the surprise return of Barry Allen in 73, with the circumstances and mystery agonisingly prolonged until 79*. Waid pulls strings like a puppet master, and comes through with a well-planned pay-off. That's the final issue for penciller Greg LaRoque, not everyone's favourite but, like Novick on the first series, always solid and reliable. 'Terminal Velocity' in 95-100* investigates the intricacies of speed and why Barry Allen was faster and more controlled than Wally West. Impulse, debuted in 92, and Max Mercury who'd been introduced/revived during the Barry Allen story, both play a part in discovering a nebulous energy named the speed force that they all utilise, some with greater control than others. 'Dead Heat' (108-111* and *Impulse* 10-11) continues the theme with a less benevolent entity tapping the speed force. Flash lost in time has a masterful conclusion in 118, but the long-awaited 'Chain Lightning' (145-150) is overcrowded with all previously seen speedsters and more besides. By this time Brian Augustyn is credited as co-writer, and while there's a neat twist for continuity buffs in 150 the tale drags overall. That's not the problem with Waid and Augustyn's final lengthy tale in 152-159, where all the stops are pulled out to provide plenty of twists. Wally West goes missing as a mystery Flash turns up. His identity and agenda, and Wally's fate, are the focuses of the story, which manages to feature a large cast over several time zones without ever seeming crowded or confused. Of Waid's shorter efforts, 87's cynical spirit-of-Christmas story stands out, as does 127-129 in which some deceased villains are revived in deadly fashion. The best of them, though, is 120-121 in which political campaigning intrudes into the Flash's life. There's mystery, villains and a neat twist, making these the issues to sample if you want to investigate Waid's *Flash*. The remainder of his work is always decently plotted and readable, and thus no better or worse than those of his predecessors. The partnership of Grant Morrison and Mark Millar write 131-142, and their tenure is also immensely readable. There's an admirable variety in the stories they tell from a wonderful day in the life of the 1940s Flash (134) to a desperate race organised by all-powerful aliens in 136-138. 133 is of note for a fine Mirror Master appearance.

164 marks the debut of Brian Bolland for a characteristically fine run of striking cover images and Geoff Johns as writer. Johns plays down the speed force aspect of the stories that had come to dominate, and introduces elements reminiscent of the off-kilter early 1970s *Flash*, working them in far more successfully, although it gives the series a harder tone. It's the arrival of Scott Kolins as artist with 170 that sees Johns' run begin to shine. Utilising the most individual style seen on the Flash since latter-day Infantino, in combination with the muted colouring of James Sinclair, Kolins is the best regular artist on the *Flash* since, well, latter-day Infantino. Their first stories to 176, including a savage Weather Wizard in 174-175 are collected. Johns believes in keeping subplots smouldering for a while, which can irritate rather than tantalise, but has a fresh view on well-used characters, particularly the classic villains, whose backgrounds he fleshes out. There's a superb look at Captain Cold in 182 and the reformed Pied Piper is spotlighted in 190, but Johns is far from entirely reliant on the past and his deadlier Rogues Gallery in 184-188 is particularly menacing. If you don't enjoy Johns and Kolins' treatment of Grodd in 178, their *Flash* is probably not for you.

Over the years, in both incarnations, *Flash* has been a very good superhero title. The small quantity of recommended issues is testament to the consistency achieved, with few issues managing to stand out above the general run. Of the various annuals, specials and spectaculars, annual 3 sees William Messner Loebs having fun with Chunk, 5 and 10 are of note for the early artwork of Travis Charest and John Cassaday respectively, while 7 provides the best story, giving Flash a problem he can't outrun. The 80-page Giants have a lot of talented creators producing okay material without managing anything particularly memorable.~FP

Recommended: Series one 214, 219, 296, 300, 308, 309, 314-320, 345-350, series two 19, 22, 30, 33, 53, 74, 76, 78, 79, 87, 90, 91, 97, 108, 110-112, 118, 120-121, 133, 134, 156-158, 175-176, 178, 182-188

FLASH Miniseries and one-shots

DC: *One-shot (Flash + Nightwing) 1997, Graphic Novel (The Life Story of the Flash) 1997, 3 issue miniseries (Flashpoint) 2000, one-shot ('Iron Heights') 2001, one-shot ('Time Flies') 2002*

In *Flash Plus...* Wally West and Dick Grayson's annual vacation is interrupted when they stumble upon a murder mystery-cum-alien invasion. It's excellent superhero shenanigans from Mark Waid, Bryan Augustyn and Eduardo Barreto. *The Life Story* is ostensibly the career of the Silver Age Flash as related by his widow. In actuality it's a slick re-tooling of the Barry Allen character to fine-tune the current continuity courtesy of writers Mark Waid and Bryan Augustyn and artists Gil Kane, Joe Staton and Tom Palmer, told in a combination of comics and prose. A comfortable read. Iron Heights is the maximum security prison that most of the Wally West Flash villains are sent to. When a deadly plague erupts there the superfast hero has to break in to save the day. Naturally all is not as it seems and the events here are merely the prelude to a major storyline in the Flash's regular comic. It's entertaining enough but needlessly over-packaged. In 'Time Flies' John Rozum and Seth Fisher have Wally chase a 1950s test pilot through the time stream in a race to save creation. The intriguing plot centres on the discovery that the jet is causing time itself to speed up and Flash must reverse the process or the universe will die of old age before tea-time. Whimsical but entertaining in *Flashpoint*. Pat McGreal and Norm Breyfogle use the Elseworlds banner to explore a world where Barry Allen was crippled in a suspicious accident, and can only help the world as a wheelchair bound scientist. Overblown and histrionic in places, it quickly devolves into yet another moribund conspiracy theory story, but the art is lovely.~WW

Recommended: *The Lifestory of the Flash*

FLASH COMICS

DC: *104 issues 1940-1949*

Most superhero anthology comics of the 1940s took time to build up their 'cast', starting off with one major feature, and developing the rest of the line-up from there. Not so *Flash Comics*, which started strongly with three long-running heroes still extant in some form more than sixty years later. First, of course, was the titular hero the Flash. Jay Garrick, an indolent university student, inhales hard water fumes during one of those experiments-gone-wrong beloved of comics writers, and gains superhuman speed as a result. Created by Gardner Fox, the purity of the super-speed concept resonated with young readers; Superman was, after all, a little beyond the ability of most kids to really empathise with, but everyone could imagine the fun to be had if you could run really fast! The appeal of the concept carried the series despite the leaden and pedestrian art in its early years, first by Harry Lampert, then by E.E. Hibbard. Both gentlemen were perfectly workmanlike, but wooden and stolid in execution, the antithesis of what a speedster needed. The plots, however, were lively and imaginative, and the Flash's girlfriend, Joan Williams, a cut above the average comic-book token chick. Fully in Jay's confidence from the beginning, there was no Lois Lane nonsense of trying to discover his secrets, and she was much more an equal partner, showing courage and initiative throughout the series' run.

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* Available in a collected edition

The other major player was another Gardner Fox creation, Hawkman. Carter Hall, wealthy collector of weapons, has his ancient memories unleashed by a curious artifact, and discovers he is the reincarnation of the ancient Egyptian Prince Khufu. Using his invention of an anti-gravity metal, and clad as the Hawk-God, Anubis, he thwarts the reincarnation of his ancient enemy, handily bumping into the modern avatar of his old lady love, Shiera, in the same 12 pages. Some plot strands are heavily borrowed from the then-popular Mummy movies, but the result is an enjoyable romp, and Denis Neville's airy artwork suits very well. Fox obviously preferred mature romantic interests, as there was never any question of Shiera not knowing Carter/Hawkman's identity; in fact, she joined him as Hawkgirl from 24, one of the first super-heroines. Admittedly she wasn't very good at it at first, but she improved. From 3, the art on Hawkman was by Sheldon Moldoff, who remained until 61. Notoriously 'influenced' by Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon*, Moldoff nevertheless gave the strip a richness and depth all its own, with a dark, menacing feel to the environs.

The third long-running strip was John Wentworth and Stan Asch's Johnny Thunder, or Johnny Thunderbolt, as he was often known at first. A Seventh Son, born at 7 a.m. on the 7th of July, 1917, John L. Thunder is heir to a great magic power, command of the Badhnisian Thunderbolt, which are unleashed when he is seven years old. Unfortunately, Johnny's naïveté and ineptness prevent him using these powers to any great effect, and he stumbles across his magic word Cei-U, which sounds like "Say, you", only by purest accident. A very slight concept, but well-meaning everyman Johnny struck a responsive chord with the readers (he was, despite his power, someone they could feel superior to) and had a long run until 92, when the Black Canary, of whom more later, hijacked his series.

Filling out the first issue were crusading reporter Cliff Cornwall, the Flash Picture Novels (by Minute Movies' Ed Wheelan), and the Whip, aka Rod Gaynor, an Anglo playboy who dressed like Zorro, and flagellated his enemies rather than using a sword. Cornwall and the Picture novels were early casualties, but the Whip enjoyed a healthy 55 issue run, but his adventures in modern-day South America are largely forgotten now.

The King, a Shadow-like gentleman crime fighter, ran in 3-41, while the Ghost Patrol, poltergeist adventurers (think 'dead Blackhawks'), enjoyed a lengthy career from 29 to the final issue. The Atom was a successful transfer from *All-American Comics* from 80 to the final issue, but other than that, the most significant change in the line-up was when Johnny Thunder met a new nemesis, shapely jewel thief the Black Canary. She became so popular with the readers that eventually she was revealed only to have been stealing from criminals in a Robin Hood manner. Thus exonerated, she was given the feature in her own right after co-starring with Johnny for several issues. She was also given a new love interest, private eye Larry Lance, and Johnny departed, an ignominious fate for one of *Flash*'s founders.

The two major strips, meanwhile, had been undergoing improvement. From 1946 onwards, the Flash's art had been handled primarily by Carmine Infantino or Lee Elias, with occasional incursions by Joe Kubert, all skilful and dynamic artists who at last made the strip come alive with movement and velocity it had previously been lacking. New villains, also, had livened up the series; the Thinker, the Fiddler, and especially the Thorn, a schizophrenic harridan in a bikini top and mini-skirt whose alter-ego, the Rose, was unaware of her 'sister's' wrong-doing. The Thorn made such an impact that the artists were subsequently ordered to tone down her sexy appearance and put her in a more sedate blouse and jodhpurs ensemble.

Hawkman, too, had been changing. From 62, Joe Kubert had been the primary artist, and while Moldoff's menacing, enclosed panels had given the strip a great claustrophobic atmosphere, Kubert's mastery of layout and composition unlocked the series and let it stretch. More than anything else in his early career, Kubert seemed to be having fun with the possibilities of Hawkman.

Despite the presence, by 1948, of five high-quality features, *Flash Comics* became a victim of the first heroic slump. The post-war years saw readers turn away from superheroes and towards western, crime or comedy titles. Not even the combined powers of the Flash, Hawkman, Atom, the Black Canary and the Ghost Patrol could stem this tide, and the series was cancelled (rather abruptly, as at least two full issues are believed to have been prepared but unpublished) with 104. The Flash remained a vivid memory in many readers' minds, though, and it isn't surprising that years later, his was the first series chosen to be revived.~HS

FLASH GORDON

Nostalgia Press: *One-shot ('In the Ice Kingdom of Mongo') 1967, one-shot ('Into the Water Kingdom of Mongo') 1971*
Kitchen Sink: *6 volumes 1986 (1), 1989-1994 (2-6)*
Kitchen Sink: *2 volumes 1992 ('The Dailies')*

This is the classic science-fiction adventure mapped in choice sequences from the 1930s to the 1950s. In 1934 'Flash' Gordon is a "renowned polo player and Yale graduate" who, whilst resisting an alien invasion, is whisked off to the planet Mongo along with his girlfriend Dale Arden and colleague Doctor Hans Zarkov. Mongo is ruled by the evil warlord Ming the Merciless, and every Sunday for the next seven and a half years Flash and his friends became key elements in a growing resistance movement against his regime. Along the way they met Ming's slinky daughter Aura, her husband Prince Barin of Arboria, Queen Fria of the Ice Kingdom, Vultan leader of the Hawk-Men and Undina who ruled the underwater regions of Mongo. June 1941's liberation of Mongo was followed by a brief return to Earth but it wasn't long before the three adventurers were back on Mongo fighting a new tyrant named Brazor whilst trying to deal with the intrigues of Queen Desira of Tropica. The influence of this feature on the comics of the 1930s and 1940s is enormous. Just as Hawkman was inspired by Vultan's winged soldiers and many underwater strips took the sequences with Undina as their style guide, so many professionals were influenced by the elegant artwork of Alex Raymond (quite apart from all the tracings and swipes). The daily strip follows a completely different adventure on Mongo and is slightly hampered by having to continue from tier to daily tier. The earliest pages date from 1934, reprinted in the second Kitchen Sink book. Don Moore scripted for creator Raymond from early on, often playing up Dale's jealousy of the other women Flash encounters. Whilst maintaining some restraint, it's definitely not written with nine year olds in mind. Each Kitchen Sink volume contains nearly two years worth of Sunday pages. In the first two books a reader can watch Raymond's already accomplished style gradually mature. 3 features the famous ice and underwater sequences, as well as Flash appearing to die three times, and 4 continues the rebellion on Mongo to its conclusion and features the Hawkmen. In 5's splashdown to Earth and 6's return to Mongo there's a discernible drop in enthusiasm. Raymond joined the Marines in 1944, leaving the strip for good, the final story being completed by his assistant Austin Briggs. The Nostalgia Press books are shorter, and also feature material printed in Kitchen Sink volume three. The two volumes of Flash Gordon Dailies start at the beginning with May 1940, running to June 1944 and were all the work of Moore working mainly with Briggs, himself a top illustrator and a key collaborator with Raymond. The first Kitchen Sink collection was the revival of the daily strip in the 1950s, subcontracted by artist Dan Barry to writer/editor Harvey Kurtzman. Frank Frazetta, Jack Davis and Al Williamson among others pencilled the panels before they were passed back to Dan for his distinctive finish (on which his brother Seymour assisted). These strips have a homogenised science-fiction approach to Flash's heroics: more modern, but with little of the fantasy and romance that made the 1930s feature so memorable. There isn't a better word than 'classic' for the mid to late 1930s sequences.~SW

Recommended: Volume 3 ('The Tides Of Battle')

FLASH GORDON

King: *11 issues 1966-1967*

Based on the famous newspaper strip created in 1934 by Alex Raymond. 'Flash' Gordon, a college polo player, is thrust into the middle of warring factions on the planet Mongo after thwarting an attempted invasion of Earth by Mongo's ruler Ming The Merciless. He is accompanied on his adventures by his girlfriend Dale Arden and scientific genius Doctor Zarkoff. If this sounds hackneyed it's worth bearing in mind that this is the romantic fantasy that virtually everyone since has copied from. It's a sourcework with the gravitas to command considerable respect for an original formula that has survived 58 years.

There was real excitement to be found in King's *Flash Gordon*, and these issues remain some of the finest examples of comics craftsmanship produced in the 1960s. Flash received a new lease of life from artist Al Williamson, in extremely Raymondesque mode, and writer Archie Goodwin in 1 and 3-5. Goodwin and Williamson were succeeded on the title by Larry Ivie and veteran artist Reed Crandall, who also produced excellent comics (6, 8 & 11). Somehow 2's cover depicts the story running in the back of The Phantom, and the contents were drawn by the less exciting Frank Bolle, whilst the balance of issues ran re-sized reprints by Raymond and the then current Sunday newspaper strip artist Mac Raboy. As well as launching Flash in his own title King ran him as a back-up feature in The Phantom 18-20, lovingly drawn by Wally Wood & Gil Kane, while Flash's title hosted Mandrake and Secret Agent X9 back-up strips.~SW

Recommended: 1, 3, 4, 5

FLASH GORDON

Charlton: *7 issues (12-18) 1969-1970*

When Charlton licensed several of King's characters there was some classy inventory material left over from 1967 by Reed Crandall (12). There were also new stories by Jeff Jones (13) and Mike Kaluta (a filler in 18). The new adventures of Flash, Dale and Dr.Zarkoff were by Joe Gill and Pat Boyette. This was a period when Boyette was experimenting with diagonal page divisions, which didn't help Gill's reverent but pedestrian scripts. The usual poor colouring, printing and paper quality just added further hindrance to any real enjoyment one might get.~SW

FLASH GORDON

Gold Key: *One-shot 1965, 9 issues (19-27) 1978-1980*
Whitman: *10 issues (28-37) 1980-1982*

Gold Key reprinted a late 1940s strip from Dell's Four Color in 1965 as a one-off before the King Comics issues appeared the following year. They revived Flash Gordon in 1978 continuing the numbering from Charlton's issues, and the early scripts were by John Warner with fine, Raymond-influenced artwork by Carlos Garzon. Sadly, by the time the publisher's name had changed to Whitman Flash was being drawn by the less-spectacular Frank Bolle once again. 31-33 featured an excellent adaptation of the 1980 Dino DeLaurentis movie written by Bruce Jones and drawn by Al Williamson, assisted by Dan Green. This story appeared in hardback collections in Europe. The title finally winked out when Whitman ceased publishing in 1982.~SW

Recommended: 31-33

FLASH GORDON

DC: *9 issues 1988-1989*

This is a retelling of the veteran science-fiction story of football star Flash Gordon versus Ming the Merciless. At four issues, it might just have worked, at least as nostalgia, but there's no justification for dragging it out to nine. The only tiny spark of interest is the fact that this Flash Gordon is in his forties, and has moments of bitterness as he looks back at his sporting career. This idea is used well at the end, but not well enough to repay the effort of reading.~FC

FLASH GORDON

Marvel: *2 issues 1995*

One of the medium's finest draughtsmen, Al Williamson, is near the top of his form on the character created by Alex Raymond, who was so influential on Williamson's romantic style. For this classic space opera Mark Schultz wrote traditional characterisations of all the leading players, such as Emperor Ming and Dr Zarkov. It's well coloured and exceptionally well printed, too. An old-fashioned bit of escapism, perhaps, but of top-drawer quality. It's a treasure not to be overlooked.~GK

Recommended: 1-2

FLAXEN

Dark Horse: *1 issue 1992*
Caliber: *1 issue ('Alter Ego') 1995*

Flaxen is the true-life secret identity of a 'supermodel' who, during the 1990s was the flesh and blood 'mascot' of the Golden Apple Comics Store, making promotional convention appearances galore. The Dark Horse issue, behind a rather lovely Steve Rude cover, features the tale (courtesy of Mark Evanier and Richard Howell) of how plain, dumpy nurse Susie Owens is transformed into the superheroine Flaxen. This would be more inspirational if the photographic evidence submitted by Ms. Owens did not, in fact, suggest that she had transformed herself from a competent, attractive, healthy professional person to an anorexic parody of womanhood with the flat dead eyes of a serial killer. The Caliber issue is bog-standard heroics, indifferently told, notable only for the involvement of Brian Bendis, the 'hot ticket' writer of the late 1990s. It's reassuring to know even he has some skeletons in his closet.~HS

FLEENER

Zongo: *3 issues 1996-1997*

Mary Fleener moves from the slice-of-life, adults-only emphasis of her previous series, *Slutburger*, to more whimsical subjects in this general-audience series. Animated tiki gods, sentient canapés (who, disturbingly, run a restaurant), and grotesquely distorted hillbillies are the stars of the three issues, still drawn in Fleener's distinctive, frenzied pseudo-cubism.~HS

FLESH:The Legend of Shamana

Fleetway/Quality: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

Reprint from *2000AD* wherein the Time-To-Time corporation sends freelance stockmen into pre-history to harvest dinosaurs for meat. In this lacklustre tale the harried reptiles resistance is led by a rebel human woman. Dumb as it sounds.~WW

FLESH & BONES featuring Dalgoda

Fantagraphics: *4 issue miniseries 1986*

Flesh & Bones continues where Dalgoda's hastily truncated story-line ends. The cute canine spacer of the title is on his way towards the wreckage of his home planet in a fleet that's been hastily cobbled together by an Earth government not completely convinced they should help their doggy allies out, even if it increases the chance that they won't suffer the same fate at the hands of the mysterious and violent Nimp.

The action comes thick and fast, punctuated by lovely character touches, as Dal fights to keep his leadership and his sanity. Highly recommended if you're more interested in reading about people (albeit some with bushy tails and wet noses) than the costumes they wear.~FJ
Recommended: 1-4

FLESH-COLORED HORROR
ComicsOne: *1 Volume 2001*

Part of the Junji Ito *Horror Comics Collection*, this contains six tales that succeed admirably in unsettling the reader. Ito's scenarios are apparently commonplace, a couple's break-up, a murder, a boy's bad behaviour in kindergarten, but readers and characters are then drawn into weird, often supernatural situations with some genuinely creepy denouements. All of this is aided by Ito's simple yet realistic artwork which picks out the horror in all its detail.~NF
Recommended

FLESH CRAWLERS
Kitchen Sink: *3 issue miniseries 1993-1995*

An alien-attacks-small-town script that would have been rejected by 1950s B-movie makers as too pedestrian combined with fanzine quality art doesn't make for the usual Kitchen Sink quality package. All the more remarkably, there was a seventeen-month gap between first and second issues, yet the series was still completed. One can only assume that pressure was brought to bear.~FP

FLEX MENTALLO
DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1996*

Flex Mentallo has all the hallmarks of a classic Grant Morrison script: a slightly ludicrous hero, lots of referential bits and a soupçon of surrealism. As part of his new, uncynical take on superheroes he makes Flex a big-hearted muscleman slightly (and amusingly) out of his depth in a world of nasty villains. Morrison effectively contrasts his character's happy-go-lucky attitude to life and adventuring with the realisation that there are problems a good right hook can't solve. The series is notable for bringing Frank Quitely (think about it) to a wider US audience. Not only is his artwork breathtakingly detailed, it's also beautifully composed – his handling of perspective in crowd scenes makes you want to weep. Rarely do you see action storytelling and such beautiful drawing so effectively balanced. Sadly, complaints from Charles Atlas' company mean this is never likely to be reprinted.~FJ
Recommended: 1-4

FLINCH
DC/Vertigo: *16 issues 1999-2001*

Given the number and quality of the different writers and artists at work on this horror anthology, there ought to be something for everyone. In fact, few individual issues meet expectations. There are three stories to an issue, and there's usually some good artwork to attract the casual reader. Amongst the artists are: Jim Lee (1), Richard Corben (1), Frank Quitely (1, 12), Kelley Jones (3), Kent Williams (4), Phillip Hester (6), Dave Taylor (9, 11), Danijel Zezelj (10, 16), David Lloyd (10), Tim Truman (13), Bernie Wrightson inked by Tim Bradstreet (14), Ted McKeever (14), the Pander Brothers (15) and Philip Bond (16). Amongst the writers are: Bruce Jones (1, 4, 9, 12, 14), Scott Cunningham (3, 12) and Joe R. Lansdale (5, 13). Individual stories worthy of note are a Titanic tale by Garth Ennis and Kieron Dwyer (3), a western by Bruce Jones and Paul Gulacy (4), and an S&M obsession by Joe R. Lansdale and Bruce Timm (11). 2 features Dean Motter with Bill Sienkiewicz, Brian Azzarello (also in 10 and 13) with Eduardo Risso and Bob Fingerman with Pat McEown, while 8 matches Greg Rucka with James Romberger, Robert Rodi with Marcelo Frusin and John Kuramoto with Jon J. Muth.~NF
Recommended: 2, 8

The FLINTSTONES AND THE JETSONS
DC: *19 issues 1997-1999*

Superior funny book for children of all ages pairing the far future and the distant past in separate tales, although many issues are thematically linked. The transition of 1960s cartoon icons to 1990s sensibilities is handled well, with creators such as Mike Carlin, Bill Wray and Bernie Mireault supplementing the various creative teams. Especially noteworthy is the story in 4 where the Great Gazoo turns Fred and Barney into Wilma and Betty. Hideous but hysterical. Worth looking into.~WW
Recommended: 1, 4, 8

FLIPPER
Actus Tragicus: *2 volumes 2000*

Four members of an Israeli art collective produced a story for these flip books, one cover promoting each story. B. Kolton has no cover representation and fewer pages in total, but they're in colour and her grotesque work is in both volumes. It's really a shame the effort expended on producing a well-designed package wasn't equally applied to the material it showcased in 1. The material is slim, stretched and fails to engage with detached worldviews and unsuitable art, although it may have appeal for fans of Richard Sala's work. 2 is far better, with the art complementing the narrative rather than fighting it, and two worthwhile stories. The temperamental diva and her horrendous entourage in 'The Sisters d'Espard' by Y. Pinkus are gloriously portrayed and illustrated in ligne clair style, and while not as well drawn, Rutu's 'Bygone' neatly pulls back a family secret through coincidence. These won't have universal appeal, but all probe territory rarely investigated in English language comics.~FP

FLOATERS
Dark Horse: *5 issue miniseries 1993-1994*

There are a lot of interesting ideas concerning a future society where use of narcotics is commonplace and legal. Both script and art leave a lot to be desired, however, which is odd as this was originally conceived as a Spike Lee screenplay.~WJ

FLOOD RELIEF
Malibu: *One-shot 1994*

Fund-raiser that perhaps rather tastelessly has the Ultraverse heroes fighting a flood that actually occurred, but ascribing it to a supervillain, thereby trivialising very real problems. Buying it now won't pass money to a good cause, so don't.~FP

Adventures of THE FLY
Archie: *31 issues 1959-1965*

Teenager Tommy Troy was given a ring that when wished-upon turned him into The Fly, insect-powered superhero, once every twenty-four hours. Creators Joe Simon and Jack Kirby were recycling their 1950s character The Silver Spider, an arachnoid copy of Fawcett's *Captain Marvel*, and 1, 2 and 4 feature some of their last work as a creative team. It's alongside the likes of George Tuska, Bob Powell, Al Williamson and someone whose work was so indescribably ugly he isn't credited! 3 has the only known superhero story by Jack Davis. The stories have a definite feeling of anyone and everyone pitching in on the inking, and a teenaged Neal Adams pencilled a couple of pages of these issues. Scripter Robert Bernstein inherited the title, then Jerry Siegel as Tommy grew to become attorney Thomas Troy, and blonde film star Kim Brand became his sidekick Fly Girl (origin in 14). Their adventures became world-saving affairs and their insect powers grew in strength and diversity. The presence of Siegel may account for the introduction of Chlordane a green substance that beset the winged duo in much the same way as Kryptonite did Superman. It wasn't the only similarity the strip bore to DC's bread and butter. John Giunta briefly took over the art with 5 before they fell to John Rosenberger's attractive, romance-styled drawings. He brought a great deal of charm to the comic and more than a dash of pulchritude to Fly Girl. He was sorely missed when Giunta returned to draw the last few stories. The scripts are all inane with no exemplary issue standing out although the Comet made his first reappearance in 30's solo Fly Girl strip. After 31 the title changed to Fly Man, the publisher changed to Mighty Comics and all of a sudden John Rosenberger's rather staid interpretation of the character looked to be the definitive one.~SW

THE FLY

Red Circle: *9 issues 1983-1984*

A grown-up Thomas Troy is called upon by the mystic Turan to take up once more the mantle of the Fly. The first issue gets off to a good start artistically with work by James Sherman on the Fly and Trevor Von Eeden on the back-up Mr Justice, but the scripts, by Jack C. Harris and Chris Adams respectively, seem clichéd, if enthusiastic. Sherman's gone by 2 but one of his replacements is Steve Ditko so that's all right, even inked by Rich Buckler. Flygirl is a major part of the stories in 3 (both drawn by Ditko) and by 5, Ditko is plotting the Fly strips as well as drawing them. Ditko's work is always interesting but in this short-lived series he's not given enough time to expand the nature of the strip, nor its main characters. The back-ups are no better than average and the initial enthusiasm of the editorial team seems to evaporate quickly.~NF

Recommended: 3

The FLY

DC/!mpact: *17 issues, 1 Annual 1991-1992*

Archie Comics' superheroes were given a 1990s makeover by DC and this series from Len Strazewski, Mike Parobeck and Paul Fricke was the best of the bunch. Jason Troy designs a modern day hero as a homework assignment, but when the mysterious Mr Abin (a substitute teacher no one else can see) gives Jason a fly amulet enabling him to become his creation, the boy's life is changed forever. Charming and witty, the stories evoke a genuine sense of breakneck exuberance as The Fly tackles villains and other neophyte heroes with equal verve, and deals with real issue such as child abuse and animal rights without becoming preachy. The series ended ambiguously as the recession caused the entire line to amalgamate into *Crucible*.~WW

Recommended:1-8, 11-13, 15, 16

FLY MAN

Mighty Comics: *8 issues (32-39) 1965-1966*

Noting the success of the more jocular and realistic style of superheroes being published at Marvel, Archie reinvented themselves as Mighty Comics, remodelling their existing superheroes in the process. Thus *The Fly* became *Flyman*, and Jerry Siegel's plots became even sillier than they'd been for the previous incarnation. Attempting to mimic Marvel, Siegel picked up on the idea of guest stars, the sometimes corny humour and the bombastic dialogue, but didn't appear to understand how it slotted in alongside other elements to make readable titles. And instead of having Jack Kirby to draw his comics he had Paul Reinman, a man who hadn't let an inability to master a single basic artistic technique deter him from a career as an artist. Not bothering with trivialities such as perspective or anatomy, Reinman had plenty of time left to draw Siegel-written back-ups featuring other revamped Archie superheroes. Their skewed Marvel imitation is bizarre, and best sampled in small doses only by those already submerged in kitsch. With 40 the title was changed again, and, unbelievably, *Mighty Comics Presents* was a further plunge down into the chasm of ineptitude.~FP

FLYING COLORS 10TH ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL

Flying Colors: *One-shot 1998*

Concord comic shop *Flying Colors* celebrated a decade in business with this special. The Dan Brereton cover is the best aspect, but there's also Jeff Bonivert's Fun Boys, Jeff Nicholson's Father and Son, and Smith Brown Jones by Jon Hastings among other strips. A nice souvenir for customers, but not worth hunting down.~WJ

FLYING SAUCERS Comics

Dell: *5 issues 1967-1969*

Masquerading as 'impossible but true' tales of alien encounters, this anthology features short tales of abductions and cover-ups. The stories are pedestrian, but are illustrated by some decent artists of the mid-1960s, such as Frank Springer, Dick Giordano, Chic Stone, Sal Trapani, Sam Glanzman and Jose Delbo, and retain a peculiar period charm. Fans of X-Files will love this stuff.~WW

FOG CITY COMICS

Stampart: *3 issues 1977-1979*

This wonderful Canadian underground comic started life as a funny-animal anthology and grew into a varied collection. Contributors of the funny-animal strips in 1 include Norm Drew, Mark Newgarden and the scatologically-minded Rand Holmes, but the highpoint was George Metzger's wonderfully evocative reminiscence 'Comic Book Addict'. The remaining two issues again featured Metzger and Holmes in fine form on more traditional science-fiction material, but the comic's real star was the little known Brent Boates. From the anthropomorphic issue 1 to the stunningly drawn science fiction in 2, Boates excelled astonishingly, making his lack of strips elsewhere very regrettable.~DAR

Recommended: 1-3

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Gary Millidge: *One-shot 1985*

It doesn't really matter what a famine-relief comic contains, although the fewer politically naïve, heavy-handed satires the better. This UK effort brings together specially created strips with oddments that were clearly not done for the anthology. As you'd expect there are some highlights and some stinkers. The best contribution is Alan Moore and Bryan Talbot's 'Cold Snap', a slick tale of anthropomorphic dinosaurs that starts "It was early evening in the late Cretaceous..." The point's not new but the broad parody of US consumerism will make you smile anyway. Most of *2000AD*'s stars of the time (Dave Gibbons, Ian Gibson, Pat Mills, Kevin O'Neill) make respectable contributions and Grant Morrison completists will need to find it for the Gideon Stargrave two-pager, the art for which makes you appreciate Morrison's writing skills in a whole new way.~FJ

FOODANG

Continuum: *1 issue 1994*

August House: *2 issues 1995*

Michael Duggan's superhero satire isn't immediately apparent as such, and the best model for it surely isn't a clown fused with his make-up in the accident that powered him. And then there's the strange, murderous family who adopt amnesiac patients and the mad doctor in the hospital to be explained. Duggan tosses a lot of balls in the air, but whether he'd have been able to keep them there is another matter. For such a weird premise the humour is standard, albeit reassuringly adolescent, and the art is fine, but it's not worth buying now. The first August House issue is a colour reprint of the Continuum issue.~FP

FOOLKILLER

Marvel: *10 issue limited series 1990-1991*

Introduced in Steve Gerber's *Man-Thing*, the Foolkiller executes those he deems to be fools. Depressed over his father's murder, bank employee Kurt Gerhardt loses his job, wife and home, and settles for work in a burger joint when other attempts to find employment fail. Seeing the previous Foolkiller on TV he begins a correspondence and assumes the identity, starting by killing local muggers and drug dealers. Pencil artist J.J. Birch is unspectacular throughout, making this very much Gerber's title. He uses the series as a treatise on the acceptance and fear of violence in society and to study what transforms someone into a vigilante and how far the obsession can progress. Gerhardt's rite of passage in 4 is truly frightening. Why this works so much better than *The Punisher* in exploring similar territory is that *Foolkiller* concentrates on Gerhardt's entire life, not just his costumed escapades. The series overruns in making its point, but has a satisfactory conclusion.~WJ

FOOP GOOP FROLICS

Glen Bray: *1 issue 1975*

A lavish tabloid sized compendium of old and unpublished strips by the unique Basil Wolverton. The material runs the gamut from humour ('Bing Bang Buster' and 'Yap Yap Trap') through science fiction ('Milt Archer' and 'Meteor Morgan') to single panel grotesques ('Scoop Goop Foop, the Novelist with nineteen navels') and apocalyptic panoramas from The *Book of Revelations*. For those already acquainted with the obsessive rendering and punning of Wolverton's work this is a delight, while for the uninitiated it's a wonderful introduction to one of comics' most "unchategorisical genius". However, with a print run of only 1200 this is sadly a tough comic to find.~DAR

Recommended

THE FOOT SOLDIERS

Dark Horse: *4 issues 1996**

Image: *5 issues 1997-1998**

The future's a dismal, oppressive time with all the heroes gone. They've left their accessories, though, to be found by three teenage runaways kicking against the pricks. Having acquired useful relics they proceed to battle the odds and inspire a downtrodden population. Writer Jim Krueger presents a well-rounded concept and packs the comic with innovative ideas, and his enthusiasm and proselytising in the editorial pages are heart-warming. At Dark Horse he concocted a rarity, a superhero comic that for all its strained allegory and referential material aims for the stars and makes quite a distance. Michael Avon Oeming and Jason Martin's artwork adequately portrays the grim future, and they draw a nice set of big boots. The team stop over in *Asylum* 9 prior to the black and white Image series, which continues what was planned as 12 issues from Dark Horse. In addition to chapters of the ongoing 'Arch Enemies', drawn by the always interesting Phil Hester, there are individual segments and background information to the world occupied by the Foot Soldiers drawn by other artists, and omitted from the collection. Krueger's to be commended for aspiring to more than superheroes by numbers, but these issues strain the patience with their moralising, and despite glimpses into the cast do little to move the story forward.~FP

Recommended: Dark Horse 1-4

FOR*ETERNITY

Antarctic: *4 issues 1997-1998*

A manga-style yarn by Rod Espinosa. Millennia ago, a group of immortal, alien women were stranded on Earth, and were hailed as goddesses wherever they settled. Now, however, the military want to capture them for research. Standard doe eyed warrior woman stuff, notable only for the pointless convolution of the narrative.~FC

The FORBIDDEN BOOK

Renaissance Press: *2 volumes 2001*

Michael Cohen's fantasy anthology, following *Mythography*, has attracted a number of interesting creators (including Dennis Fujitake, Jeffrey Jones, Al Davison and David Wenzel) with its general theme of magic-related stories. Each volume features a variety of strips, some folktales, some dream-inspired, some sword and sorcery and a few horror. The best strips of the first volume, 'Journeys into the Mystic', are Colleen Doran's witches' tale of love, revenge and resurrection and Cohen's own, new fairytale. Volume 2, 'Into the Uncharted Realm', contains a wistful story of the last dragon by Frank Brunner, a humorous, feminist, sword and sorcery tale by Craig Taillefer, and Cohen and Tom Yeates' tale of a priestess' quest to enter a sealed tower. Taillefer also contributes a solo story of Alicia, from his *Wahoo Morris* series. Overall, the artwork is of a high quality, and most of the stories worth at least one reading.~NF

The FORBIDDEN KINGDOM

Eastern: *8 issues 1988*

Out of greed for the Eighteen Demons of Gold, orphans, Ping, Mugyol and Komhyang, kill an old man and the other orphans he had taken in off the streets. Only Saeok survives and vows revenge. Several years later, renamed Sain by his teacher, Saeok is persuaded to act as protector to a dying emperor's heir, who's being menaced by one of the murderers, now hidden in the emperor's court. Translated from Korean, this is artistically very much in the same tradition as *Lone Wolf and Cub*. While Sung-Nam Ha's artwork isn't as impressive his combination of revenge tragedy, mystery and action makes for compelling storytelling. Note that the series ended without concluding the story.~NF

FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE

Last Gasp: *2 issues 1975, 1978*

As the title suggested, this was a compendium of facts too shocking to be common knowledge. Amongst the contents were such shockers as 'The True Story of the Hellfire Club' and 'The Castrators of Russia' in 1, and 'The Man They Couldn't Hang'. This is in addition to a number of more unmentionable subjects. Creatively, only the three pages by Brent Boates in 1 stand out, making this a fun read, but not an essential one.~DAR

FORBIDDEN PLANET

Innovation: *4 issue miniseries* 1992*

A good adaptation of the classic 1950s science fiction film that launched a dozen shops. Artist Daerick Gross works from the screenplay as well as the video, and tells the story largely via double page spreads with smaller panels laid over. His art is rushed towards the end, but those familiar with the film ought to enjoy this version. For readers not familiar with *Forbidden Planet*, there's the danger of comparing it with later science fiction, and it may disappoint.~FP

FORBIDDEN TALES OF DARK MANSION

DC: *11 issues (5-15) 1972-1974*

After a patchy first few issues continuing from *Dark Mansion of Forbidden Love*, this settled down to become one of DC's better mystery titles. 5 contained a Gothic romance story left over from the previous incarnation, memorable only for the heroine's uncanny resemblance to Wonder Woman in her white catsuit period. 6 contained inventory material, including a decent Jack Kirby story left over from his *Spirit World* magazine. From 7 on the comic contained new mystery stories written by Jack Oleck, Robert Kanigher and Michael Fleisher, and predominantly drawn by Filipino artists. Highlights were provided by Alfredo Alcala (9-11, 13), the little known, but highly talented Ernie Santiago (8), and, best of all, Alex Niño (8, 12, 14) and Nestor Redondo (14). American artists Howard Chaykin (7), Gil Kane (13), George Evans (14) and a young Dan Green (14, 15) also contributed. While none of the stories were ground-breaking they were often raised to greater heights by exceptionally fine art. This was never more so than the case of the title's masterpiece, Oleck's vampiric 'They Walk By Night', graced with the astonishing artwork of Bill Payne in 10.~DAR

Recommended: 8, 10, 12, 14, 15

FORBIDDEN WORLDS

ACG: *145 issues 1951-1967*

A suspense anthology that has a plethora of vampires, ghosts, witches, werewolves and even a were-spider populating the early issues and "Exploring the Supernatural" as a tagline. The advent of the Comics Code in 1954 put a stop to the staple fare of Forbidden Worlds, and a temporary hiatus saw the comic renovated from 35 with a new tagline of 'Strange Adventure'. It might not have seemed so at the time, but this was for the best, forcing writer and editor Richard E. Hughes to stretch himself a little, resulting in a stronger comic. He operated under numerous aliases, even to the extent of conceiving fake biographies for the likes of 'Zev Zimmer'. Artist Ogden Whitney began appearing from 35, and there's even a strip by Leonard Starr in 37. Al Williamson is an occasional contributor and other regular artists like John Forte and John Rosenberger were suited to the material supplied. The popularity of superheroes sees the introduction of the mundane Magicman as lead feature in 125, but he's dropped for the final five issues. While never matching the contemporary EC titles on which it was originally based, *Forbidden Worlds* has far more to offer than most other similar titles, ranking far above similar Marvel product, for instance. Richard E. Hughes was a fine, imaginative writer of science-fiction suspense, and had a good eye for contributing artists, making this a decent read more often than not. 75 is a good sample. John Buscema débuts with a story about a clock foretelling the future, Forte draws an ironic commentary on modern furnishing, the magnificent Ogden Whitney's contribution has a man attempting to break a speed record, but managing much more, and there's also Paul Reinman, but you can't have everything. *Forbidden Worlds* is also the place where Herbie first came to life in 73. He's an obese, bespectacled, semi-comatose child able to do anything or converse with anything, including going back through time when powered with special lollipops. It's insane stuff by Hughes and Whitney, and would recur in 94, but really hits its stride with 110, 114 and 116, at which point Herbie graduates to his own title.~WJ

Recommended: 110, 114, 116

THE FORCE OF BUDDHA'S PALM

Jademan: *55 issues 1988-1993*

As with other Jademan kung-fu titles (*Blood Sword, Drunken Fist, Oriental Heroes*), any single issue of this Hong Kong produced comic will amaze with its generous page count, frenetic kung-fu action, eccentric characters and dynamic art. The disappointment comes with the realisation that there's little to differentiate one issue from another beyond the basic set-up. Set it feudal Persia, twin brothers are separated at birth, Samsun, eager to please but easily manipulated respectable hero, and Devilito, loveable rogue. A complex (and far-fetched) revenge plot sets them against each other for deeds done two generations previously. There's also Nine Continents, who has rather a hard time of things considering he's the greatest hero of them all, the manipulative evil White Crane, and the women who love them, but sometime can't make up their minds which of them they love. From 40 the travails of Nine Continents dominate. There are few resolutions, and each encounter is merely a step on the road to another encounter. While the same criticism can be levelled at superhero comics, and this is the closest they come in Hong Kong, most these days are plot-led, leavened with subplots and soap opera characterisation. Here the only respite is occasional humour, but unlike other Jademan titles cancelled mid-story, this runs to a conclusion of sorts. The title, by the way, refers to a form of kung-fu.~WJ

FORCE SEVEN

Lone Star: *6 issues + 1999 to date*

Generally well-considered action with a covert superhero team gathered in their leader Amazon's own feature. The Claremont and Byrne *X-Men* seems to be the template, with bickering and soap opera accompanying the fast-moving action sequences, and as such it's well done. Given the extremely erratic publication schedule (latest issue sighted May 2001) perhaps stories continued over three issues or more are not the best idea.~WW

FORCE WORKS

Marvel: *22 issues 1994-1996*

Created after the dissolution of Avengers West Coast, Iron Man's new team is intended to act "proactively, in the interests of defence and security", which translates as "getting our retaliation in first". It's consistent for the USAgent to go for that line, but the other founders – Spider-Woman, the Scarlet Witch, and, fleetingly, Wonder Man – seem badly chosen for such an aggressive policy. Not that it really matters, as writers Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning never really pursue said policy, treating the team as just another bunch of people in tights and armour, and Tom Tenney's impenetrable artwork means you wouldn't really be able to tell if they did! Wonder Man's replacement with the enigmatic alien warrior Century creates a not very interesting mystery that occupied much of the title's run. Other diversions along the way include a deeply embarrassing run-in with an aboriginal superhero, and a tedious crossover with War Machine. The title folded before it reached a quarter of the run of the comic it replaced, and was largely unmourned.~HS

FOREVER AMBER

Image: *4 issue miniseries 1999*

A corporately employed hunter, Amber's task is to locate those who've left their jobs, a no-no in this conglomerate-controlled future. When things go wrong for her, though, she proves more resilient than people suspected. There's a charm and vulnerability to Amber as portrayed by Don Hudson, and his plot would make for a good action film.~FP

FOREVER MAELSTROM

DC: *6 issue miniseries 2003*

A real disappointment from the usually sassy team of writers Howard Chaykin and David Tischman. The premise is a good one: a mad scientist destroys the timeline and it's up to our time travelling hero, Forever Maelstrom along with his talking wolf, a warrior woman and bunch of misfit sidekicks to fix things up in a number of alternative realities. Illustrator John Lucas has a nice style, but is totally unsuited for this series, which requires more subtle visuals for the humour to work. Mind you, how subtle can you get showing Queen Victoria having a fart? She would not be amused. And neither are we.~HY

FOREVER PEOPLE

DC: *11 issues 1971-1972, 6 issue miniseries 1988*

Part of Jack Kirby's highly acclaimed Fourth World Saga, the original series dealt with the adventures of five young, idealistic New Genesis Gods – Mark Moonrider, Serifan, Big Bear, Vykin the Black and Beautiful Dreamer – during and immediately after their attempt to rescue the kidnapped Beautiful Dreamer from Darkseid. Filled with many moments of Kirby genius with ties to *New Gods*, the Apokolips/New Genesis war often seems little more than a game to the youthful team, whose ability to combine themselves into the single entity they call the Infinity Man might well have made them major players had they taken things more seriously. Amidst the inevitability of war and constant struggle apparent in *The New Gods* and *Mister Miracle*, *Forever People* offered a taste of the carefree paradise and idealism of New Genesis at its best. 4-9 also included reprints of Kirby's 1940s Sandman stories.

If Kirby's intention had been to suggest that the *Forever People* were too young to be cynical and too innocent to be affected by the war, in the 1980s revival J.M. DeMatteis saw to it that their passage into adulthood was not so smooth. He used them as allegory for the 'Me Decade' of the 1980s against the idealism of the 1960s. Kirby's series left them stranded in the otherworldly paradise Adon, and DeMatteis picks up perhaps a decade later when they've grown up and

apart, until circumstances force them to take a long hard look at what they've become and how that compares to what they should have been.~JC
Recommended: Series one 1-11

The FOREVER WAR

NBM: *3 volumes 1988-1990*

European adaptation of Joe Haldeman's Hugo and Nebula award-winning science fiction novel by cartoonist Marvano (Mark Van Oppen) with Haldeman himself providing the English text. Private Mandella relates the story of his army career fighting an alien enemy at relativistic speeds far from Earth, every day taking him further from home and further from humanity. As cold and stoic an attack on the insanity of war and the idiocy of the military mind as the book it's based on. Good stuff.~WW

FORGOTTEN REALMS

DC: 25 issues 1989-1991

Forgotten Realms adapts the characters and settings from the TSR novels and role-playing games. If you enjoy the original source material you'll probably enjoy these light fantasy comics as well. If you don't... well, there's some nice Rags Morales and Dave Simons art in the first 15 issues.~FP

FORLORN FUNNIES

Absence of Ink: *2 issues + 2002 to date*

Tremendous design and artwork are immediately apparent, as is Chris Ware as a strong influence, but while the transitions between elements of the first issue are interesting, Paul Hornschemeier has very little to say in these fragments of whimsy. 2 is better, although now Ware's cod-formal archaic language has also been appropriated. It's the first chapter of a story concerning a widower finding it difficult to come to terms with his bereavement, and his seven year old son observing the change in his father. It is very much a detached narrative, but has great promise. To fully bloom, though, Hornschemeier must find his own voice.~WJ

FORT: Prophet of the Unexplained

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 2002**

In the days before 1900, New York is stunned by a series of grisly murders. Eccentric, Charles Fort, with the boy, H. P. Lovecraft, discovers an alien, Yhir, who has travelled to Earth to kill a virus that escaped from his world. Together they must avoid arrest for the murders themselves and stop the monster before it reproduces. This is a rather pedestrian adventure from writer Peter M. Lenkov, despite its attempts to mix the real personalities of Fort and Lovecraft with other historical and invented situations. Frazer Irving's artwork, with heavy use of blacks to indicate form, is like a smoother Frank Miller's, but isn't strong enough on its own to rescue this.~NF

FORTUNE AND GLORY

Oni Press: *3 issue miniseries 2000**

Brian Michael Bendis details his attempts to sell a screenplay to Hollywood. Both a primer and a depressing crash course in the ignorance, vanity and egotism of the film industry, the extra layer of involvement is that despite being able to see Hollywood for what it is, Bendis desperately wants to suck on the golden teat. Simple, engaging and very funny, the autobiographical tack may not appeal to fans of Bendis' crime comics, but they'd be missing out. The collection is a form of director's cut with a few extra pages.~WJ
Recommended: 1-3

THE FORTY-YEAR-OLD HIPPIE

Rip-Off: *2 issues 1978-1980*

While perhaps not being in the same class as Gilbert Shelton, Ted Richards is none the less an entertaining and talented cartoonist, as he reveals here. This title collects together selected strips from Rip-Off Press' syndicated *Free Press* strip, with additional lengthier, harder-hitting strips. It is very much in the tradition of Shelton's *Freak Brothers*, with added toilet humour, but the generation gap theme is an unusual twist on the genre and the comic is always engaging.~DAR

FOUR HORSEMEN

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1999*

Four sermons disguised as black comedy, with each issue occupying roughly the same timeframe. A rock concert on December 31st 1999 accidentally summons four less-than-worldly Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Whilst the crowd riots the riders repair to a bar across the way. The issues are themed to each Horseman. In 1 Famine listens to an abortion clinic nurse's tale of woe. In 2 War interfaces with a music business PR man. In 3 Pestilence sees an ex-convict single mother's misfortunes turn her dangerously paranoid. Finally, in 4 Death encounters a dysfunctional kid wandering around with his dad's gun. It's Armageddon Lite as the riders update their plans. Whilst drawn efficiently enough by Essad Ribic the series is desperately in need of some interpretive editing. Robert Rodi's self-righteous monologues interrupt the pacing throughout. His insertion of humour is tasteless and, by dodging any standpoint on the issues raised, the series stands as an impotent and exploitative rant.~SW

THE FOUR IMMIGRANTS MANGA

Stone Bridge Press: *One-shot 1999*

Yoshitaka (Henry) Kiyama was a Japanese immigrant to America. Using characters based upon himself and people he knew, Kiyama describes the experiences of being an immigrant in San Francisco between 1904 and 1924, covering such events as the 1906 earthquake, the World's Fair of 1915 and World War I. Kiyama was keen to assimilate western forms into Japanese art and produced this fifty-two chapter story, designed to be serialised over a year, closely following the conventions of the period's newspaper strips. With twelve panels per episode, Kiyama's style is simple yet full of background detail. This is a remarkable, fascinating historical document in which humour is used to comment on the social and political conditions of the time. Originally published in 1931 in Japanese and English, this edition is translated into English by Frederik L. Schodt.~NF
Recommended

FOUR STAR BATTLE TALES

DC: *5 issues 1973*

Reprints of 1950s war stories from the DC archives, mixing examples of series like 'The War That Time Forgot' (set on an island where dinosaurs still live, by Andru and Esposito) and Johnny Cloud by Irv Novick with one-off war tales by the likes of Bernie Krigstein (5), Mort Drucker, Russ Heath and Joe Kubert.~NF
Recommended: 5

FOUR STAR SPECTACULAR

DC: *6 issues 1976-1977*

Wholly undistinguished reprint title, the highlights of which are a Flash story written in the 1940s and redrawn for publication in the first issue, the original art deemed too shoddy, and a 1940s Blackhawk story in the final issue.~HY

FOUR WOMEN

Homage: *5 issue miniseries 2001-2002**

Donna is talking to her therapist about a recent trip she took with three friends, which went horribly wrong. As her retrospective narrative unfolds, her therapist's questions cause her to question and change her recollection of what "really happened" on that traumatic afternoon. Writer/artist Sam Kieth shows considerable insight into the fallibility of memory, and the fragmented narrative technique arouses curiosity rather than bewilderment. Unfortunately, in his successful attempt to differentiate between the protagonists, Kieth makes them so incongruous with each other that the reader never buys why four such disparate people would hang out together. Furthermore, the ending, after such a build-up, inevitably disappoints, and the whole thing becomes, in the words of Bart Simpson, "Just a bunch of stuff that happened." A brave attempt, nonetheless.~HS

FOX AND THE CROW

DC: *108 issues 1951-1968*

This was originally a series of Columbia Pictures (1941-1947) and then United Productions of America (1948-1950) cartoons. DC published the characters in the 1940s in *Real Screen Comics* before giving them their own title in December 1951. Fauntleroy Fox is constantly having to protect himself from Crawford Crow's chiselling nature, and there's no saying which one of them will come off best in these short (4-6 page) stories. Mostly written by Cecil Beard (whose animation credits include *Bambi* and *Fantasia*) and drawn by Jim Davis, the series is good-humoured, and made more interesting by having neither character be the constant victor. Back-up strips such as 'Flippity and Flop' and 'The Hound and the Hare' gave way eventually to all Fox and Crow issues before, in the mid-1960s, DC started to introduce some new concepts. 'The Brat Finks' were 'rock-n-rollicking rascals' and the very popular Stanley and his Monster (95-108) took over the title completely with 109. Lisping Stanley believes his monster is a 3000-year-old dog, and they have adventures such as meeting Napoleon's ghost and discovering that the reason for his keeping his hand inside his coat is to keep his socks up. A good series, if not outstanding.~NF

Recommended: 95

FOX Comics

Fox: *23 issues 1984-1989*

Fantagraphics: *4 issues (24-27), 1 Special 1989-1991*

Beginning as a home-made offshoot of a comics fanzine, by its final issue *Fox* had progressed into a fine anthology showing the best of contemporary Australian comics creators. Taking their lead from the self-published comics appearing in early 1980s Britain, 1-13 are A5-sized and photocopied. Enthusiasm outstrips talent, but Martin Trengrove's 'Roscoe The Dawg', a private-eye strip, has polished cartooning from the off. By 3 British small-press creators are aboard, though often with work already seen in Britain. Eddie Campbell's 'The Pajama Girl' in 5, about an odd Australian murder case, is the standout of the early issues, and Ed Pinsent and Phil Elliott also submit decent strips. Meanwhile Fil Barlow and Greg Gates are developing very quickly, and Paul Harris' two-page masturbation strip in 7 is an excellent study of facial expressions.

With 11 *Fox* started colour covers, and the final small-size issue, 13, has a theme of EC comics. Ed Pinsent analyses them, several creators attempt to emulate them, and there's a pastiche of 'My World'. By far the most notable aspect is the outstanding art of Darrel Merritt, with both a pencilled study of trench warfare and a cartooned strip of childhood fears. He'd developed from the early issues, but tragically, his only interior recurrence is a disappointing three pages in 18. 14 is a single issue blip in the steady progress, as more British contributors (Glenn Dakin, Chris Flewitt, Steve Way, John Bagnall) mix with the ever-improving Dillon (Brendan Naylor), Ian Eddy and Tony Thorne, a contributor from the start. Issues in the mid-teens are plagued by strips of stilted whimsy, a form only David Hodson regularly engages with, while Michael Graham and Chloe Brooks-Kenworthy are tedious.

18 introduces serials, although the first, 'Lifestyles of the Small And Insignificant', is more a series of episodes under a collective title. Written by Lazarus Dobelsky and drawn by Ian Eddy, it begins as poignant tales about life's embarrassing moments, before moving beyond into presumably autobiographical recollections. Eddy's cartooning is very expressive, and it's very funny. If only the same could be said of 'Sex' (20-23), which bears the hand of Dylan Horrocks, but is the least salacious and most tedious musing on the topic you'll ever read. Far more successful is 'Tattoo Man' in 24-27. After being beaten up at a carnival, a man awakens to find his body covered in tattoos. David Hodson's scripts are well matched by the moody art of Greg Gates for a diverting and mysterious idea. As *Fox* departed before concluding it, the final chapter saw print in a one-shot collecting the remainder of the material.

19 has a landmark with the début of the utterly mad Lindsay Arnold, who's in most issues thereafter. Considerably older than most other contributors, his stories are of adolescence in 1950s Tasmania. His crowded cartooning, complete with labelling, instinctive storytelling and very funny anecdotes are an instant highlight, contrasting with the introspection of several other strips. There's a succession of Eddie Campbell strips from 20 onwards, now creating material specifically for *Fox*. Publication at Fantagraphics is preceded by a decent reprint sampler, and they increase the page-count to good effect, with an irony being that, still under David Vodicka's editorship, *Fox* instantly bettered any Fantagraphics anthology title seen before. All the Fantagraphics issues have at least two excellent strips, with Phil Elliott and Paul Grist's story paralleling the inception and success of Britain's *Escape* magazine a standout.~FP

Recommended: 13, 18, 20, 22 25-27

FRANCIS Brother of the Universe

Marvel: *One-shot 1980*

If you've been yearning to read the life-story of the first Franciscan monk in comic form, look no further. Taking great care to conform to the approved Catholic version, there's very little of the Dr Doolittle stuff and plenty of handwringing doubt. The interesting artistic combination of John Buscema and Marie Severin is sympathetic, but Buscema carries his baggage with him, and when Francis receives Jesus' stigmata it could be a scene from *Thor*.~WJ

FRANK

Nemesis: *4 issue miniseries 1994*

Dan Chichester (not very many words) and Denys Cowan (extremely sketchy pencils) come together to update *Frankenstein* so that the monster can have lots of particularly violent fights with the world that doesn't understand him. Ahhhh. The word 'predictable' comes to mind.~FJ

FRANK

Fantagraphics: *4 issues 1996-2001**

Jim Woodring's surreal hero surfaced once more in his own comic-sized series. In a hallucinatory world just one step to the side of nightmare, Frank struggles to make sense of the baffling events and changing environment around him. As straightforward as an innocent child's dream, full of symbols and bizarre creatures, and as frightening as your worst nightmare, Frank communicates on a wordless but profound level, visiting different universes and making friends with the strange creatures that surround him. What's most fascinating for the reader is the cohesiveness of the Frank universe, the internal logic among all the mosaic-like patterns, alien life forms and sudden surreal twists. For more Frank adventures see *Tantalising Stories*.~FJ

Recommended: 3-4

Phil Yeh Presents FRANK THE UNICORN

Fragments West: *8 issues 1986-1988*

Cartoonist Phil Yeh's admirable aim is to combat increasing illiteracy around the world. He's been a tireless organiser of events for this cause, and this series was intended to appeal to adults and children alike, encouraging them to read. Having already appeared in four illustrated books, the title character is largely a passive observer and occasional commentator as movie star Gail Tokuda relates experiences or becomes involved in adventures where reading is necessary, with the cast widening as the title progressed. They're well cartooned, and certainly imaginative, but the constant repetition of the message is intrusive and lacks subtlety.~FP

FRANKENSTEIN

Prize: *33 issues 1945-1948 (1-17), 1952-1954 (18-33)*

This is based more on the film monster than on Mary Shelly's novel. Artist and writer Dick Briefer's style is a caricaturish, uncluttered one well-suited to humour and that's the unlikely direction he took the monster in the 1940s. The patchwork creature's nose moved up his face until it was in the middle of his forehead. The grotesque comedy of the strip compares to nothing more than Jack Cole's *Plastic Man*. The 1940s issues are forty-eight pagers with two to three feature stories in each, and later issues give Ed Goggin occasional script credits. When the title was revived in 1952 it was as a horror series, still produced by Briefer but in a less bigfoot style (if that's possible with Frankenstein!). After the first couple of quarterly issues the series settled into a bimonthly, one feature story per issue groove. The thirty-two pages were filled out with horror shorts by *Black Magic* regulars like Mort Meskin and Marvin Stein.~SW

FRANKENSTEIN

Dell: *4 issues 1964 (1), 1966-1967 (2-4)*

The first issue adapts the classic Boris Karloff-led 1930s horror film, and manages a very creditable job of it. The remainder, well, they were part of Dell's superhero triumvirate based on old horror characters, not necessarily a bad idea in principle, but in practice... Frankie has a skintight red costume and a white crew cut, although this is sometimes open to question, as the art throughout is by Tony Tallarico. On seeing this you'd question if Tallarico knew which end of the pencil he should be drawing with. The writer wisely selected anonymity as the preferable option.~WJ

The FRANKENSTEIN Monster

Marvel: *18 issues 1973-1975*

Considering that the success of Marvel Comics is founded on bombast and in-your-face artwork, it's surprising that many of their early to mid-1970s titles were deliberately understated. Such was initially the case with *Frankenstein*, which gave notice of its intent by adapting Mary Shelley's original novel, rather than any of the film versions, in the first two issues. Gary Friedrich's script is workable, and the subtle and expressive artwork of Mike Ploog creates a very nice mood. The series continues in the 19th century, but Friedrich couldn't maintain the quality, and once Ploog left with 6 the art was never more than adequate. Doug Moench becomes writer with 12, and sets his stories in the present day, but his work was sloppy, and matched by the art. 1-6 are worth a glance for Ploog's work, but stay well away from the rest.~WJ

FRAY

Dark Horse: *6 issues + 2001 to date*

Buffy the Vampire Slayer creator Joss Whedon, with Karl Moline art, makes his first foray into comics with this series charting the adventures of Melaka Fray, the Vampire Slayer of the 23rd century. As well as the usual demons and vampires, Melaka has to contend with a post-apocalyptic social decay and radiation induced mutants, all of which she manages to dispatch with the usual combination of high kicks and stakes through the heart. Despite much anticipation from the comics community and *Buffy* fans alike, *Fray* is nothing special and is unlikely to appeal to a crossover audience of comics fans not already tuning in to the TV series. Still, *Buffy* fans generally seem to approve of it. Planned as an eight issue limited series, there has been no new issue for almost a year.~JC

FRAYED ENDS

Jason Brightman: *3 issues + 2000 to date*

Paul is reacting badly to his girlfriend's walking out on him, and is defensive when advised by his friend. Then he's sucked into another reality, where the imaginary friend of his childhood, Edward, turns up, looking for his heart. Jason Brightman's meditations on loneliness offer some gratuitous satire on American gun law, but the whole is unmoving and remains, so far, unfinished.~NF

The Fabulous Furry FREAK BROTHERS

Rip-Off/Knockabout: *14 issues (0-13) 1976-1992* (1-12, 0), 1997 (13)*

Certainly the world's most popular underground comic, Gilbert Shelton's *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* first appeared in a 1967 issue of *The LA Free Press*. They continue to star in their own comics, each edition kept constantly in print throughout Europe and America. The Freak Brothers still appeal to nostalgic hippies, pot-smoking ravers, and a huge general readership, uninterested in superheroes but in love with Shelton's wild humour and accomplished story-telling.

Exemplars of the long-hair lifestyle, The Freak Brothers are Fat Freddy, Phineas and Freewheelin' Franklin, three shiftless room-mates whose constant craving for dope forms the basis for many of Shelton's funniest strips. Born in Texas in 1940, Shelton was a teenage EC-addict with a particular fondness for the work of *Mad* creator Harvey Kurtzman. In *Blab* 1 Shelton wrote that "Kurtzman's style was my favorite. It was strong, full of action, and well-suited to a story-teller's style". Kurtzman once returned the compliment, describing Shelton as the "true pro" of the underground. Inspired by the first manifestations of flower power, Shelton's early Freak Brothers strips were drug-guzzling, cop-baiting, free-loving farces that both epitomised and satirised the counterculture scene. Whilst Shelton's drawings were often extremely crude, his well-defined characters and meticulously constructed scenarios sustained a series of thigh-slapping one and two pagers, collected in the first four issues of the comic. He also began a series of strips devoted to Fat Freddy's Cat, a flea-ridden ginger tom who proved almost as popular as the Brothers. By 5, longer stories like 'Grass Roots' or 'Come Down' allowed Shelton to stray from the basic formula of failed dope deals and run-ins with Norbert The Narc, leading to the epic 'Idiots Abroad' story-line in 8-10*, which remains Shelton's finest work to date. The Freaks decide to travel to Bogotá to buy cheap weed "from the source", only to be separated at the airport. They are soon caught up in a series of misadventures. Franklin is captured by pirates, Freddy travels through Europe (stopping in Amsterdam, natch) and Phineas becomes the ruler of a powerful Middle Eastern country. Produced in collaboration with Paul Mavrides, gloriously coloured by Mavrides and Guy Colwell, this globetrotting romp also enabled Shelton to abandon the hard-core drug humour which had previously alienated potential readers. 12 is a return to the format of the earliest issues, containing lots of shorter strips, often in collaboration with Mavrides.

With Shelton seemingly disinclined to produce more Freak Brothers comics, 13 limped out in 1997 reprinting in black and white stories from the colour 1978 'Thoroughly Ripped', themselves originally printed in *High Times* (and one from *Playboy*). Another story from this collection occupied half of 11, the final colour issue. 1985's issue 0 was more old work, this time the earliest versions of the Freaks.

The popularity of *The Freak Brothers* enables Shelton to exercise a great deal of quality control over his best loved characters. Never fully embraced by either the mainstream or 'serious' comics pundits, the static *Freak Brothers* world often strikes non-believers as anachronistic or tired, a stale joke. However, devotees understand that while the hippy dream may well be dead, Shelton's comics transcend their historical moment. They remain constantly amusing and endlessly re-readable, and how many other comics can you say that about?~AL

Recommended: 1-13

FREAK FORCE

Image: *18 issues 1993-1995, 3 issue miniseries 1997*

Following build-up, back-ups and hype in Erik Larsen's *Savage Dragon*, the early issues lived up to expectations. Old-timer Super Patriot and the experienced Dart team up with Mighty Man, Rapture, Ricochet, Barbaric and Horridus. They're five of Chicago's younger and mostly incompetent superheroes, providing a light-hearted romp reminiscent of early Giffen and DeMatteis *Justice Leagues*. Giffen's plots (although the script was Larsen's) no doubt played a large factor in this.

Amongst the jokes Larsen and Giffen nonetheless manage to weave some entertaining and clever plots. A well-executed mystery over Mighty Man's true identity, swimming with red herrings, which reaches a conclusion only obvious in retrospect, provides the most entertainment. While early issues received much critical acclaim, sales were less encouraging, and an inevitable round of team-ups attempting to boost sales in 8-12 leads into a tedious alien-invasion storyline, after which the series never quite regains its way. Attempts to take itself more seriously by becoming grim and gritty only served to drive away the fans who had enjoyed the fun of the earlier issues.

The team return in a miniseries that brings them firmly back into line with dozy-but-fun superhero antics. Their enemies track them down by the change of address cards they sent out; they mostly screw up. Directly after this they're back to being *Savage Dragon*'s support cast in issue 40 of that title, where they belong.~JC

Recommended: 1-7, 10

FREAK SHOW

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1992*

The Residents are a difficult band to describe to newcomers. They're four musicians who keep their identities a secret behind giant eyeball masks. Their music is always adventurous and very uncommercial. *Freak Show* is a concept album with each song telling the story of a different freak. Some friends were asked to interpret these songs as strips and this is the result. Given its origins, it was never going to be entirely coherent: the disparate styles work against any sense of coherence and Dave McKean's 'Lillie', in particular, disrupts the visual identity of the book. That said, there are some interesting pieces by the likes of Kyle Baker and Savage Pencil. Particularly worth reading are Brian Bolland's 'Harry The Head', Matt Howarth's 'Jello Jack The Boneless Boy' and Richard Sala's 'Herman the Human Mole'.~NF

FREAKS

Monster Comics: *4 issues 1992-1993*

A bit late in the day for an adaptation of Tod Browning's infamous film about a gold-digger who marries a sideshow freak for his money only to have a horrible revenge visited upon her when his deformed carnival buddies find out what she's up to. Jim Woodring's script is bought to life by F. Solano Lopez's clear pencilling, although Lopez's tidiness doesn't serve the story well during its muddy, rain-drenched climax. Woodring does his best to bring the characters to life, and though flaws in the original film stop the script being truly great, it remains worth reading.~NF

FREAKS AMOUR

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1993*

Following a nuclear incident known as 'Caliban's Night', 77,000 people are irradiated and mutated to form an ostracised underclass. A harrowing social commentary deftly adapted from the Tom DeHaven novel, it succeeds both as a modern tragedy and a horror story.~HS

Recommended: 1-3

THE FREEDOM COLLECTIVE

Rough Cut: *One-shot 2002*

An intriguing idea well handled: What if Stan Lee and Jack Kirby had created *The Avengers* in 1960s communist Soviet Union? The scenario avoids outstaying its welcome over an entire comic, with the text pages and fake ads adding to the joke. Artist Dom Regan manages a creditable Kirby/Ayers style as well. A good laugh.~WJ

FREEDOM FIGHTERS

DC: *15 issues 1977-1978*

Appallingly sloppy and featuring staggeringly inane villains, Bob Rozakis scripts were a standard feature of DC's second and third-string titles during the mid- to late 1970s. Here, however, he redeems himself with a well-considered, scintillating revival of the 1940s characters. Only joking. It's all rubbish apart from 12, in which the mustard is just about cut. It's not all his fault, though, as Martin Pasko established the format of creative apathy, and when the best art one can point to is Ernie Chan covers you know things are in a bad way.~FP

FREEMIND

Future Comics: *3 issues + (0-2) 2002 to date*

Trapped his entire life almost immobile in a wheelchair, Mac Flint is a superb engineer. His ultimate plan is to create an artificial body into which he can transfer his mind, but other parties also have an interest in the technology. With their years of experience, David Michelinie (plot and script), Bob Layton (plot and inks) and Dick Giordano (pencils) know how to produce a professional comic. In fact, the whole feel of the title is something that could have come from Valiant a decade ago. Professional, however, doesn't equate with compelling, and so far there's nothing to make this a compulsory purchase.~FP

FREEX

Malibu: *18 issues, 1 Giant-Size 1993-1995*

Mediocre take on the successful *X-Men* formula as Gerard Jones and Ben Herrera relate the adventures of misunderstood, super powered and highly generic teen misfits. Pressure, Anything, Sweet-Face, Plug and Boom Boy team up and go on the run pursued by the usual suspects, government agents, freelance bounty hunters and the like. 7 introduces The Old Man, an immortal who offers them survival training in return for their help battling Ultraverse arch-villain Rex Mundi. They're captured by Contrary, a dead ringer for *X-Men*'s Emma Frost, who also happens to run a school for super powered children. Their escape (11) leads into the Giant-Size as lizard kid Cayman replaces Boom Boy and the Old Man takes them under his wing as young warriors. Other than a so-so Rune guest-shot in 17 the series starts off half-baked and peters out from there. It's tough being a freak, but not as tough as reading this rubbish.~WW

FRENCH ICE

Renegade: *13 issues 1987-1988*

French Ice offered readers two classic French humour characters not previously translated into English: Lelong's cantankerous old woman Carmen Cru and Binet's smart-arse dog, Kador. Most readers passed, and they're not entirely to be blamed. While Lelong's cartooning is a delight, his stories of irascible bull-headedness rely to a great extent on a knowledge of French life and an acquaintance with little French peasant women. Carmen Cru, around whom the earlier issues are built, may be a national treasure but she doesn't travel well. Kador, on the other hand, fits in with a long tradition of animal-joke crackers à la Garfield, with the added humour of his owner's continual marital problems, and by the last issue Kador dominated the comic.~FJ

FRENCH KISS Comix

Ediciones La Cúpula: *4 issues + 2001 to date*

This hardcore sex anthology aims to present the best in erotic comics, offering material published in the Spanish *Kiss* magazine. Some artists will be familiar from NBM's Eurotica line (Kevin Taylor, Ignacio Noe, Belore, Juan Emilio and Tobalina), or Last Gasp's Priapism Press (Ferocious), but it's worth mentioning the clean lines and humour of Messina (1, 3-4), Honey (1-4), Alvaro (2-4) and Man (4), and the fluidity of Val & Marcelo Sosa (1-4). 1-3 also contain the manga, Miss DD, by Tomo Chiyoji, which, as the title suggests is aimed at lovers of big breasts, and 3 has the advantage of the inclusion of one of Solano-Lopez' *Silly Symphonies.* With one hundred page issues and half of the strips presented in colour, this is an attractive package, with a wide variety of strips and styles, excitement practically guaranteed.~NF

FRENCH TICKLERS

Kitchen Sink: *3 issues 1989-1990*

Continued from Renegade's *French Ice,* Kitchen Sink wisely added more elements to the staple diet of Lelong and Binet, relying less on the dubious charms of Carmen Cru and more on the selling power of known names such as Moebius and Franquin. Even so it only managed to limp along for three issues. Humour is obviously not as universal as we'd like to think.~FJ

J. Michael Leonard's FRESH BLOOD Funny Book

Last Gasp: *1 issue 1978*

Confident cartooning in a variety of styles from Leonard, who can also produce a good gag strip. He has a selection of archetypal characters whose milieu and even appearance changes from strip to strip, but who remain in character. Foremost among this repertoire company are Skipper Seaweed, the salty seadog, Bumboat, the idiot, and a couple of dogs in civil war stories, the longest and lest rewarding strips here. The maxim "Don't judge a book by its cover" also holds true; the drawing is far better inside than out.~FP

FRESCAZIZIS

Last Gasp: *One-shot 1977*

Best described as a hallucinatory journey through the artist's subconscious, *Fresczizis* was Melinda Gebbie's solo title. Typical of Gebbie's early work, the art has a wonderfully sensuous, almost art nouveau line, and a cavalier disregard for artistic convention. Those looking for a coherent story-line would be best advised to look elsewhere, as the many, frequently sexual short stories on offer here are very short on conventional narrative.~DAR

FRIENDS

Renegade: *3 issues 1987*

Attempting to ape Winsor McCay art is no bad thing, and Bill Dinardi's managed the delicate line characterising McCay's work. He's managed little else, though. While attempting the whimsy of McCay's strips he falls woefully short with twee tales of bonding between Will and his humanoid alien buddy, and the stunning and innovative layouts of McCay elude him entirely. The result is page after page of static talking heads with nothing of interest to say.~WJ

FRINGE

Caliber: *8 issues 1990-1991*

Nutty telekinetic architect animates superball and is hunted by bald nun. Sounds interesting, no? Sadly muddled and confused, it's very much an amateur effort, notable only for early art from Philip Hester. 1-4 are collected.~WJ

The FROGMEN

Dell: *12 issues 1962-1965*

One of small group of 1960s sub-aqua comics. Compared with Dell's usual offerings of the period this title is noteworthy for some surprisingly good artwork from George Evans and Mike Sekowsky among others, and particularly Alex Toth in 5. The back-up strip 'Boy Of The Pacific' was occasionally drawn by Frank Thorne.~SW

FROM BEYOND THE UNKNOWN

DC: *25 issues 1969-1973*

DC's rich legacy of well-drawn science-fiction stories from the 1950s provided adequate material for twenty-five issues of reprints. The actual plots are generally pretty silly, the covers and splash-page teasers being the best thing about them, but artists of note include Murphy Anderson and Carmine Infantino in most issues and 'Al' Toth in 2. 7-17 are forty-eight or sixty-four pages, and the new material by Denny O'Neil andAnderson in 7 and 8 is neither's best work.~FP

FROM HELL

Tundra: *3 issues 1991-1993**

Kitchen Sink: *7 issues (4-10) 1994-1996**

Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell* concerns the Jack The Ripper murders that occurred in London in the late 1880s, probably the most famous serial killings ever. The perpetrator was never caught. Moore has them committed by the Queen's physician, Sir William Gull, with Victoria's knowledge, to protect her son from a blackmail attempt by a group of prostitutes, one of whom has acted as nursemaid to an illegitimate grand-daughter, the child of Prince 'Eddy' and a shopgirl. Gull is also impelled by his Masonic duty to the crown. As the killings progress he becomes deranged by what he has seen and done, seeking the ultimate, emblematic meaning for his hideous acts in Masonic lore and ritual.

Moore takes the huge body of Ripper scholarship – some of it far from scholarly in tone – and threads through it until he has the means to develop the moral and metaphysical points at the heart of the story. His version of Jack the Ripper starts off as an awful, human tragedy, a monster conjured up by a group of weak people who, once an idea that will get them off the hook has been planted in their brains, cannot forget it. It ends up in an extraordinary vision of evil down the ages. People who object that he's taken his theory from *The Ripper and the Royals,* one of many books on the subject, are missing the point. The point is that the particular and extraordinary circumstances surrounding the Jack The Ripper murders allow the writer to examine certain facets of human nature. They also, of course, ignore the many elements drawn from other sources, all carefully detailed in the appendices for intrigued readers, along with information on which scenes are factual and which have been invented.

Eddie Campbell, illustrating a story which moves from the hideous poverty of the East End of London right through to visionary dreams of Blakean stature, draws extensively on his knowledge of Victorian satirists and illustrators. He adopts an extremely dense, etched style, involving intricate open cross-hatching and the use of very fine lines that you usually associate with printmaking. This is balanced by occasional heavy use of ink, and the many scenes set at night. Occasionally the art unravels at the edges to express extreme emotions. Both he and Moore have researched the project carefully, and it shows, in everything from the correct label on a cocoa tin to the architectural detail of London during the period. There is a tightness and rigidity, echoed in the regular use of page grids, which is juxtaposed by the way certain panels fade out, and the way certain characters are never quite in focus, diffusing into a mass of lines.

From Hell is an extraordinary piece of 'faction', carefully dramatising events, including contradictory evidence, yet also making exciting leaps of the imagination. Moore, as you would expect, brings in all sorts of intriguing odds and ends of Ripperology, from Buffalo Bill Cody to the Mad Monk of Mitre Square and the interest Ian Brady took in the case, while building an overall picture of a time of social unrest, class struggle, racial tension and terrible deprivation. It is beautifully rendered, each panel oozing atmosphere and quietly but firmly supporting the dismal, depressing mood of each of the chapters. In From Hell there are no heroes and villains. Judgement is withheld. We are all to be pitied.~FJ

Recommended: 1-10

FROM HUNGARY

Tom Galambos: *One-shot 1996*

Tom Galambos' parents were born in Hungary and escaped the country after the anti-communist uprising of

1956. Here he details their terrifying experiences. Don't be put off by Galambos' awkward and sketchy art as it serves the story rather than distracts from it. This is an absorbing read, and serves to bring home how some of us take our comforts and freedoms for granted.~WJ

FROM THE PIT

Fantagor: *1 issue 1994*

Intended as a seven-issue series, this Richard Corben magazine is now merely a tantalising glimpse at what could have been a great horror comic. The art is some of Corben's best of the 1990s, and a nice H.P. Lovecraft-adapted back-up (reprinted from *Slow Death*) only adds to the disappointment of the title's untimely demise.~DAR

FRONTIER LINE

CPM: *7 issue limited series 1999-2000**

During a war, fought with giant robot warriors between the North and the South on the planet Sodom, various soldiers and civilians are introduced between great swathes of exposition. The character biographies provided in the collection tell you more about the series than reading it, as its narrative focus is so random. This is not a well-told, well-reproduced or memorable series.~NF

FRONTLINE COMBAT

EC: *15 issues 1951-1953**
Gemstone: *15 issues 1995-1998**

The immediate success of *Two-Fisted Tales* led to this companion title. Editor Harvey Kurtzman used *Two-Fisted*'s stable of artists to draw stories from his plots and layouts, but while promulgating the same pacifist ideals, *Frontline Combat* was initially distinct, with more stories focusing on the hardware enabling effective warfare. This is exemplified by 'War Machines' in 5 and later issues featuring a large selection of plane-based tales. The artwork was stunning throughout from the likes of Wally Wood, Jack Davis, Kurtzman in early issues and George Evans from 9, and the team of John Severin and Will Elder. Wood highlights are the heart-rending 'A Baby' in 10, 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' in 4 and a tale contrasting the nobility of Rommel with the atrocities of the Nazis in 3, while Davis' speciality was evoking the dirt and grime of war in almost every issue. Alex Toth contributes two airplane masterpieces in 8 and 12.

An ambitious and never completed project encompassing both EC's war titles and intending to tell the entire story of the US Civil War began in 9. Opening with a biography of Abraham Lincoln and the attack on Fort Sumpter, it's the only Civil War special to appear in *Frontline Combat*. There are other theme issues, though, an excellent detailing of the Iwo Jima campaign in 7, and an Air Force special in 12. Notable biographies include Julius Caesar in 8, Stonewall Jackson (5), Immelman (14) and both Geronimo and Napoleon in 10. Despite lacking the variety of *Two-Fisted Tales*, as a run *Frontline Combat* is of higher quality. It's also without that title's initial fumblings, and it was cancelled before any misguided change of direction. The Gemstone issues are reprints in the original format, collected as annuals, but the connoisseur will want the hardbound boxed set reprint.~FP

Recommended: 2, 3, 5-10, 14

FROST

Caliber: *3 issue miniseries 1989**

Black and white adventures of a private eye who likes to wear sunglasses. With pedestrian plots involving drugs, murder and child-beatings there's nothing original, but creator Kevin VanHook shows promise.~HY

FRUSTRATION

Methuen: *3 volumes 1982-1986*

French cartoonist Claire Bretécher employs a sketchy, almost scribbled, style of art, and offers social commentary, dinner table philosophy and the dissection of contemporary relationships and thoughts about them. The satirical content is occasionally barbed, but she's more often than not satisfied by highlighting the idiocies of the educated middle-classes who lapped up her work from the late 1970s. This is where she falls short of obvious influence Jules Feiffer, although most people do, by not offering any real insight. One imagines her hanging around bars and cafés surreptitiously scribbling notes as she overhears those around her. Perhaps Feiffer comparisons are invidious, but they're inevitable when so much of her repertoire stems from him. There is considerable wit on display in these collections, and if you've not looked at Bretécher's work in twenty years it deserves another glance.~WJ

FUGITIVE

Caliber: *One-shot 1989*

A killer and the detective chasing him are moving through a series of scenarios from old TV shows. In *Caliber Presents* the idea ran out of steam very quickly, and so it is here. Mind you, if you've lied awake at night wondering how badly James O'Barr would draw the *Star Trek* cast this is the place to look.~FP

FUN BOYS Spring Special

Tundra: *One-shot 1991*

Fondly remembered days of childhood friendship and comic collecting are deftly contrasted with the disturbing experiences that children accept. Jeff Bonivert's subtlety and illustrative cartooning is a joy. A short back-up strip contrasts the main story with the characters now as cynical teenagers. They re-appear in the *Flying Colours 10th Anniversary Special*.~FP

FUNGUS THE BOGEYMAN

Hamish Hamilton: *1 volume 1977*

In print twenty-five years after quietly outpunking all competition at what was quite a punky time, this faultless hymn to filth, written and drawn by Raymond Briggs, is mystifyingly still not on the national curriculum. The Bogeys live below our surface, and everything that disgusts us delights them. They sleep in damp mildewed beds, cultivate boils, and eat rotten eggs. They hate anything new so read oldspapers (filled with "strip cartoons – a form of entertainment for the simple-minded"). Fungus is a kind, industrious family Bogeyman, working steadily by our night at the usual Bogeyman business of frightening the surface dwellers, known as "drycleaners", creaking our doorknobs and tapping at windows. He adores his wife Mildew ("Good smelly dumpling keeps the house filthy") and his boy Mould.

All this is innocent mucky fun for young and old, packed with witty footnotes explaining Bogey habits and the inventive language ("I'll glaur the bar muffs on the Bogeybike, Dad"). There are literally hundreds of laugh-out-loud bits on the beautifully drawn grey, brown and snot-green pages. Meanwhile, though the Bogeys are ostensibly in conflict with us, they can clearly be seen to be a portrayal of us, specifically the British, stuck in a gloomy world of tradition and meaningless work, redeemed only by love. At the bleak ending, just before the final slimy endpapers, Fungus, his nose dripping at hugely increased rate, breaks down, unable to understand why he lives as he does.

Look out for 1982's *Plop-Up Book*, not a comic, but too amazingly hilarious and disgusting to miss.~GK

Recommended

FUNNY AMINALS

Apex Novelties: *One-shot 1972*

An anti-vivisection benefit comic edited by future Crumb documentary maker Terry Zwigoff, featuring a number of top underground cartoonists. For some reason many, including principal artist R. Crumb, somewhat missed the point, and a lot of the stories feature violence against animals as entertainment. It's redeemed, however, by Art Spiegelman's devastatingly poignant Maus strip, which still retains its power to shock today.~DAR

Recommended

THE FURIES

Carbon-Based Comics: *7 issues 1996-1997*

Seeing a team of female superheroes as commercially viable, creator Bill Knapp then did his best to ensure they were fully-rounded personalities, not just melon-sized breasts falling out of costumes. Prematurely curtailed, presumably due to lack of success, this is a well-considered attempt to produce a superhero comic with some humanity, and that makes these worth picking up if you come across them.~WJ

FURRLOUGH

Antarctic: *51 issues 1991-1997*

Radio Comix: *61 issues + (52-112) 1997 to date*

Anthropomorphic anthology dedicated to a mix of manga, humour, action, drama and adult comedy with cute fuzzy animals as the protagonists. There are long running serials such as Tall Tails' by Jose Calderon and Daphne Lage (78-101), 'Star Run' by Louis Frank and Steve Fait (41- 61) and 'Heebas', Scotty Arsenault's fluffy- but barbed take on Friends (intermittently from issue 48), complemented by short, complete vignettes on every genre from World War I and II action, science fiction, detective, slice-of-life, surreal comedy. There's even an adaptation of *The Song of Jenny the Pirate* by Berthold Brecht and Kurt Weil in 84.

Some well known alternative lights have also appeared. Ben Dunn was in 1 and his series 'Swimmer' ran in 39-47. Ganbear (Satoru Yamasaki) previewed *Fantastic Panic* in 9 and Kyle Baker was a guest illustrator in 62. Later issues began to act as a memory lane/catch basket for vanished anthropomorphic features such as Fission Chicken by J. P. Morgan (85) and Patrick Morans' 'Tunesia' (91-95) and there are many appearances of Fred Patten and Steve Gallacci's Erma Felma from the pioneering anthropomorphic animal comic *Albedo*.

Furrlough is always enthusiastic, and with a huge cast of contributors it ranges from the usually adequate to the sometimes excellent, such as 'Stinz: Bad Memories' by Donna Barr (32). A steady diet of funny animals, though, no matter how thematically varied, won't be to everyone's taste.~WW

FURY

Marvel: *One-shot 1994, 4 issue miniseries (Fury Of S.H.I.E.L.D.) 1995, 2 issue microseries (Fury/Agent 13) 1998*

Max: *6 issue miniseries 2001-2002**

The one-shot tells the background and origin of Nick Fury and the covert organisation he heads, S.H.I.E.L.D. It clarifies inconsistencies and, somewhat unconvincingly, 'corrects' certain events in S.H.I.E.L.D.'s previously revealed history. For completists only. The miniseries is a great little number with Howard Chaykin on script, slick Corky Lehmkuhl pencils, and plenty of intrigue and double-cross as the heads of S.H.I.E.L.D. and HYDRA team up. Any comic featuring Nick Fury at a Smokestoppers Anonymous meeting must be worth the entrance fee. The decoder supplied with 4 is one of the better comic gimmicks. Having killed Nick Fury elsewhere, it seems to have occurred that this may not have been the brightest editorial idea. We therefore have Agent 13 discovering he may still be alive. An ingenious way of sneaking a look at Fury heading the Howling Commandos in World War II occurs amid a decent pageturning plot. The downside is the unattractive artistic distortions making every character resemble a constantly morphing clay model.

The Max 'adult' makeover has an ageing Nick Fury and an old Russian sparring partner from HYDRA use a banana republic island as their playground for all-out carnage. Garth Ennis strains to out-gross himself with very similar material to his contemporary *Punisher* stories. Unfettered by the Comics Code Authority, Nick Fury is portrayed as never before and consequently appears strangely out of character. Darick Robertson and Jimmy Palmiotti abet with the gruesome gore.~APS

Recommended: 1995 miniseries 1-3

FUSED

Image: *3 issues + 2002 to date*

A series plagued by delays and increasing gaps between issues, which is a shame as Steve Niles has concocted a good action thriller about a man who's merged with an experimental armoured suit. The trappings and supporting cast are recognisable, but not obviously enough to drop into cliché. The sources of artist Paul Lee (1-2) are more familiar (Christopher Walken for one), and while his art is occasionally stiff, the story moves fast enough to distract attention. A group of government sponsored superheroes The Implementers turn up in 3, and well conceived back-up strips in 2 and 3, excellently drawn by Diego Jourdan, detail the first day on the job of one member, Kid Crash. All in all, thoroughly enjoyable and with the potential to be very successful if it would only appear.~FP

Recommended: 1-3

FUSHIGI YÛGI

Viz: *7 volumes + 1999 to date*

Yu Watase creates an engaging soap-operatic fantasy epic recounting the somewhat interminable adventures of a schoolgirl transported to a magical land within an old book. Miaka first gets drawn in with her best friend Yui, where they are rescued by the celestial warrior Tamahome and escape back to the real world. After an argument with her mother, Miaka returns to the library where the magic book is kept and is once again drawn into the world within – The Universe of the Four Gods. The world within is a facsimile of ancient China and Miaka becomes the priestess of Suzaku, destined to save the kingdom and find true love. As the series progresses Yui is also drawn back and becomes the priestess of a rival kingdom. Miaka spends most of her time deciding who to be in love with, trying to reconcile with Yui who now hates her and searching for a complete set of seven celestial warriors to win the upcoming battle for Suzaku. Well done of its type, but in need of severe pruning. This was originally introduced to the English speaking world as part of the line-up of manga anthology *Animerica Extra*, and in order the seven collections are titled 'Priestess', 'Oracle', 'Disciple', 'Bandit', 'Rival', 'Summoner', and 'Castaway'.~WW

FUSION

Eclipse: *17 issues 1987-1989*

Fusion is a space opera that follows the adventures of the cargo ship Tsunami, crewed by a mixture of humans (Indio, Dow Cook) and animalistic aliens (Haven, a bird, Tan, a squirrel, Alshain, a cat, Herrick, a flightless bird and Carz, a lion). 'The Soulstar Commission' in 1-5 sets the tone for the whole series: conflict, tragedy and betrayal as the Tsunami becomes caught in a war over a Royal House. Thereafter the stories concentrate as much as possible on characterisation, losing the plot to an extent that isn't helped by the almost constant shifting of writers from issue 6. Originally written by Steve Barnes (1-5), the following twelve issues credit no less than six different writers, including Steve Gallacci (7-9, 16-17) and Christy Marx (14-15). Most of the artwork's by Gallacci and Lela Dowling, neither of whose work is particularly bold or dynamic. Better than the lead feature are Ken Macklin's clever back-ups Dr Watchstop in 1-5 and 7-8, and The Weasel Patrol (5-17). The latter is a deliciously frenzied comedy shoot-em-up featuring armed and dangerous, but mostly stupid anthropomorphic characters. Check *Fusion* out for the back-ups.~NF

FUTURAMA

Slave Labor: *3 issues 1989*

Art Deco science fiction à la Metropolis, or the far superior Hernandez brothers comic Mister X. Set in generic future city Kronos, the silly script has rival night club owners Frank Dekker and baddie Karl Von Horst fighting over beautiful singer Zarah Heiberg. Zarah is engaged to Frank, and exclusively contracted to his establishment, The Egyptian. The singers at Karl's Club Dementia are all robots, so he sets in motion a wicked scheme to convince Zarah that she's actually an android named Zara. In addition to satisfying his own depraved appetites, Karl hopes that Zarah/Zara's drugged, robotic performances at Dementia will cause Frank to forget all about his business, leaving The Egyptian ripe for takeover... Although Futurama tries far too hard for it to be really 'cool', the sexy, streamlined artwork of Ken Holewcyznski is worth a mention. While clearly influenced by the 'clear line' style of Spanish artist Daniel Torres, Holewcyznski's gift for retro design still deserves a better showcase than this instantly forgettable piece of fluff.~AL

FUTURAMA

Bongo: *10 issues + 2000 to date, 2 issue microseries ('The Futurama/Simpsons Infinitely Secret Crossover Crisis') 2002-2003*

Based on Matt Groening's other cartoon series, set in the year 3000, this series features further adventures of all of the regular characters: dumb man-out-of-time, Philip J. Fry, robot Bender, one-eyed alien, Leela, Fry's descendant, senile Professor Farnsworth, consummate bureaucrat, Hermes Conrad, rich-girl, Amy Wong and lobster-like alien, Dr Zoidberg. They all work for the Professor's *Planet Express Delivery Service* and must face giant sea monkeys on a rampage (1), robotic space pirates (2), and the consequences of Fry and the Professor having their minds switched (9). Other issues include parodies of Apocalypse Now (4), *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire* (5) and *X-Men* (8, a homage to Jack Kirby). Eric Rogers wrings plenty of humour out of the scripts, and the different artists (including James Lloyd and John Delaney) manage to maintain a look consistent with the cartoon throughout.

The Simpsons crossover is written by Ian Boothby and drawn by Lloyd with the set-up being that Evil Brain Spawn have trapped the *Futurama* characters in a *Simpsons* comic where only Fry and Leela's pet, Nibbler are immune to assimilation into the comic's reality. Not as funny as the separate strips, unfortunately, though there is some fun to be had in the way the characters react to each other.~NF

THE FUTURIANS

Marvel: *Graphic Novel 1983*
Lodestone: *3 issues 1985-1986**
Eternity: *1 issue 1987*

The graphic novel tells the origin story for this group of superheroes, and it's a complicated one, involving two warring factions from Earth's future who come back to the 1980s to fight their last battle. The villains have arrived with a full warfleet, but the white hats were only able to send one representative. This representative gathers a group of people with various talents and tricks them into undergoing a process that turns them into superheroes, complete with helmets and costumes, and immediately sends them into battle. The other issues, which are published as a collection in the Eternity book, are set in the aftermath of the battle.

Even though many elements of the story-lines have been seen elsewhere, and more than once, Dave Cockrum (as writer) has put in a lot of imagination where it counts, making the comic a fresh read, with solid characters and plots. True, the characters aren't particularly striking as individuals, but Cockrum handles them well as a team, and the tension of their forced origin is always simmering quietly in the background. Cockrum's pencilled artwork doesn't call attention to itself, but tells the story very clearly, and it's a story that deserves to be continued.~FC

Recommended: Marvel Graphic Novel, Eternity collection

FUZZ & PLUCK

Fantagraphics: *1 volume 1999, 2 issues + ('Splitsville') 2001 to date*

Fuzz is a teddy bear and Pluck a featherless rooster, who inhabit a strange world where humans and talking animals co-exist, but where the exact boundaries between them are not defined. 'Splitsville' picks up where the *Zero Zero* serial, reprinted in the 1999 volume, left our heroes – working in a fast-food joint called, Lardy's. The adventure begins when a surly dog attacks Fuzz during a delivery and Pluck is fired after fighting with a customer. Fuzz finds himself at the mercy of a young girl's other toys, while Pluck is signed up for a gladiatorial show. Ted Stearn draws in a crude style that suggests lack of ability (though it's not unappealing), but the inventive, cynical storylines more than compensate.~NF

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* Available in a collected edition

G

G-8 AND HIS BATTLE ACES

Blazing: *1 issue 1991*

Strange attempt to revive G-8, the pulp fighter ace from World War One, in which the green monstrosity Grun hogs the limelight, happily killing Allies and Hun alike. On the flip side of the comic is 'The Spider's Web' (by the same creative team of Chuck Dixon and Sam Glanzman), which explains what happens between a couple of panels in the G-8 story when Grun passes through a time portal and meets another pulp hero, the Web-Man. Nothing more than a curiosity.~NF

G. MEN

Caliber: *1 issue 1991*

Hard-boiled science fiction thriller with a rookie trying to fit into an experienced team with a tough leader. Despite amateurish artwork and by-the-numbers plotting there is also a certain verve, too.~NF

GABRIEL

Caliber: *One-shot 1995*

Extrapolating an interesting alternate papal-controlled Glasgow, *Gabriel* ultimately comes down to an all-too-easily resolved God vs Satan conflict. The muddied storytelling obscures what could have been a far better tale, but David Hill's black and white artwork is excellent, echoing the disciplined standards of 1960s British adventure comics.~FP

GAG

Harrier: *7 issues 1987-1989*

Good old Harrier, not just there to fill the shelves with substandard sexist-fan crap, they also picked up on the 1980s British small press. Eddie Campbell is the most successful graduate of this anthology, and there are plenty of his slices of life, but Glenn Dakin's contributions are consistently better. Both are below par, though, in the best overall issue, 5, with Phil Elliott, Paul Grist, Ed Pinsent and Steve Way carrying the day. Nothing in *Gag* changes the world, and it rarely lives up to the title, but there's a gem in every issue, with John Bagnall's tale of backwoods religious repression in 6 particularly memorable. 1-3 are standard comic size, with the remainder magazine format.~FP

Recommended: 5-7

GAIJIN

Matrix: *1 issue 1987*
Caliber: *One-shot 1990*

In an America where the Republicans and Democrats live under different laws and governments, Ella Salidor, Agni, Maurice, Scream and Moravick, perform industrial espionage for the highest bidder, though there is always a chance of betrayal. The Caliber issue presents a redrawn and completed version of the story begun in the Matrix issue, then restarted in Caliber's *Roulette*. Gabriel Morrisette's artwork is full of heavy blacks, but becomes scratchier by the second strip in the Caliber issue (a solo adventure of young female, Scream, facing hooligans in a mall), and the whole tone seems unbalanced.~NF

GALACTIC GUARDIANS

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1994*

Dull and pointless *Guardians of the Galaxy* spin-off. Biff, Bang, Pow all the way.~FP

GALACTICA: The New Millennium

Realm: *1 issue 1999*

Another uninspired comic about the Brave Colonials fleeing from and fighting back against those insidious Cylons. It's no use issuing a warning as *Galactica* fans will pick it up no matter what, while regular comic fans won't go within laser-range of it. Just more of the same~WW

GALACTUS

Marvel: *One-shot (The Origin) 1983, 6 issue miniseries (The Devourer) 1999-2000*

The Origin uses panels from old Stan Lee and Jack Kirby *Thor* issues, heavily edited with new bridging text by Mark Gruenwald. In *Galactus the Devourer*, Louise Simonson, John Buscema and Bill Sienkiewicz tackle the age-old problem of rejecting Galactus' unwelcome advances as he attempts to eat planet Earth. Again. The Silver Surfer, Fantastic Four, Avengers and all the usual cosmic, alien races chip in to this competent if uninspiring fare. The plot stretches too thinly over six issues although the finale is neat and unconventional.~APS

GALAXION

Helikon: *11 issues, 1 special 1997-1999, one-shot (Galaxion/Amy Unbounded Flip-book) 1999*

Impressive space-opera epic, with Manga overtones from Tara Jenkins Tallan. When the starship Galaxion tests its experimental hyperspace engines they return to real space orbiting a planet in what seems to be an alternate universe. When a contact team touches down they find the remains of the lost starship Hiawatha, missing for a decade, and commanded by the husband of the Galaxion's commander, Scavina. Mystery piles upon mystery as survivors are found and the natives of the planet try to embroil the crew in their war with mind controlling aliens. How can the crew hold themselves together and get themselves home? The special recounts an adventure of the contact team in their student days, and the flip-book co-stars Amy Unbounded, a sort of Pippi Longstocking, set in medieval Wales. Welcome fun, well handled.~WW

GALAXY EXPRESS 999

Viz: *5 volumes + 1998 to date*

Leiji Matsumoto possesses an impressive CV, including creating several of Japan's most successful anime series, *Starblazers* and *Captain Harlock* among them. These two hundred plus page books are published following serialisation in animation magazine *Animerica*, and they're a sequel to Matsumoto's original *Galaxy Express 999* series, which ran over four thousand pages. It remains unseen in an English language version, which is a shame, not least because it's plain that anyone reading this would take far more away if familiar with the original. References to it, whether footnoted or otherwise obvious, are plentiful to begin with, and support the claim that this is the project closest to Matsumoto's heart. This being the case, self-indulgence abounds, particularly in the first volume. Overall it's an extremely frustrating series, with plenty of irritations and faults, and sometimes only ethereal fragments of plot, yet for all that, very occasionally it's wonderful. There are many glorious images of the old steam train chugging through space, and brief, but inventive, science-fiction stories offering commentary on the constants of human nature. The knowing Maetel and the innocent Tetshuro journey across the galaxy in the train, largely passive observers of formidable threats and, all too often, the demise of a civilisation. The gloomy character of Maetel annoys, forever given to wistfully oblique pronouncements and portentous references to a future larger purpose. It's years away at the current rate of publication, and if the joy of the series is the journey, not the destination, why continually refer to it? Also vexing is the constant fashion in which Matsumoto's earlier creations drop in and out for purposeless cameos, although that may be an extra treat for some. As it really makes little difference where you start, volume 4 is cited as the best so far, and if you like that investigate further.~WJ

GAMBIT

Oracle: *2 issues 1986*
Eternity: *1 issue 1988*

Gambit is an express freighter, fighter-bomber and habitat, as well as being the fastest ship in the galaxy. It's captained by Gem Bel-Sonnek, who rescues political activist, Sean Jaxton, from his prison satellite. Sean ends 2 facing a life-threatening situation, but by the time of the Eternity issue, he's head of the mysterious project Malaclypse, and still attracting unexplained accidents. This shows some promise in its original incarnation, though there is clearly a lot for its creator, Scott Bieser, to learn. As he doesn't provide much background story for the re-launch, however, readers will make little sense of it on its own.~NF

GAMBIT

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1994, 4 issue miniseries 1997, 25 issues, 2 Annuals 1999-2001, one-shot (Gambit and Bishop: 'Alpha') 2001, 6 issue miniseries (Gambit and Bishop) 2001*

Before he was an X-man, Gambit was a member of the Thieves Guild, bitter rivals of the Guild of Assassins. Gambit married the daughter of the Assassins' leader and both Guilds pay tribute to an immortal sorceress called Candra for which she provides an elixir of life. Gambit's wife is hovering in a coma between life and death. It's time for the latest dose of elixir to be doled out. Got it? Now go watch *Romeo and Juliet*. Howard Mackie and Lee Weeks must have before churning out such predictable, sophomoric melodrama. Mackie returns for the second outing, aided by Terry Kavanagh, Klaus Janson and Bill Sienkiewicz to tell the tale of Anielle, an Angel who has fallen to Earth and become the prey of evil gangsters and prominent church folk alike. On the run, she turns to the chivalrous Gambit for protection. It's pretentious and silly.

The series begins at a breakneck pace with the Cajun thief stealing alien technology from a freshly discovered pyramid, incurring the wrath of a private security force, captivating the mandatory sexy archeologist and coming to the attention of recurring villain the X-Cutioner, all the while slowly advancing a major plot strand. This is the unravelling of the seemingly benevolent master planner New Son's secret plan, which winds through the entire series, leading to a time-trip to the 1890s a retooling of Gambit's powers, other dimensions, an exploration of his mysterious origins and lots of guests. Fast paced and well crafted by Fabian Nicieza, Steve Skroce, Yanick Paquette and others, it manages to avoid many of the pitfalls of a comic so closely tied to *X-Men* continuity

In *Gambit and Bishop*, Bishop, fellow X-Man and mutant from the future, has been mysteriously afflicted with an alien symbiote, so he and Gambit, who don't like or trust each other, go off on a jaunt to find out where it came from and if it's dangerous. Somehow this takes another six issues to tell, and naturally it leads to lots of fighting and explosions and the potential destruction of the Universe. Scott Lobdell and Joe Pruett totally waste the talents of pencillers Cary Nord and Georges Jeanty. Completists only.~WW

GAMBIT AND THE XTERNALS

Marvel: 4 issue miniseries 1995

One of the miniseries in Marvel's 'Age of Apocalypse', which placed the *X-Men* characters in an alternate world where their enemy rules the Earth. *Gambit and the Xternals* was probably the least interesting of the series, pitting the Cajun card-thrower and the immortal Externals against nothing very interesting as they attempt to steal the M'Kraan crystal and restore normality to a fractured universe. It's more cosmic than the other 'Age of Apocalypse' comics, but lacks the character-driven analysis which made the best ones worth the effort, leaving a story that would be dull no matter what world it was set on.~JC

GAMERA

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1996*

Those outside Godzilla fandom will be unaware that Gamera is a giant-flying-turtle equivalent of the Big G, and the guardian of the universe to boot. He's summoned via an amulet by a psychic teenager, and called forth initially to fight a genetically engineered giant pterodactyl. Gamera is competent without ever being outstanding, but should appeal to all enthusiasts of big monster movies.~WJ

GAMMARAUDERS

DC: *10 issues 1989*

Based on the role-playing game, this reads and looks like an inventive TV cartoon show. The story focuses on Jok Tadsworth, handler of a bioborg (a giant combination of beast and technology), and his well-characterised fellow-handlers. Martin King and Dave Cooper's artwork (most issues) is delightful, and Peter Gillis' scripts are light and witty.~WJ

GANG BUSTERS

DC: 67 issues 1947-1958

Based on the popular US radio show (1936-1957) in which true crime stories were broadcast and the FBI offered descriptions of wanted criminals, *Gang Busters* began as a fifty-two-page comic (1-23) with four stories and a 'Case Book Mystery' in which the reader was given the opportunity to spot where the criminal had slipped up before the strip ended. This feature became 'You Be The Detective' before being dropped in 1956. With artwork generally above average, the stories, as varied as possible, attempt to pick out the more interesting cases (catching criminals with a police badge, the criminal in the line-up accusing the eyewitness of the crime etc.). Artists include Dan Barry, Ruben Moreira and Mort Meskin, with occasional strips by Nick Cardy, Frank Frazetta and Jack Kirby.~NF

GANGLAND

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1998**

A strong cast of contributors (Richard Corben, Jamie Delano, Peter Kuper, Frank Quitely, Eric Shanower, Lucius Shepherd) produces a selection of crime stories in this anthology series. Although seemingly unsure if they're doing *Reservoir Dogs* or *Twilight Zone*, much of the material is strong and fresh. Especially noteworthy are 'Clean House' by Brian Azzarello and Tim Bradstreet and 'The Bear' by Dave Gibbons both in 1 and 'The Big Snooze' by David Lloyd in 4.~WW
Recommended: 1, 4

THE GARGOYLE

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1985*

As introduced in *The Defenders*, the Gargoyle was a rare interesting idea sinking in a sea of mediocrity. Already in his eighties, Isaac Christians didn't want to die, and was granted his wish by a demon at the cost of being trapped in the body of a gargoyle and therefore shunned by all who knew him. In this series Christians learns the Gargoyle was a malevolent living entity who was transferred into his old body. In parts charming and wistful, particularly when dealing with Christians' past and lost love, and offering some interesting theological theories, the whole never quite gels. It's because the Gargoyle's a superhero and therefore he has to fight, but J.M. DeMatteis and Mark Badger aren't very interested in that concept.~FP

GASM

Stories, Layouts and Press: *4 issues 1977-1978*

Publisher Myron Fass built a career on cheap rip-offs of other people's comics, and *Gasm* was an extraordinarily quick off the mark *Heavy Metal* clone. Fass picked up on *Heavy Metal*'s spaceships and unclothed lovelies but missed out on the subtleties and depth. However, whether by luck or judgement, he built up an eclectic roster of young contributors, including Matt Howarth, Mark Wheatley, Chuck Dixon and even Ben Katchor. With some minor

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* Available in a collected edition

Richard Corben strips in later issues, this is far from the worthless package it could so easily have been, although much of the material here is patchy at best. A curio.~DAR

GASP

ACG: *4 issues 1967*

A horror anthology title with nothing outstanding, but with the odd flash of originality in each issue. For instance, in 'The Devil's a Businessman' (1) we see time-and-motion studies being applied in hell, in 'The Fourth Wish' (2) there's a nice spin on the genie-in-a-bottle yarn, and 'You've got the Wrong Ghosts'(3) is unusual for dealing with cowardice in war. Even in the best stories, the endings fall flat, but you can tell that they're trying.~FC

GASP!

Gasp: *One-shot 1994*

Four sample pages from sixteen independently produced titles. There are no publication details, but this was presumably a co-funded project intended as a convention giveaway. *Strangers In Paradise* has the largest following, but there's also *Buck Godot, Dragonrok, Tyrant, Strange Attractors, Wolff & Byrd, THB, Poison Elves* and *Rarebit Fiends* among others. As all the pages come from issues of the comics and this is more difficult to come by than any of them, don't bother.~WJ

GATECRASHER

Black Bull: *4 issue miniseries ('Ring of Fire') 2000*, 6 issues 2000-2001*

Alec Wagner is a typical high-school klutz who happens to belong to a secret organisation (The Split-Second Squad) that protects the Earth from inter-dimensional invasions. 'Ring of Fire' establishes the basic premise that Alec screws everything up, but because he's accidentally become the only means of spotting where the invasions are going to occur, he's also very important. The series continues with Alec now in college and focuses on his rivalry with fellow squad member, Trystan. Played for laughs by writer Mark Waid, this can be entertaining and it's pleasingly drawn by Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti, but Alec is so stupid, it's difficult to feel any empathy for the character. The final issue promises storylines will be continued in future miniseries.~NF

Jademan Opens THE GATES OF THE NIGHT

Jademan: *4 issue miniseries 1990-1991*

A variety of horror stories in the manner of DC's old mystery anthologies, except with more room for the creators to play. Jademan don't bother with credits, which is a shame because all the art is of a decent standard, if sometimes a little cramped, and a few stories are excellently drawn. The plots are very much hokey old horror standbys, with the one about a person being influenced by an evil object overused. There is a good story about a demon baby in 4, but the best is the horrific 'Bridge of No Return' in 1, in which the ghosts of the Japanese soldiers that occupied Hong Kong in World War II return in all their brutality. The best issue overall is 2, comprising one long story about a devil doll constructed to the 1980s straight-to-video horror template. Read with a screeching violin soundtrack.~FP

GAY COMICS

Kitchen Sink: *5 issues 1983-1984*

Bob Ross: *20 issues (6-25), 1 Special 1985-1998*

Initially an annual collection of comics by or about gay people, edited by Howard Cruse (1-4) and then Robert Triptow (5-13), with issue 6 Bob Ross, publisher of San Francisco's *Bay Area Reporter*, took over and announced a quarterly schedule. Though the contributors didn't have to be gay or lesbian themselves, the content of the stories was always predominantly about homosexual experience. Generally, this meant a light-hearted approach, but harder-edged tales also found their way in and even with the comedy, the difficulties and politics of gay life were never far from the surface. Kitchen Sink's issues contain stories from such notables as Lee Marrs (1-4), Roberta Gregory (1-5), Howard Cruse (1-5), Jerry Mills (4, 5) and Tim Barela (5). Mills' 'Poppers' stories and Barela's 'Leonard and Larry' strips would become firm favourites with the readership, the former a clean, bright comedy about sexy, dumb boys with big muscles, the latter a soap opera about a mature gay couple. 9 is an all 'Poppers' issue, and 'Leonard and Larry' featured in the 1992 special.

The change in publisher didn't affect the style or direction to any great degree, although Cruse was a less common contributor (Wendel débuted in 6, but the only other Cruse strips are in 10 and 14). There was some effort to give the book an international flavour, with Patrick Marcel's funny animal strip 'Night of the Hunter' and other contributions from 3-12, Theo Bogart in 2, and Brits Howard Stangroom and Steve Lowther in most issues from 11 onwards. Their 'Ride the Wild Surf' in 14 is an effective Archie and Romance parody rolled into one. With 14 Andy Mangels became editor and generally tried to include shorter strips from a wider range of contributors, some more successful than others. Ivan Velez Jr, Roberta Gregory, Donna Barr, Jennifer Camper and Ralf König became regulars. Of the newer contributors, Catherine Doherty (23) looks most promising. 19 was an Alison Bechdel special and 22 was a funny-animal special with Waller and Worley's Omaha, plus contributions from Leanne Franson, Diane Di Massa and Joan Hilty. Sam Kieth contributes a story featuring characters from The Maxx, in 24. 25 is an eighty-page anniversary issue gathering seventy-one new contributions from the creators of past issues. Though the resultant strips are largely one-pagers, this is a fine introduction to the diversity of the material produced so far. It's also a farewell to the title, though new issues aren't ruled out entirely. As an anthology, *Gay Comix* has suffered from a lack of depth to the story-telling and relied too much on short gag-based strips. The special issues have been the only place where a consistent quality of contribution has been apparent. Too many issues seem to have earnest but dull contributions or more of the same old jokes about gay life. Mangels attempted to address this with the themed or single-contributor issues and, to be fair, there is something in each issue to make it worth reading.~NF

Recommended: 1-6, 14, 15, 19, 22

GAZILLION

Image: *One-shot 1999*

Writer Howard Shum transfers cold-war politics to a future galactic scenario for this focus on spy Gazillion, sent to infiltrate an enemy base to destroy a super weapon. Decently enough written, it tested the waters for a series that never materialised, possibly due to the unappealling art.~FP

Batman GCPD Gotham City Police Department

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1996*

Chuck Dixon writes *Hill Street Blues* with the *Batman* supporting cast and weaves several investigations and an eccentric cast with aplomb, even managing a subtle Batman cameo. The fusing of Jim Aparo and Bill Sienkiewicz's very individual art styles is strange at first, but Aparo's solid storytelling shines through. Solid story and good art make this a benchmark for the minimum standard all comics should attain.~WJ

GE ROUGE

Verotik: *3 issue miniseries 1997*

More of Verotik's unsavoury association of titilation with extreme violence, this time with a voodoo theme. Wanton slash'n'gore with tits'n'bums galore, but a plot, heaven forbid, no. Anyone with an IQ higher than their shoe size is advised to stay well clear.~FP

Doug TenNapel's GEAR

Fireman Press: *6 issue miniseries 1998-1999**

Simon, Waffle, Gordon and Mr Black are cats sent to capture a guardian (giant robot) to help protect their home of Newton from attack by the mantid insects of South Plate.

Unknown to them is that the cats of North Plate have allied themselves with the dogs of Dogtown in order to defeat them both. At the same time, the semi-legendary Forbidden Mechanism (Gear), is being sought by factions on all sides and will prove decisive in the coming battle. Blockily defined, with few brushstrokes, Douglas TenNapel's artwork is impressionistic with a rough delineation that makes some panels hard to read. His story's an odd mix of black humour and adventure, but visually impressive (most of the time).~NF

GEAR STATION

Image: *5 issues 2000*

Dan Fraga's two-fisted fairytale where innocent country boy Bryce Carter is caught in the intrigues of his land's corrupt rulers. Prince Arthur leads a secret resistance against the wicked Drach Domo, inquisitor to the King, and he and his allies help Bryce train to become a court champion. Just then the slinky Fable arrives from the future. The initial story arc ends in 4 after Domo's showdown with Arthur. 5 is a disappointing fill-in, but Felipe Smith's masterful five page 'GS Animated' puts the entire series to shame. This series' artwork features the gimmick of linework round the characters separating from the rendered backgrounds like an animated cel. Too bad that the figurework, proportion and storytelling is borderline inept.~SW

Brother Power, The GEEK

DC: *2 issues 1968*

DC/Vertigo: *One-shot 1993*

Well, where shall we begin? This series was ridiculed for decades, and only in recent years has DC owned up to it. "Here is the real-life scene of the dangers in Hippie-Land!"exclaims the first cover. As you may have gathered, The Geek is a period piece set in the heyday of flower power from ageing hippy Joe Simon, the man who gave us Captain America and instigated various comic-book genres. Brother Power is a tailor's dummy who's brought to life by a bolt of lightning and given superstrength (hey, this is comics, remember). Befriended by hippies he helps them further the cause of peace, love and flower power, beats up a bunch of Hell's Angels, goes to school, gets kidnapped by the Psychedelic Circus (oh yes) and forced to appear in their freak show, escapes and naturally runs for Congress, is hounded by the police and eventually drowns. And this is only the first issue. The second is just as, er... inventive. *The Geek* is actually an original, well-crafted, enjoyable, if indulgent, tale that every comic reader should really experience. Just wear a flower in your hair to get you in the mood, though.

Iin some ways *The Geek* could be seen as the forerunner to DC's mature imprint, Vertigo, who published the 1993 special (just titled *The Geek*). Scripter Rachel Pollack brings back some elements from the original series – the circus freak, corruption in corporate America and a good dose of Nazis – but updates the character to a sort of "toy spirit". Disjointed in places, there seems to be a need to legitimise the character to lessen the absurdity. Why bother? Anyway the art by Michael Allred more than makes up for any shortcomings. *Brother Power, The Geek*: cool or crap – you decide!~HY

Recommended: 1-2

GEEKSVILLE

3 Finger Prints: *3 issues 1999*

Image: *7 issues (0-6) 2000-2001*

Picking up from *The 3 Geeks*, this follows three, male teenagers obsessed with superhero comics, who spend their time discussing continuity, artists and what they would do if they were in charge of *The X-Men*. The first series is one-off stories, while the second is mainly about their attempts at self-publishing. In the last issue, Rich Koslowski writes an editorial saying how disappointed he is that comic fans don't want to read a comic about them, which in some ways shows where he went wrong. Superhero-reading 14-year-olds want to read superhero comics, not read about what geeks they are, and those comic types who hate Marvel zombies would find his portrayal of them here too affectionate. *Geeksville* also contains back up material, but nothing of great note. The Geeks return in *Dork Tower*.~DB

GEISHA

Oni Press: *4 issue miniseries 1998*, one-Shot ('Out of Tune') 2000*

Jomi Sohodo is an android, adopted into a family of bodyguards. When her latest art exhibition fails, she asks her father for a job in the company, and he decides to give her all of the boring jobs until she decides to go back to painting. During her first assignment, however, she runs across a blackmailer, Brant, who's involved with Kelowna Peck, who has just asked Jomi to forge a Vermeer for him. 'Out of Tune' is a more thoughtful strip with various characters looking for inspiration to solve a particular problem. Andi Watson writes and draws appealing, down-to-earth characters and manages to keep the whole light-hearted without playing it entirely for laughs.~NF

Recommended: 1-4, 'Out of Tune'

GEMINAR: 72 Page Special

Image: *One-shot 2000*

Created by Terry Collins and Al Bigley, Geminar is a human, given superpowers by aliens, who encourage him to serve the cause of justice against the empire building K'Trall. Intended originally as separate issues, the story is effectively told in three parts, the key to each being that nothing is as it seems. Bigley's agreeable artwork displays the influence of Joe Staton and Steve Ditko, though it's sometimes over-inked.~NF

GEMINI BLOOD

DC/Helix: *8 issues 1996-1997*

Science-fiction novelist Christopher Hinz adapts his own books about a chaotic future America where genetically engineered people with 'gemini blood' have two bodies, controlled by the same consciousness. Threatened by a gemini assassin, a large corporation hires a team of misfit mercenaries to protect itself. Hinz's world is full of fascinating detail, but his characters lack life. He falls back on every cliché in the book – gentle giant, genius leader, traumatised veteran – hey, it's The *A-Team*! Tommy Lee Edwards' heavy, blocky artwork suits the action-packed nature of the comic but doesn't seem particularly suited to portraying emotion. Which is fine because there isn't much. Average shoot-em-up that could have been much better.~FJ

GEMMA BOVERY

Jonathan Cape: *Graphic Novel 1999*

One of the myths of the graphic novel is that if it has a squarebound spine it must be for "adults" despite invariably being populated by men in tights. This is that rarest of creatures; a graphic novel worthy of the name dealing with adult themes and emotions in a gripping, intelligent way. It's also witty, ironic, perceptive, beautifully drawn and ultimately one of the finest comics ever drawn.

For years now Posy Simmonds has been cartoonist in residence on the *Guardian* newspaper's Women's page, and once a week the space has been hers to do with what she wants. Over the course of two years she serialised the saga of the capricious, beautiful Gemma Bovery, her husband Charlie, her lovers and her final downfall. Simmonds details Gemma's life through her diaries, which are interspersed with comments from her obsessive neighbour Joubert, who has stolen the books. Visually, Simmonds mixes her beautiful soft pencil and wash drawings with excerpts of text, and occasional dialogue. There is a lot of reading here, but the art is never extraneous or overpowered. Her drawing has never been better, with subtly realised people and wonderfully evocative settings that pull you into the story. This is simply a perfectly realised combination of words and pictures.

Gemma is portrayed as a complex force of nature, constantly wanting the unattainable, and unrelentingly acerbic, but also a romantic and somewhat tragic figure destined never to find contentment. The story described her early romance with Charlie in London, their subsequent retreat to rural France and her almost inevitable affairs and liaisons. Simmonds creates believable and human characters while also satirising them, and takes delight in picking over the foibles and relationships of the British middle classes. Her observations are cutting and perceptive.

The title is more than a throwaway gimmick. The characters are aware of Flaubert's tragic romance *Madame Bovary*, but that doesn't stop them unswervingly echoing the plot. I'ts a simple device, but by having her protagonists comment on it and fight against it Simmonds imbues the book with added levels of intrigue and perception. It is a rare comic that succeeds on every level and is an unmitigated triumph, but this is that comic. No serious collection should be without it.~DAR

Recommended

GEN ACTIVE

DC/WildStorm: *6 issue miniseries 2000*

Having proved he can handle young superhero soap admirably with his run on *Titans* and *Green Lantern*, Jay Faerber gets a shot at WildStorm's teens-to-20-somethings Gen^{13} and their alternate numbers DV8. Ably assisted by penciller Whilce Portacio, this is good, solid superhero fun in the DC tradition and a sound marketing move to introduce the parent company's long-term readers to its new acquisitions at the WildStorm imprint.~JC

GEN 12

Image/WildStorm: *5 issue miniseries 1998*

There's a complex set of connections between a significant proportion of the major characters populating the WildStorm produced titles at Image. Chronologically everything starts with Team 7, and their history is gradually being filled in by series revealing the details, of which this is one. The death of covert operations director Miles Craven initiates an investigation, during the course of which more letters are dotted and crossed, slotting further information between previously revealed segments. It's to writer Brandon Choi's credit that if you've not read any other WildStorm titles this is an engrossing thriller, but those familiar with the other titles will enjoy the cameos and exposition. The art by Michael Ryan and Sal Regla is occasionally static, but generally functional given their brief to illustrate pages of talking heads at a time.~FP

GEN^{13}

Image/WildStorm: *6 issues miniseries (0-5) 1994, 36 issues 1995-1998*

WildStorm: *41 issues (37-77) 1999-2002, series two 4 issues + 2002 to date*

The original miniseries told a competent tale of teenagers co-opted against their will into Project Genesis, an attempt to unleash the powers inherited from their fathers, the government-created super-soldiers of Team 7. It also dealt with the group's escape from the shady government operation, but it is with the ongoing series that Gen 13 really comes into its own, as Jim Lee, Brandon Choi and Scott Campbell settle down to have real fun with their characters. Unlike most teen groups, these kids are irreverent, badly behaved and far from their clean-cut predecessors. They defeat villains by distracting them with bad guitar playing, sneak out in the night, smoke, fart and generally act like real teenagers (with superpowers). Their adventure on an island of half-naked nympho (possibly) lesbian amazons is the creative team at their tongue in cheek best (3-5). The fun and games continue throughout the first 25 issues, consistently well written by Choi and beautifully pencilled by Campbell and his successor Al Rio, who begins as a fill-in artist in the mid-teens and eventually takes over. It's a fast-moving, light-hearted superhero romp all the way, with the alternate future yarn in 22-24 particularly worth a mention. The miniseries and 1-13 are collected in a cheaply priced black and white *WildStorm Archives* book.

Choi's sign-off in issue 25 seems to mark the end of Gen^{13}'s raison d'etre. Whereas the creators were never afraid to play for laughs, their replacements, John Arcudi and Gary Frank never quite hit the same note, often making the characters and plots seem idiotic rather than funny. Their introduction of Fairchild's long-lost father as a supporting character provides an interesting diversion, but overall the seventeen issues they produce are little more than run-of-the-mill superheroics. One problem that couldn't be ignored by this point was that WildStorm's decision to age its characters, if not in real time then in quicker time than is the norm for comics, meant that its teenagers had grown up to be twenty-somethings. The next generation of writers did their best to play on this. Adam Warren takes the title back to its comedy roots in 43 and 44, and. Scott Lobdell and Ed Benes continue the trend to 54 with stories making the most of Gen 13's strengths: their ages and their slacker tendencies. They're just as funny as directionless, trust-fund twenty-somethings as they were as irreverent teens, needing a writer with a good grasp of comedy to bring out the best in them.

Lobdell departs mid-story in 55, and Warren returns with 60. Perhaps aware that the joke has started to wear thin, he favours stand-alone stories. Each issue is good enough when taken alone, but leaves nothing to entice the reader back. The teen comic lacked any teenagers, and something had to give. As the series edged past 60, Warren slowly introduced new, younger cast members who were intended to replace the old. Sadly, they weren't anywhere near as interesting. The decision to write this off as a mistake in favour of another entirely new cast of disaffected teens brought with it the obvious editorial gimmick of restarting with a new issue 1. Priced at just 13 cents, it was an appealing jumping on point for new readers, or jumping back-on point for those who'd fallen by the wayside. Unfortunately, a well past his best Chris Claremont writes, and his execrable dialogue reads like what it is: a middle-aged man churning out stereotype ideas of teen angst tired before these characters were born. In some respects, *Gen^{13}* has been a victim of its own success. Ageing characters has necessitated major line-up changes. The new batch of persecuted superkids, however, seems dull and derivative, leaving the impression that *Gen^{13}* has really had its day.

As with many Image comics, several issues have variant covers, including fourteen for issue 1, and four for 24, while issue 13 is split into three one-third sized mini-issues numbered 13a, 13b and 13c.~JC

GEN^{13} BOOTLEG

Image/WildStorm: *20 issues, 1 Annual 1996-1998*

Issued, apparently to provide versions of the characters other than those from the creators of the regular title. Possibly also to have another *Gen^{13}* title on sale while the characters were hot. Cancellation came, though, as *Bootleg* was still selling, the reason given being it was becoming difficult to attract top of the line creators. One can sympathise with the editorial viewpoint. While never outstanding, there are no poor stories in the first dozen issues, although Adam Warren does stretch plot and patience with three issues of Grunge's Hong Kong action film in 8-10*. The team of Alan Davis and Mark Farmer always deliver, and in 1-2 it's Farmer writing as well as inking, and 3 is a text and illustration medieval fairy tale by Dan Norton and Sandra Hope. The medieval theme returns from James Robinson and Scott Hampton, but in the setting of a modern day renaissance fair for 7, and Walt and Louise Simonson produce 4, guest starring a member of Weapon Zero. Terry Moore's time travel story in 5-6 is somewhat undermined by Tomm Coker's stylish and static art, but not significantly. Walt Simonson is back in 11 and 12, but merely in a scripting capacity for what is Aaron Lopresti's baby crushing several homages together, with *The Island of Dr Moreau* providing the plot.

Beyond 12 the best stories are Jan Strnad's tale of Roxy's death in 15-16, nicely illustrated by Sean Shaw and Kevin Nowlan and 20's resurrection issue by Christopher Golden and Charlie Adlard. Both maintain the light feel of the parent title while dealing with potentially tragic subjects. The annual from Warren Ellis and Steve Dillon, however, strays too far from the fun world occupied by Gen13.~FP

GEN^{13} Miniseries and One-shots

Image/WildStorm: *One-shot ('Rave') 1995, one-shot (Gen 13/Maxx) 1995, 2 issue microseries ('Ordinary Heroes') 1996, one-shot ('Unreal World') 1996, one-shot (Gen13/Generation X) 1997, one-shot ('3-D Special') 1997, one-shot ('Yearbook') 1997, 3 issue miniseries ('Interactive') 1997-1998*, 3 issue miniseries ('Magical Drama Queen Roxy') 1998, 2 issue microseries (Gen 13/Monkeyman and O'Brien) 1998*

WildStorm: *One-shot ('Going West') 1999, one-shot ('Grunge Saves the World') 1999, one-shot ('Wild Times' 1999, one-shot ('Wired') 1999, one-shot ('Carny Folk') 2000, one-shot ('A Christmas Caper') 2000, one-shot (Gen 13/Fantastic Four) 2001, one-shot ('Medicine Song') 2001, one-shot ('Science Friction') 2001*

Of the team-ups, *The Maxx* and *Fantastic Four*, illustrated by Tomm Coker and Kevin Maguire respectively, are the most successful, the latter a comedic race to stop a giant-sized Qeelocke from meeting another member of his alien species on a rampage in New York. *Generation X* and *Monkeyman and O'Brien* are both illustrated by Arthur Adams, but only the latter, with its tale of a world of moral opposites, approaches a natural use of the characters. Adams is also responsible for the short 'Mauling' in the '3-D Special' also including one of Tom McWeeney's adventures of a miniature Gen13. These 'mini' characters are also the heroes of 'A Christmas Caper', a fantasy adventure with Santa Claus captured by International Operations. Other comedy adventures include 'Grunge Saves the World' by Kevin Altieri, 'Magical Drama Queen Roxy' by Adam Warren and 'Science Friction' drawn by Matt Haley and Aaron Lopresti; all are entertaining, but unchallenging reading. 'Interactive' offers readers the chance to choose how certain plot elements will be worked out, by voting between issues. This is an interesting experiment, but hardly leads to great comics.

Of the stories with a more serious intent, 'Ordinary Heroes' suffers from over-dark colouring and overwriting, but otherwise Adam Hughes' strip is a downbeat look at the nature of heroism. 'Wired', by Mike Heisler and Richard Bennett, looks good, but its story is slight and 'Unreal World', by Heisler and Humberto Ramos features a rather pedestrian battle against a mind-controlling villain. 'Going West' is an interesting mix of good-intentioned storytelling and humour, as Fairchild and Rainmaker investigate the ominous birth of a white buffalo whilst their team-mates hunt for gold. Written by Joe Pruett and drawn by Andrew Robinson, who are atypical creators for Gen^{13}, this is one of the better uses of the characters. The best characterisation of all is provided in 'Medicine Song' by writer Ben Raab, as Rainmaker returns to her home to face a rogue shaman and her own fears. Unfortunately, the artwork by Brent Anderson and Will Blyberg does not complement the script. 'Carny Folk' reprints backup strips from the regular series (32, 34, 36, 38), 'Yearbook' is largely pin-ups whilst 'Rave' contains interviews with the creators, character biographies, pinups and a one-page strip by Matt Feazell.~NF

GENE DOGS

Marvel UK: *3 issues 1993*

A team of counter-terrorists are saved from death by a secret weapon that rewrites their DNA in combination with the genetic material of various animals, including a dinosaur. The resulting hero-type creatures battle superfoes engaged in a war between rival conglomerates. Bold story-telling can't hide the lack of originality in the premise or the characters.~NF

GENERATION X

Marvel: *75 issues, 5 Annuals, 2 Specials 1994-2001*

In 1994 Image were successfully selling comics with continuity-shy artwork featuring pin-up-friendly characters. Ever the bandwagon-jumpers, Marvel added in direct links to the X-Men, namely Jubilee and their dullest ever scripter Scott Lobdell, and achieve their own Imagey hit. A new group of students attend *Xavier's Academy for Gifted Children*, which is now run by Emma Frost (The White Queen) and Sean Cassidy (The Banshee). They bicker, but there's an understated romance going on for the first few years. Joining Jubilee in class are Husk – New Mutant Cannonball's little sister, who can shed her skin to reveal new bodies and substances; Chamber whose telekinetic power literally erupts from his mouth and throat; invulnerable telepath Monet StCroix known as M. Synch who can attune himself to other nearby mutants' abilities, Angelo 'Skin' Espinosa who can control ductile lengths of his grey skin, and the enigmatic Penance is diamond hard with razor-sharp edges all over her scarlet body. The first villain to raise his head is genetic vampire Emplate who keeps returning due to his links with Penance and Monet.

Lobdell scripts the first 28 issues passably, concentrating on character interaction, although his cartoon Londoner dialogue for the oddly spelled Jonothon is unbearable. Co-creator and artist Chris Bachalo is usually inked by Mark Buckingham in 1-6, 18-22, and 27-31. Many hands draw the series in between, occasionally very nicely, but none with a flair that even approaches Bachalo's. The stories concentrate on the cast and are therefore hard to summarise individually. The mutants fight to control Penance in 3, and she provides a surprise revelation in 12. Synch falls under Emplate's influence in 14 and battles his team-mates in 15, and Howard the Duck guest stars in 21-25 where Nightmare influences Emma's dreams, which begin to affect reality. 27 features the classic short 'Cooking With Jubilee' by Jim Mahfood, who also produces 1998's Underground Special.

32 ignores several hanging threads from 31 as the comic changes creative hands, with Larry Hama writing mediocre stories to 47, including the team spending several mystified issues inside a fantasy jungle with locomotives running through it. Terry Dodson's decorative art starts in 38 with its pronounced Adam Hughes influence. Apart from the occasional explosion of action, the title is doomed to two years of catalogue poses and exquisite talking heads. There are important revelations about Penance in 40, and having dipped his toes in the water with 45, Jay Faerber renders *Generation X* readable again between 48 and 62. His highlights include Generation X versus The X-Men in 54-55, even if they are wearing Hellions costumes. 59 is devoted to visiting morlocks Artie and Leech's day out in Manhattan with the classmates and Uncle Juggernaut calls round with season's greetings in 61, while. Monet solos in 62. Warren Ellis collaborates with Brian Wood on the writing from 63 leaving it in Wood's hands for the last five issues, and artist Steve Pugh takes over for 64-72 and 74. His storytelling style is a feast of body language and able continuity, but he never finds a good inker. Their issues mark a darker trend in the themes handled in Generation X. 'Correction' deals with traders in children in 63-66, featuring new costumes, and Emma's sister Adrienne returns in 67-70. The new, casual style costumes in 71 don't save the title, with 'Four Days' in 71-74 amounting to a series of solo portraits of Chamber, M and Jubilee, Skin and Banshee then Paige. Everyone really does just decide to call it a day in 75, and the series' undertaker is the suitably dreary Ron Lim.

There was a not-unentertaining *Generation X* television movie made in 1996 starring Finola Hughes as Emma with characters like Chamber, Husk, Synch and Penance replaced or omitted due to budget restrictions. The 1995 annual features the group's encounter with The Hellfire Club, 1996's annual is an extended everyday sequence ruined by Andreas and Andrea Strucker and their mutagen wave projector and the annual for 1997 is based on the first *Generation X* novel where they meet D'Spayre. Annual 1998 chronicles a visit from Dracula and the 1999 Annual focuses on Jubilee. There's also a Holiday Special to coincide with Christmas 1998 where the kids are menaced by Orphanmaker and Nanny, and, yes, they do meet Santa. The comic celebrates Christmas in 4, 24, 60. As a next generation of X-Men this is a better fist than *New Mutants* or the feeble *X-Factor* to be sure, but that's hardly a compliment. Bachalo's imaginative, if oblique, approach quickly lost out to uninspired fill-ins and the safe slickness of Dodson. When some decent scripting finally came along with Faerber and then Ellis the title no longer had any individuality to cash in thanks to years of straw editing.~SW

Superman & Batman: GENERATIONS

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1999*, 4 issue miniseries ('II') 2001*

This Elseworlds tale covers the lives of Batman and Superman as if they aged in real time. The first series covers 1929 to 1999 in ten-year leaps (including a look at 2929). The second spans 1942 to 2019 in eleven-year steps. John Byrne takes the opportunity to give Bruce Wayne and Clark Kent families with more or less tragic consequences as the Ultra Humanite spends a lifetime seeking revenge against his earliest enemies. The second series adds detail to the first whilst including more DC heroes and their children. Byrne has fashioned a story respectful of pre-*Crisis* continuity yet playful as well in accepting its inconsistencies. One for the fans.~NF

Recommended: Miniseries one 1-4

Alan G. Oldham's GENERATOR COMICS

Caliber: *1 issue 1994*

He's not lacking an ego is Alan G. Oldham, penning a self-aggrandising editorial promoting his DJ activities, and bestowing a meaningless title on the comic named after his music company. At first glance the stylish retro-future style art would seem to confirm a talent, but start reading and it's dire. Cliché follows cliché interspersed with contemporary cultural references for a story set in 2097, and wish fulfilment women. The back-up is slightly better, but overall look without venturing further.~FP

The GENERIC COMIC BOOK

Marvel: *One-shot 1984*

My, what a jest in 1984 as Marvel turned out a generic comic by generic creators with a generic superhero, a generic origin and a generic fight. Had it been released five years later it would have put the rest of the line to shame.~FP

GENESIS

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1997*

Odd power fluctuations annoy the superheroic community, linked to a background radiation, the Kurtzberg Field, permeating the DC Universe. To the New Gods, this phenomenon is known as "The Godwave", and... it's just too stupid, okay? The upshot is, writer John Byrne attributes every DC super power to the New Gods, in a cack-handed tribute to the late Jack Kirby, nee Kurtzburg. While superheroes as we know them wouldn't be here without Kirby, this after-the-fact deification – literally, as it's revealed superheroes are what were, in ancient times, referred to as demigods – is inappropriate and offensive. While touting itself as the series that would make major changes to DC, the only people even semi-permanently affected were odd members of the Legion of Super-Heroes, the Teen Titans, and Young Heroes in Love, hardly movers and shakers. Oh, and Takion died, got better, and was installed as the new Highfather. Do yourself a favour, and if you're given these for free, rip off the rather nice Alan Davis covers and throw the rest away.~HS.

Codename GENETIX

Marvel UK: *6 issues 1993*

A team of mutants unsure of its origins battles against one of the evil corporations that also turn up in *Gene Dogs*. Heavily dependent on the dynamics of other, well-established Marvel teams (they have a Danger Room), their membership consists of token stereotypes and they don't even warrant new villains. Dull.~NF

GENOCYBER

Viz: *6 issue miniseries 1993*

The peculiar Japanese blend of innocence and ultra-violence strikes again as a teenage girl's natural psychic talents are accelerated by machine and combined with a battlesuit. This series is an origin story, but the character hasn't been seen since in English translation.~FP

GENTLEMAN JIM

Hamish Hamilton: *1 volume 1980*

Jim is a middle-aged lavatory cleaner of limited intelligence, dissatisfied with his position, but feeling trapped due to his lack of education. Given to fantasising about outrageous alternative careers, Jim eventually tries his hand at being a highwayman. Reading it, you can almost hear the Peter Sallis voiceover. In addition to producing a very good children's story, Raymond Briggs is making a few points about the failures of British social systems, and the manner in which everyone is assigned a place and not expected to rise above it. Despite depicting an obvious comedic figure, Briggs is never patronising about Jim: his eccentricities are presented in poignant fashion, and the depictions accentuate Jim's innocence in the face of more knowing caricatures. Briggs would become a little more strident in later works, and Jim's stoic naivety fatal in *When the Wind Blows*.~WJ

Recommended

GENUS

Venus: *22 issues 1993-1997*

Radio Comix: *35 issues (23-57) + 1997 to date, 3 issues ('Spotlight') 1998-2000, one-shot ('Genus Male') 2002*

A perhaps surprisingly long-lived anthology, but then it does combine anthropomorphism and sex, so there's a wide target audience. A number of creators have been with the series from the start, sometimes with recurring characters and serials, other times with short stories. These include Kjarten Arnorsson whose magic-weaving Mink is a frequent presence, Brian Sutton, with his own 'Amy's Adventures' or writing for others, Shon Howell, Brad Lesher, and Dennis Clark, whose 'Collars and Cuffs', with Robin Lane and Joyceanna Brock, about a couple of female police officers, is another regular. A sampling of that can be found in a 'Collars and Cuffs' special. Early issues contained strips from Lea Hernandez (2) and Donna Barr (7), experimented with themes like a "Bondage and Fetish Issue" (4, 8), and surely set some sort of record with its "Extra-Large Lesbian Unicorn Issue" (10).

James Hardiman is another regular contributor, whose 'Skunkworks', about three sisters, Natasha, Onyx and Lori, is the subject of the three 'Spotlight' issues, which include new and reprint strips. 'Desert Storms' is an irregular series by Dean Lee Norton and Michael Hirtes, and Richard Moore provides occasional pinups, as well as strips in 40 (his 'Pound' characters), 51 and 57. Mixing softcore and hardcore sex, and willing to apply the sexual situations to all sorts of genres, *Genus* is never less than interesting (assuming you're past the obvious entry requirements), but rarely produces extraordinary material. 'Genus Male' is a gay-themed issue, and there are also two issues of Genus Greatest Hits, which reprint the best of 1-20.~NF

GEOBREEDERS

CPM Manga: *35 issues 1999-2002**

Stylish, violent, spooky cop drama played heavily for laughs as the hapless Taba joins a private agency dedicated to the destruction of supernatural entities that threaten the stability of the world, while all he wants is a day off and a pay rise. As with much contemporary manga, the hero is a bit of a klutz until the action starts, and he vacillates between being overawed or beguiled by his archetypal sexy female co-workers. They seek to battle infernal outbreaks during an interminably long-running subplot concerning good and bad Phantom Cat spirits. Enjoyable fluff with all issues available collected.~WW

GEOMANCER

Valiant: *8 issues 1994-1995*

Clay McHenry, blind cop on the take, is the unlikely choice as Geomancer, Guardian of the Earth. This tradition, established before recorded history began, chooses one

* Available in a collected edition

individual every generation to reaffirm humanity's link with the mother planet. The superheroics are competent, but writer Maurice Fontenot's efforts are insufficient to distinguish the title from the rest of the pack. Geomancer's mystically-imbued powers exhibit too many shades of Daredevil, and the slate would have been better filled by examining the roles and responsibilities of the Geomancer, as opposed to parading a string of bad guys for bicep-flexing fodder.~APS

GESTALT

NEC: *1 issue 1993*

Odd pacing and sparse art characterises this story of a Russian woman during World War II fed an experimental drug enabling her to tune in on the thoughts of others. The first issue concentrates more on humanity than heroics, and that's all we got.~FP

GESTALT

Caliber: *1 issue (0) 1998*

Spin off from Seeker, telling the story of Tracy Le Master who believes that she becomes Seeker when possessed by the spirit of an Atlantean warrior called Kiryn. Captured and imprisoned for two years without contact with Kiryn, Tracy feels lost when she escapes, but her former employers believe she could still be of use to them. Mostly scene setting and exposition, this is hardly promising.~NF

GHOST

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1993, Series one 36 issues, 3 Specials 1995-1998, Series two 22 issues 1998-2000, one-shot ('Handbook') 1999*

Introduced in a one-shot as part of *Comics Greatest World*, Ghost is Elisa Cameron, searching the city of Arcadia for clues to her past and how she's come to be dead, but still able to handle a pair of forty-fives. Initial issues team her with other Comics Greatest World characters King Tiger (2-3), Barb Wire (4) and X (9), and a Predator (5). Her sister, Margo becomes a victim of the villain, Scythe and the Furies, an all-female paranormal strike force are introduced (9-12) and remain important characters throughout both series. Barb Wire returns to share a kiss (18-19, Special 2), as does X unfortunately, before Elisa goes hunting for the city under Arcadia (20-25) leaving her with a new role as protector of Arcadia, above and below ground. 'Painful Music' (28-31) sees Elisa meeting other ghosts, but unable to follow them as they're given their final release and Margo returns as the deadly, Silhouette in 'Jade Cathedral' (33-36). In the second series, Chris Warner turns Elisa's origin on its head as, in fighting the villain Trouvaille, it is revealed that Margo has been possessed by a demon and that other demons have been deliberately given human hosts (1-6). A team-up with King Tiger against Scythe leads to a meeting with Vortex (7-10) before 12-15 has the conclusion of the Silhouette storyline.

The first series is entirely written by Eric Luke, the second by Chris Warner (1-15) and Mike Kennedy (7-10 (co-writer), 16-22). The title has many problems, not least that no-one seems to have known what to do in respect of Elisa's origin. There were too many supernatural stories at the expense of crime or mystery, and various attempts at a new direction were all short-lived. It can't have helped either, that Ghost was incapable of retaining an artist, with eleven contributing to the first series and four to the second. The best of the artwork is provided by Adam Hughes (series one 1-3) and Scott Benefiel (series one 6-7, 26), but John Cassady (27), Ivan Reis' run on the first series (17-25, 28-31, 33-36) and Ryan Benjamin's on the second (11-15, 18-19, 21) are all enjoyable. The earliest and later issues of the first series are available in collections (sometimes spliced together), as are 1-6 of series two.~NF

GHOST Miniseries

Dark Horse: *One-shot (Ghost and The Shadow) 1995, 2 issue microseries (Ghost/Hellboy) 1996, 4 issue miniseries (Ghost/Batgirl) 2000*

Doug Moench has The Shadow unfrozen from hibernation in order to protect the world from a demon encased in Jade that an old enemy is planning to unleash, with the unwilling aid of Ghost, whose sister has been kidnapped. This is well characterised and has an old-fashioned feel as drawn by H. M. Baker, but is rushed at the end. The possessed spirits of men murdered by gangsters in Arcadia, try to trick Ghost into defeating Hellboy so they can take his hand, in Mike Mignola's customarily creepy plot, attractively drawn by Scott Benefiel and Jasen Rodriguez. Missing women bring Batgirl to Arcadia where she teams up with Ghost against Malcolm Greymater, who's building an army of zombies with which to rule the underworld, and Two-Face, who's annoyed by Greymater's recruiting techniques. Mike Kennedy's script rambles and Ryan Benjamin's artwork is inconsistent, though when inked well, as by Michael Bair on 2, the whole is much more attractive.~NF

Tales of GHOST CASTLE

DC: *3 issues 1975*

A couple of Robert Kanigher-penned tales don't stop this representing DC's horror line at its most mediocre. The predictable stories all have EC format 'shock' endings, with retribution from beyond the grave and ironic dénouements predominating. Lucien the Librarian makes his first comic appearance as host of Ghost Castle, so being a *Sandman* completist is probably the only reason for bothering with the title now.~NF

GHOST DOG: The Way of the Samurai

Oni Press: *One-shot 2000*

Based on the character from the film of the same name, Scott Morse's comic is an attractive package to look at, with his black and white brushwork beautifully executed. His story of the American samurai/assassin, however, is so gently paced that almost nothing happens during its 25 pages.~DB

GHOST IN THE SHELL

Dark Horse: *8 issue limited series 1995**

Deceptively straightforward action adventure series for the first six issues, becoming a treatise on artificial intelligence and the nature of life in the final two. In the near future, a vast computer network covers the planet and a crack team of covert operatives exists to combat terrorism of all kinds. The field leader of this team is the beautiful but deadly Major Kusanagi, an android with a 'ghost' (a sort of artificial soul). Each issue leads the team into deeper and deeper political waters until in 7 Kusanagi undergoes a transformation requiring the assistance of an Artificial Intelligence in the network. Masamune Shirow doesn't provide much in the way of characterisation beyond the hard-headedness of Kusanagi but his technology-heavy stories are still very readable. His artwork is detailed if not particularly elegant while his people can tend towards caricatures, but the action is fluid and the overall effect is unique.~NF

Recommended: 1-8

GHOST MANOR

Charlton: *Series one 19 issues 1968-1971, series two 77 issues 1971-1984*

Charlton's third 1960s mystery anthology was hosted by a blue skinned, green haired hippy in a mini-skirt and sunglasses, Wanda the Witch. Despite occasional stories from the likes of Joe Gill and Steve Skeates, and the odd bit of drawing from Jim Aparo, Steve Ditko and Pat Boyette, the title suffered from Charlton's late 1960s mediocrity (which is really too complimentary a term for the general standard here). The title became *Ghostly Haunts* in 1971, with Wanda renamed Winnie. Do we detect some disapproval from Marvel, whose Scarlet Witch was also named Wanda?

Three months after the title was changed, *Ghost Manor* was back with a new host, a ghostly undertaker called Mr Bones. Now typical of mid 1970s Charlton mystery anthologies, there's nothing of note. Writing was by Joe Gill, Mike Pellowski and Nick Cuti, and art by Ditko, Joe Staton, Don Newton, Tom Sutton, Pete Morisi (PAM), and Wayne Howard. From the late 1970s there were also innumerable stories by very poor (especially on Charlton rates) South

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* Available in a collected edition

American artists and the dreadful Korean artist Sanho Kim. Many of the covers from 20 to 32 were painted, and issues from 33 on are all reprint, sometimes dredging as far back as the 1950s.~SW

GHOST RIDER

Marvel: *7 issues 1967*

Ghost Rider mark one originated at Magazine Enterprises, and when the copyright expired, Marvel pounced. He was drawn in the 1950s by Dick Ayers, who returned for this incarnation. He was a Western character whose gimmick was to coat his clothing and horse with "a phosphorescent substance" to give the appearance of coming from beyond. One presumes his demise was from a particularly hideous form of cancer. Six of his issues were reprinted as *Night Rider* when the 1970s Ghost Rider was popular, and he went on to star in *Western Gunfighters*.~FP

GHOST RIDER

Marvel: *Series one 81 issues 1973-1983, Series two 94 issues, 2 Annuals 1990-1998, 6 issue miniseries 2001-2002**

The second incarnation of the Ghost Rider is one of the most visually striking characters created for Marvel. Mike Ploog's design has a flaming skeleton clad in leather biker's gear that leaves only the skull visible sitting atop a flaming motorcycle. Carnival stunt-rider Johnny Blaze makes a deal with the devil (modified to Mephisto in more conservative times), and comes out possessed by the spirit of a demon. This occurs in Marvel Spotlight 5-11, and was reprinted in the wake of the 1990s version's popularity as a series titled *The Original Ghost Rider*. It's unlikely that any other title as shoddy as the 1970s *Ghost Rider* has lasted half the length. It's difficult to find any redeeming features in 1-68, although Jim Starlin's tale of a cross-country race against death (35) stands out by default among the assorted demons and other half-arsed satanic clichés. Perhaps in desperation, then newcomer Roger Stern was appointed writer (68), and something astounding occurred: he raised the title above the mediocrity line. 'Freaks' (70), despite appropriating ideas from DC's early *Swamp Thing*, was touching, and the return of very silly villains the Circus of Crime (72,73) was also enjoyable. By that time, though, the damage had been done, and the series was adequately concluded by the team of J.M. DeMatteis and Bob Budiansky as Blaze separated from his demonic other half. These later stories were reprinted as seven issues titled *The Original Ghost Rider Rides Again*, and those desperate to see Johnny Blaze again should look for *Spirits of Vengeance* and Blaze.

The second series begins well. This time teenager Danny Ketch is drawn to the Ghost Rider's motorcycle in a graveyard, and his transformation enables him to save lives. Far more an obvious force for good than Johnny Blaze in his possessed identity, he also has some other abilities, a particularly inventive one being that when he stares into a villain's eyes said villain is confronted with all the pain they've caused others. 1-7 are collected, and the first dozen issues written by Howard Mackie with the art team of Javier Saltares and Mark Texeira produce a body count so high it's a wonder anyone's left living in Marvel's version of New York. Despite the inevitable return of Johnny Blaze (14) and a nifty glow-in-the-dark cover on 15, the title is a long time recovering from the loss of Saltares after 12. It drags from fight scene to angst-ridden soul searching as Mackie tantalises with hints of the Ghost Rider's origin and past. Ironically, it's only once this is revealed (41-43 and *Spirits of Vengeance* 14 & 15) that things improve. An interesting new Ghost Rider takes over the title for 46-50, and the arrival of Salvador Larocca as penciller from 52 finally drags the art back up and beyond the originally established standard. With 66 the Ghost Rider is given a harder edge, becoming the spirit of vengeance the original character was, and that issue has a shock value long absent, but it doesn't last. Despite Larocca improving all the while, the series is dragged down by the scripts of Ivan Velez Jnr. He's caught between a rock and hard place in attempting to move away from the satanic clichés and angst, yet retain an obviously declining readership. An injection of humour doesn't work, and 82 deserves a mention for the inexplicable and incompatible guest appearances of Devil Dinosaur and Howard the Duck. The cartoony art of Pop Mhan (82-87) doesn't work either, and even the returning Saltares from 89 can't prevent cancellation. Those compelled to check out later issues should start with 86, an investigation into how the Ghost Rider is perceived by neighbourhood residents. Don't bother with the preceding three chapters of the usual nonsense, but 93 is a spirited issue that serves, to all intents and purposes as a conclusion to the series.

Warren Ellis fans might want to seek out the second annual, but don't come with expectations raised, and at the height of Ghost Rider's renewed popularity three one-shots were issued. *Fear* teamed Ghost Rider with Captain America and the *Ghost Rider Special* reprinted the Ghost Rider and Cable teaming from *Marvel Comics Presents* 90-98. Both are very ordinary. *Hearts of Darkness* is not, sadly, in this instance a terrifying look into the bleakness and torment of humanity under stress, but a crap team-up of Ghost Rider, Wolverine and Punisher.

The Marvel Knights imprint usually guarantees a certain level of competence, but *Ghost Rider* seems to possess some over-ride. The miniseries revisits Johnny Blaze, who puts out a contract on Ghost Rider while travelling road movie style, encountering other bikers along the way. It's as wretched as anything from twenty-five years previously.~FP

GHOST RIDER 2099

Marvel: *25 issues 1994-1996*

Cyberpunk reworking of the flaming skulled, bike-riding spirit of vengeance. After his murder data-pirate Kenshiro Cochrane A.K.A. Zero has his consciousness downloaded into an invincible war robot by a conclave of artificial intelligences and embarks on a crusade to clean up the world and avenge the deaths of his friends. Fast, edgy writing from Len Kaminski and art from Chris Bachalo, Mark Buckingham and latterly Ashley Wood provide suitable graphics for a pacy action romp. A treat for Sci Fi fans.~WW

GHOST SHIP

Slave Labor: *3 issues 1996*

Surreal sea adventures by Jon Lewis, set aboard the not-so-good ship Cassowary as cartoonist and poet John Conk'roo settles into his new permanent home and learns to live with the most peculiar crew afloat. Most of the material concerns the odd-couple relationship between John and first mate DeQuayne, although Dr Rahblablah and the surly crows get a few good one-liners. Competent, but not as funny or as poignant as it thinks.~WW

Filmation's GHOSTBUSTERS

First: *6 issues 1987*

Oh, the superior knowledge of TV executives. The *Ghostbusters* movie had been a global hit, and the cartoon rights fell to Filmation, who decided that with a little tweaking they could improve matters. "Who needs the original characters?" they reasoned. "Let's have their descendants. And a giant talking ape, a ghost-possessed car and a flying vampire bat/pig." Apathy from the kids was resounding, so much so that a new cartoon was speedily conceived stressing it was the *Real Ghostbusters*. That said, given the duff ideas, Hilarie Staton came up with just the right level of fantasy and humour in the comics to appeal to young children (although not beyond), integrating puzzle and activity pages into the stories. The plots are basic, but have a charm and artifice altogether lacking in Now's comic based on the succeeding cartoon show.~WJ

GHOSTDANCING

DC/Vertigo: *6 issue miniseries 1995*

An apocalyptic tale featuring drumming, revelatory drugs, rock concerts, and a few Native American spirit gods. It sounds desperately worthy, but no – it's fun! The enthusiasm in Jamie Delano's writing is infectious, and the treatment is refreshingly matter-of-fact, as if you've known this story all along, and don't need any lectures. Richard Case's vibrant and direct artwork brings out the best of this approach and it all makes for a great read.~FC

Recommended: 1-6

GHOSTLY HAUNTS

Charlton: *39 issues (20-58) 1971-1978*

Formerly titled *Ghost Manor*, this mystery anthology was typical of 1970s horror fare. Hosted by Winnie, formerly Wanda, the Witch, a mini-skirted, blue-skinned hippy narrator, there's little inspiration. Stories by Joe Gill (whose many pen names included Jack Daniels and Tom Tuna), Mike Pellowski and Nick Cuti are illustrated by the usual roll call of 1970s Charlton artists: Ditko, Boyette, Staton, Howard, Newton, Sutton. Work by Mike Zeck and Rich Larson is accompanied in the later issues by art from South American and Korean studios of the most execrable quality. In 1975 Charlton started running painted covers, and issues from 54 onwards are almost exclusively reprint.~SW

GHOSTLY TALES

Charlton: *115 issues 1966-1976 (55-124), 1977-1984 (125-169)*

As was often the case with Charlton comics, the numbering was inherited from a completely unrelated title, in this case the Blue Beetle series. This was Charlton's first new mystery anthology of the 1960s, and featured their horror host Doctor Graves, who occasionally involved himself in the stories he told. Under editor Dick Giordano there were several interesting artists, although most of the scripts are appalling, the better ones being by Steve Skeates (as Norm DiPlume), Denny O'Neil (as Sergius O'Shaughnessy), Joe Gill and Dave Kaler. Stories drawn by Pat Boyette, Steve Ditko and Jim Aparo are the exception rather than the rule.

Dr Graves moved into his own title, and was replaced here by Mr Lazarus Dedd from 71. When Giordano departed to DC most of his better contributors went with him, leading to an appalling slump in the late 1960s. By the mid-1970s, though, newer talents like Don Newton, Tom Sutton, Joe Staton, and later Mike Zeck and Rich Larson, joined Boyette and Ditko. Writers included Gill (under assorted pseudonyms), Mike Pellowski and Nicola Cuti. From the 1977 revival the comic is exclusively reprint.~SW

GHOSTS

DC: *112 issues 1971-1982*

The cover proclaims that this horror anthology featured "True tales of the weird and supernatural". Despite this, the content was typical of DC's mystery books. One notable feature was that for the first fifty issues almost all the stories were written by Leo Dorfman, which contributed to the lack of highpoints. The stories weren't bad, simply uninspired, with the exception of 22's camp classic 'The Last Shrill Laugh of the Phantom', wherein Benito Mussolini was haunted by the ghost of Julius Caesar!

Throughout its run *Ghosts* seemed cursed with more than its fair share of John Calnan and Jerry Grandenetti art, though the first five issues did at least have a smattering of choice 1950s reprints. Issues in the teens and twenties have a higher proportion of quality art by the likes of Alfredo Alcala, Gerry Talaoc and Rico Rival, with a Nestor Redondo strip in 13 being particularly nice. Undoubtedly the title's best-ever story was the Bayou shocker 'Blood on the Moon' (31), illustrated in riveting style by forgotten comics genius Bill Payne. Later issues are less impressive, although an occasional decent art job would surface, such as the nice Michael Golden strip in 88. A three-part Spectre story in 97-99 failed to raise much interest, probably due to its total lack of inspiration, and the last few years are best left to collectors who simply can't get enough of Ruben Yandoc's 'unique etchings'. A number of the best early strips were reprinted in 40, a hard-to-come-by sixty-eight-page giant.~DAR

Recommended: 13, 31, 88

G.I. COMBAT

DC: 245 issues (44-288) 1957-1987

Continuing the numbering after DC purchased the title from Quality, early issues consisted of short unrelated war stories written by the likes of Bob Haney, Bill Finger and editor Robert Kanigher. Though eminently readable, they suffer from an over-reliance on gimmicks and were hamstrung by The Comics Code and DC's reluctance to explore the darker side of war. Almost all early issues feature art by Joe Kubert, Russ Heath, Jerry Grandenetti and Ross Andru, though particularly notable were a number of strips by Mort Drucker (48, 61-64, 66, 71, 72, 76, 78). 87 introduced Kanigher's 'Haunted Tank' strip, which ran almost unbroken until the comic's demise. Jeb Stuart, whose tank was also rather confusingly called Jeb Stuart, was haunted by the ghost of his idol, Confederate cavalry leader (you've guessed it) Jeb Stuart. The ghost would pop up periodically to give Jeb advice, but in all other respects it was a straightforward war strip, with the most surprising aspect being how Kanigher kept coming up with fresh ideas, although he unerringly did. The likes of Kubert (99, 100, 102-113), Andru (134-136) and Irv Novick (89, 116, 118-120, 122, 127) all took their turns at the strip, but it belonged to its first artist Russ Heath, a man seemingly incapable of drawing badly. The Kanigher/Heath team so consistently turned out quality work that it's hard to pick out particular highpoints, though 121, 125, 126, 141 and 142 are at least spectacularly well drawn. 138 introduced another long-running strip, The Losers, later to gain their own series in *Our Fighting Forces*.

After a Doug Wildey fill-in on Haunted Tank in 153, veteran war artist Sam Glanzman took over, drawing it in one form or another until its demise. Some later issues contain Glanzman inks over Dick Ayers pencils, but the difference is barely noticeable. More significant was the departure of Kanigher, replaced by writer/editor Archie Goodwin (159-173), who gave the strip a higher emphasis on characterisation and continuity. Symptomatic of this was the death of long-time crew member Aron Asher in 162, and though Kanigher's stories were always well crafted, Goodwin's tenure was the book's best period. Kanigher returned with 174 and the rest of the run remains readable, if rarely inspired. 201 saw *G.I. Combat* transformed into a dollar comic with a vastly increased page-count and included 'O.S.S.' (by Kanigher and E.R. Cruz) and a number of short stories in addition to three 'Haunted Tank' stories each issue. 242 introduced 'The Mercenaries', by Kanigher and Vic Catan, which, with 282, eventually supplanted Haunted Tank as cover feature, but this couldn't save the comic from cancellation. 128, 140, 144-154 and 169 are all or part reprint.~DAR

Recommended: 48, 61-64, 66, 71, 72, 76, 78, 121, 125, 126, 141, 142, 159-168, 170-173

G.I. JOE

Marvel: *155 issues, 4 Yearbooks 1982-1994*

Based on an ever-increasing line of action figures, initial issues feature substandard art and uninspired scripts coupled with the most ridiculous character names until Rob Liefeld's Image titles dredged the barrel still deeper. Breaker, Clutch, Zap, Rock'n'Roll... there's even an Eskimo named Kwinn in 2. Appalling quality notwithstanding, there was a rabid market. *G.I. Joe* was enormously successful, spawning numerous spin-offs and two reprint titles. The digest-sized *G.I. Joe Comics Magazine* ran for thirteen issues, reprinting 1-37, and *Tales of G.I. Joe* reprinted 1-15, all of them wretched. 1 is also reprinted as a treasury edition and in the first yearbook, and there's a 1995 *G.I. Joe Special* reprinting the Todd McFarlane pencilled 60. More permanently, 1-30 can be found in three collections.

Described as an élite counter-terrorist strike force, G.I. Joe's target is Cobra, an organisation dedicated to the principle of divide and rule. After the awful early issues, generally drawn by Don Perlin or Herb Trimpe, writer Larry Hama's multi-issue missions develop a greater complexity. He turns the title into an action soap opera with a massive cast. New characters are constantly added, although names didn't improve, with Quick-Kick, Crazylegs, Payload and Snow-Job among them. Letters make comparisons with *Hill Street Blues*, although *Burun Murchstansangar* would be as close, and the title is increasingly hamstrung by having to incorporate more characters and vehicles from the toy line and cartoon show. For a strike force, there's an astonishingly low mortality rate for the first hundred issues, but immediately thereafter the cast is reduced considerably, adding a new edge to the title. Beyond the first twenty-five or so issues *G.I. Joe* is an undemanding and generally reasonably produced action comic, albeit one with the pernicious subtext of glorifying war and violence in a real world setting. A representative issue encompassing the spirit of the title is 82, in which Hama has a bit of fun with the new recruit programme before delivering a short mission, while *Transformers* fans should check 139-142. The best of the yearbooks is 2, with the lead story drawn by the uncredited Mike Golden.~FP

G.I. JOE

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1996*

Veteran Mike Barr fails to lift this derivative, floundering series of vignettes used to promote a new toy line. This time, the paramilitary wonders are saving the world of the future from Iron Klaw and his legions of Skar. This should be for adults only as children aren't that impressionable.~WW

G. I. JOE: A Real American Hero!

Image: *13 issues + 2001 to date, 3 issue miniseries ('Battle Files') 2002, 3 issues + ('Front Line') 2002 to date*

The Cobra Commander has returned and the G. I. Joe Task Force is reformed under its own commanders, Flint, Scarlett, Roadblock, Shipwreck and Snake Eyes. Cobra Commander suffers a betrayal by Destro, however, who has his own plans for some deadly nano-mites (1-4). 5 is a flashback to Duke's battle with Major Bludd. 6-9 concern Cobra Commander's attempts at revenge for his treatment by Destro, at the same time, sending Storm Shadow to kill General Tomahawk. 10 has fill-in artwork from Jamal Igle on a tale of Zartan's sister, Zarana, leading into the four-part, 'Malfunction', in which the Dreadnoks take delivery of a Battle Android Trooper. It develops autonomous thought and goes on a rampage, chased by the Dreadnoks, G. I. Joes and Cobra Commander's Alley Vipers. Written by Josh Blaylock, this is celebrated for its realistic approach to military life in all of its various forms, but is really just another superhero strip, poorly illustrated by Steve Kurth (1-4, 6-9), and Kevin Sharpe (from 11), with stiff, badly proportioned, overly muscled characters. 'Battle Files' is illustrated information about the huge cast and the various organisations and weaponry involved, while 'Front Line' is a second, ongoing series, written by Larry Hama and drawn by Dan Jurgens, which at least means better artwork. In the first storyline (1-4), the Joes are escorting a device for what's meant to be their last mission before being disbanded, when they're attacked en route, but it has very dull dialogue and is poorly designed.~NF

G.I. JOE AND THE TRANSFORMERS

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1987**

A magnificent sermon on the concept of predestination as experienced by a rich and varied cast, and infused with the clash of the instinctive and the intellectual. No, hang on, that's *War and Peace*. This teams giant mutating robots and all-American heroes to protect a military project from the evil Decipticons and Cobra. It's rubbish.~WJ

G.I. JOE SPECIAL MISSIONS

Marvel: *28 issues 1986-1989*

"The missions we couldn't talk about until now" proclaims the cover of the first issue. Can't figure why, since there's little difference between this and the regular title right down to the creative team of Larry Hama and Herb Trimpe. The only notable distinguishing feature is that most of the stories here are self-contained.~FP

G.I. WAR Tales

DC: *4 issues 1973*

Reprints of solid but unspectacularly written war stories drawn by a stellar selection of artists. Over four issues there's Neal Adams, Mort Drucker, Russ Heath, Joe Kubert and, most astonishingly, Bernie Krigstein in 4.~WJ

GIANT-SIZE CHILLERS

Marvel: *1 issue 1974*

Marv Wolfman and Gene Colan are responsible for a story that slots between *Tomb of Dracula* 22 and 23. Restoring Dracula's daughter Lilith to life and introducing the tragic Sheila Whittier, this is an issue of Dracula's own title in all but name, and bears the same quality. Dracula related reprints from Marvel's 1950s monster titles round out the issue.~FP

Recommended: 1

GIANT-SIZE MINI COMICS

Eclipse: *4 issue miniseries 1986*

The minicomics phenomenon was particularly invigorating and satisfying. There's much dispute as to when the idea started (with a case to be made for the 1920s 'Tijuana Bibles' sex comics), but the principle was that the creator, operating under nothing but personal constraints, wrote and drew and self-produced comics that were photocopied, stapled and distributed, usually in smaller-than-pocket-size format. This series attempted to feature the best of them. Very wisely, four separate editors were each given an issue to present their selection of the best. The greatest variety is in 4, so that's the place to start, but the most biting cartoon of the entire run is Ron Hauge's 'The Known World' in 3, encompassing the US's feelings of paranoia and xenophobia.~WJ

GIANT-SIZE SUPER-HEROES

Marvel: *1 issue 1974*

Very ordinary extra-length three way battle between Spider-Man, Man-Wolf and Morbius.~FP

GIANTKILLER

DC: *6 issue miniseries, one-shot ('A-Z Field Guide to Big Monsters) 1999-2000*

Charming, vigorously painted and written by Dan Brereton, Japanese big monsterfight film type aliens destroying California story, with sweet monster/human DNA test-tube product hunk falls for sassy mutated super-crossbow wielding ex-agent fleshy blonde twist, plus humane meddling scientist and gruff military nuke enthusiast. Nothing wrong with this at all. Full marks.~GK

Recommended: 1-6

THE GIFT

First: *One-shot 1990*

Basically a sampler for First comics, *The Gift* was a squarebound-format 'Holiday Special' for Christmas 1990, featuring short stories about the major First characters, including Nexus, Grimjack and Badger. Some have a festive theme, all lead into a framing sequence by John Ostrander and Ian Gibson. Incidentally, it wasn't a gift at all. The package cost $5.95, and the name referred to the gift of life needed to save a child's life.~JC

GIFTS OF THE NIGHT

Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1999*

In a fairytale Europe we meet Reyes, tutor to the king's son Magdin, a slow-witted boy. It's a position of little or no power until Magdin starts to reinterpret the legends Reyes tells him as visions for his father. At first Reyes fuels Magdin's imagination accidentally, but soon starts to manipulate the boy to fulfil his own small dreams. All well and good, until another courtier, realising what Reyes is doing, uses the boy for his own, much darker, ends. Paul Chadwick's script is disappointing and the slight story could have been wrapped up in ten pages. Think how much time this would have saved poor John Bolton, who had to paint this dull slog.~DB

GILGAMESH II

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1989*

Written and drawn by Jim Starlin at a very low ebb of creativity. Gilgamesh and Otto, the last survivors of their race, arrive on a deserted planet Earth. They are soon battling the tentacled Nightshadow creature. In a grief stricken turn-around Gil comes over all philosophical and embraces a white, featureless void – allowing a variation of background from Starlin's usual black-with-stars. Despite the mythological tropes this reads like Robert E Howard doing science fiction rather than the retelling of a Sumerian epic.~SW

GINGER FOX

Comico: *Graphic Novel 1986, 4 issue miniseries 1988*

What should have been a run-of-the-mill tale of Hollywood folk was, incredibly, one of the most bizarre comics of the 1980s. Actually, the graphic novel by Mike Baron and a young Mitch O'Connell was a largely uninteresting affair, enlivened only by its stylish art. For the miniseries, however, O'Connell was replaced by the Pander brothers, for whom the description "eccentric" is an understatement of gargantuan proportions. While the comic is ostensibly about studio boss Ginger Fox and her tussles with murderous actresses and unruly directors, the expressionistic, distorted art transforms it into an insane, nightmare world. However, whereas the Panders' art is unrelentingly demented and staggeringly ugly, Baron leaves no cliché untapped, with every Hollywood stereotype present and accounted for. It's a rare title that manages to be outrageously camp and soul-destroyingly banal at the same time, but Ginger Fox is that comic.~DAR

GIRL

DC/Vertigo: *3 issue miniseries 1996*

Teenage rebellion par excellence from Pete Milligan and Duncan Fegredo. Simone's awful family live in a high-rise block where the local boys hang out in her lift counting whether there are more used condoms than syringes in there today. When she breaks the TV and blames it on her dog, her father throws him out the window. Milligan's parody of modern Britain is at once funny and hideous. Simone's fumbling attempts to get laid, her daydream of watching her gas-bloated corpse explode all over her family's winning lottery ticket; the make-believe bravura with which she confronts school bullies with a breadknife: Fegredo illustrates all in a brash, over-coloured style full of knock-kneed adolescents and over-made-up tarts. It's not a very deep story. When we discover a lot of what Simone tells us is actually fantasy it comes as no surprise, and the blithe ending rather negates any social criticism, probably in the name of irony. But it is fun, and if you're a mixed-up fourteen-year-old it probably reads very sympathetically.~FJ

GIRL CRAZY

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1996**

Gaby, Maribel and Kitten are friends whose sixteenth birthdays are fast approaching. One's a lawyer in the Fifties, one's a jungle heroine and the last's a collection agent for the I.R.S., who now control everything. Kitten takes a day off to meet up with her friends to celebrate and they decide to break Una out of prison (she's another friend about to turn sixteen). It's not going to be easy, though, with the I.R.S.'s robot Gaby out to stop them. This odd fantasy series by Gilbert Hernandez is at once a superhero satire and an attempt to explain what growing up is really all about. Humorous for the most part, there's an underlying sadness at the loss of innocence necessitated by age.~NF

Recommended: 1-3

GIRL GENIUS

Studio Foglio: *9 issues + (0-8*) 2001 to date*

Engaging tale of young Agatha Clay, erstwhile student of the Transylvania Polygnostic University, premiere educational establishment on an alternate earth where the Industrial Revolution was a global armed conflict. The major terror weapon in this world is that rare creature, the Mad Scientist, called "Sparks" by normal people, and every nation wants to corner the market in them. Is our heroine a Spark? Agatha's mysterious and deliberately suppressed past holds many secrets and a major conflict is brewing involving the powerful warlord who sponsors all progress on this steam-punk world and the nebulous forces that have used her as an unknowing pawn. Phil Foglio maintains his usual high standard blend of adventure and comedy in this engrossing fable. Witty and worthwhile.~WW

Recommended: 0-4, 6-7

GIRL TALK

Fantagraphics: *4 issues 1996*

Following a debut as a flip-book with *Real Girl* 7, this women-only series didn't seem to have a sense of direction, and floundered aimlessly. By 3, it was beginning to pull itself together, with two notable stories, Luella Wright's trippy, disturbing 'Tight Top', and Vicky Rabinowicz's 'O Fuck I'm a Victim' rising out of the ordinary, but the improvement wasn't sufficient to prevent this being dismissed as just another 'womyn's' anthology.~HS

GIRLFRENZY

DC: *7 one-shots (Batgirl, Donna Troy, Lois Lane, The Mist, The Ravens, The Secret, Tomorrow Woman) 1998*

As a '"special event", DC spotlighted their female characters, no doubt expecting it to compensate for their second-class status the rest of the year. Each one-shot starred a supporting player from an established series, and they looked great, with a very fetching nouveau-Mod design enticing readers to open them up. That's where the trouble started. *Donna Troy*, by Phil Jimenez, was intelligent and perceptive, with the former Wonder Girl/Darkstar/Troia pondering her many roles in life. *Tomorrow Woman* featured the deceased JLA member in smart, sassy superheroics, nothing remarkable. *The Mist* had what should have been the advantage of the parent series' writer, James Robinson, working on it, but it manages to be mawkish and pretentious at the same time. *The Ravens* introduced a villainess alliance scheduled to become the Birds of Prey's nemeses, but succeeded only in being the first pedestrian and tedious *BoP* comic. *The Secret* is technically a prequel to *Young Justice*; our gaseously evanescent heroine does little other than hang around while the boys save the day. For *Lois Lane* and *Batgirl* see their respective entries. This makeshift, faux-feminist non-event (advertised with a "No Boys Allowed!" tagline, assembled by a 95% male creative team) served no purpose, other than getting DC sued by Erica Smith, publisher of the UK's *Girlfrenzy* fanzine, effectively preventing DC from producing any more *Girlfrenzy* specials. Hey, maybe there is a silver lining there, after all... ~HS

Recommended: *Donna Troy*

GIRLHERO

Highdrive Publications: *6 issues 1993-1996*

After leading an unsuccessful revolution at her workplace, a young woman transforms her arm into a rivet gun and starts a not terribly successful career as a working-class superhero, aided by her gifted, but largely useless, friends, Animata and Yolanda. Back-ups are slice-of-life stories or non-serial fantasies by writer-artist Megan Kelso. They're rather more successful than the continuing tale, and collected as *Queen of the Black Black*.~HS

GIRLS' LOVE STORIES

DC: *180 issues 1949-1973*

After the success of Jack Kirby and Joe Simon's pioneering romance titles *Young Love* and *Young Romance*, every comics publisher jumped on the moonlight-and-roses bandwagon in the late 1940s. Most successful of the imitators was DC, who produced very creditable facsimiles using top-notch talent, and created a six-pack of romance titles that lasted until the 1970s. *Girls' Love Stories* was the career-girl variant, a significant number of tales involving the heroine's enforced choice between her career (always in a suitably girly profession such as actress or model. No lady engineers on view!) and The Man. Guess who invariably won. There's some superb art by many distinguished names, among them Gene Colan, Jay Scott Pike and John Romita, a staple of DC's romance line for many years before moving to Marvel.~HS

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* Available in a collected edition

GIRLS OF NINJA HIGH SCHOOL

Antarctic: 9 *issues 1991-1999*

This annual series enabled creators other than Ben Dunn to have a try at his popular characters. To his credit, as editor, Dunn was as likely to feature strips by total unknowns as more established creators, although this often results in cases of enthusiasm supplanting talent. Rod Espinosa does a nice job including some recognisable characters in 7, and many artists prove they can ape the manga style, but this is very much preaching to the converted, with some stories making little sense in isolation.~WJ

GIRLS' ROMANCES

DC: *160 issues 1950-1971*

A clone of DC's successful *Girls' Love Stories* released a year later in the hope of repeating its sister's success, which for two decades it did. There's Alex Toth art in some early issues, and a Neal Adams cover and splash in 134, but otherwise the mixture's as before: lovely elegant artwork gracing outstandingly sappy and naïve stories.~HS

GIVE ME LIBERTY

Rip-Off: *One-shot 1976*

Years before Miller and Gibbons, Patrick Henry's quote was used to title a bicentennial special in which Gilbert Shelton, Ted Richards, Garry Hallgren and Willy Murphy apply the wit of the underground to the events of the War of Independence. Basically an educational title, the humorous cartoon style employed minimises dry historical detail while covering all the salient points, making learning a pleasure. Sadly long out of print, this is memorable and incisive and should have been a standard text in US schools during 1976.~FP

Recommended

GIVE ME LIBERTY

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1990-1991**

Frank Miller's scripts for what are essentially war stories play to Dave Gibbons' strengths: the ability to draw amazing landscapes believably; fast changes of pacing from explosive action to moments of reflection; using heroic poses and angles without irony or pomposity. In near-future Chicago Martha Washington, an angry young black woman who's been brought up in a fenced-in ghetto where the poor are imprisoned, is desperate to get out into the world. Her skills with computers and the encouragement of a liberal teacher seem to point the way until he is murdered and she goes after the killer. Traumatised by her action, she's sent to a mental facility, where she stumbles on an illegal government experiment to use schizophrenic psychics to control computers.

Thrown out of the mental home she ends up joining PAX, America's 'peace keeping' force, and makes a name for herself protecting the Amazon rainforest against rebel fast-food corporations. Although Martha begins fighting solely for her own survival, political change is taking place and she finds herself agreeing with the idealistic new President. She makes an enemy of her superior when she observes him betraying his men. They are the only two survivors of the action and, knowing she won't be believed, Martha keeps quiet about his duplicity, an action which brings trouble on her head for the rest of the story. She meets up with one of the schizophrenics from the mental hospital when sent to stop a gay, right-wing extremist organisation from nuking Washington, and together they set out to do the right thing, even when government and generals are deceiving everyone. Miller's political satire doesn't exactly stretch the reader, but it's lushly illustrated by Gibbons and, compared to your average Marvel comic, a masterpiece of insight. Her story continues in *Martha Washington* miniseries.~FJ

GIZMO

Chance: *1 issue 1985*

Mirage: *Series one 5 issues 1986-1987, series two 2 issues 1989*

Feeble humour comic about a metal man and his giant koala companion. For the second Mirage series the Fugitoid gets equal billing, and Michael Dooley's artwork has improved immensely.~WJ

GLOBAL FREQUENCY

WildStorm: *2 issues + 2002 to date*

Warren Ellis' take on *Thunderbirds* sees an organisation of specialists linked by the butch and mysterious Miranda Zero who gathers the appropriate teams to fend off disaster whenever the world is threatened by total obliteration. It's an entertaining take on the doomwatch genre with art by the a host of UK star talent such as Garry Leach (1) and Glenn Fabry (2) that so wants to be a TV show. The series is planned to be twelve issues.~WW

GLOOM COOKIE

Slave Labor: 14 *issues + 1999 to date*

Serena Valentino writes the eccentric and stylish adventures of a crew of groovy Goths who spend their time sleeping with each other, swanning about in dark clothes, going to parties and being bitchy and miserable. Underlying that is a mystical mystery, as cute little Max tries to find true love, friend Sebastian seeks the answers to his psychic episodes, Chrys seems to subsist on a diet of monsters and the evil Queen Isabella plots and manipulates everyone. Ted Naifeh, John Gebbia and latterly Breehn Burns illustrate a dark, lyrical blend of *Dangerous Liaisons* and *EastEnders*, by way of *Sleepy Hollow*. Subversively compelling.~WW

GLORY

Image/Extreme: *17 issues (0-16), 2 Specials 1995-1996, one-shot (Glory/Avengelyne) 1995, one-shot (Glory/Angela) 1996*

Maximum Press, *6 issues (17-22) 1996-1997, 3 issue miniseries (Glory/Celestine) 1996*

Awesome: *1 issue (0) 1999*

Avatar: *3 issues (0-2) 2001-2002*

As a supporting character in Rob Liefeld's Extreme Studios titles for Image, Glory seemed heavily derivative of Wonder Woman. When she gained her own title, it became clear she was an entire rip-off, from the Amazonian heritage and matriarchal island home down to the bracelets and lasso accessories. Mary Jo Duffy, scripter for the vast majority of the Image and Maximum issues, tried to start each issue on a strong scene or character note, frequently dealing with members of Glory's troublesome family (demon father, power-crazed goddess mother, fallen angel auntie...) By the mid-point, however, it always appeared as if Duffy got depressed and wandered away, leaving the story to flounder in inflato-bint 'anatomy' to the exclusion of any attempt at characterisation, storytelling or even the most basic narrative.

The flow was not helped by three consecutive issues (8-10), which crossed into and out of three different inter-company crossovers, but then, given the low standard of storytelling, the series probably wasn't hurt by the protracted interruption, either. Mike Deodato drew the first story arc, then it was the "Deodato Studios", who finally gave way to Ed Benes, purveyor of ineptly-drawn tits n' ass to the gentry.

After cancellation Glory started appearing as a supporting character in the acclaimed *Supreme* stories written by Alan Moore, and plans were announced for a new *Glory* series, written by Moore. An issue 0 was produce a for Liefeld's Awesome Comics, offering eight pages by Moore and Brandon Peterson, expanded to twelve by running two as 'portrait' double-page spreads. It established Glory's new human identity of Gloria West, broken-down and possibly

* Available in a collected edition

delusional waitress. A fascinating teaser, expanded upon somewhat in Alan Moore's *Awesome Adventures Handbook*, where extensive notes by Moore on what he planned to do with Glory were published. Given the frankness of some of Moore's comments in these notes, it is difficult to believe they were published with his intent or consent, particularly in view of his admitting, in print, that Glory was a blatant rip-off of Wonder Woman. It's not like people didn't know that, but it's one thing, legally, to have it understood, and quite another to have it admitted. Since Awesome folded shortly thereafter, it looked like no harm had been done. Glory then passed to Avatar, who re-issued 0, with Moore and Peterson's prelude. Using left-over Awesome material 1 and 2 came out to great acclaim; finally the character had some focus and direction, and the 'flashback' interludes, evoking the old "Charles Moulton" Wonder Woman tales, were a riot. Sadly, though, the inventory appears to have dried up, (or possibly DC interceded?) and Glory's career, just as it was becoming worthy of the term, has ground to a halt again.~HS
Recommended: Avatar 0-2

GLYPH

Labor of Love: *Series one 3 issues 1996-1997, series two 4 issues 1998*

A first issue Mike Kaluta cover introduces a decent black and white anthology magazine with the only familiar interior contributor being Sarah Byam. A wealth of talent accompanies her, from the brutal almost *Raw*-style art of Pia Guerra to the unpredictable heart-tugging writing of Daniel Rivers, both sadly absent thereafter. David Lee Ingersoll's seemingly unconnected vignettes under the collective title of 'Bonecage Graffiti' are initially charming little slices that drop into a finely dialogued story and drop right back out again, but they disappoint on coalescing in 3. His toned art, though, is gorgeously expressive and he should go far. Of the other contributors, David Lasky manages a madcap Neil Young strip each issue, but too many serials begin never to be completed. Donna Barr fans should look for the Stinz story in 3, and Shepherd Hendrix's art is seen throughout, sadly never matched with a story befitting his talent. A negative aspect is the few pages given over to prose, almost all dull stuff to the final word, and you're better off ignoring Fred Burke's wanky editorial to 2. The text pages are overtly political in 3, though, and all the better for it.

The second series was a newsprint magazine distributed free in the Seattle area, to which Ingersoll contributes the wordless 'Zazkwotch', and Jeff Swenson the uneven gag strip 'Kevin's Muse' in four page segments. The text fiction is improved in this incarnation, and there's a new, although slight, Billi 99 story in 4, which also has two of Keith Knight's funny 'K Chronicles' strips. Sean Black is another new talent unearthed by Glyph, and his angry 'The Widower' is 2's highlight.~WJ
Recommended: Series one 1

GNATRAT

Prelude: *One-shot (The Dark Gnat Returns) 1986*
Dimension Graphics: *One-shot (Happy Birthday Gnatrat) 1986*
Mighty Pumpkin: *One-shot (Darerat) 1987*
Innovation: *One-shot (Gnatrat: The Movie) 1990*

Although the first one-shot is seemingly merely yet another parody of *The Dark Knight Returns*, writer/artist Mark Martin scores on two counts. Firstly that it's not, it merely appropriates the plot in the loosest sense, and the art style, and secondly because it's actually good. A tirade about the endless slew of substandard comics festering in the wake of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* is combined with Martin's excellent cartooning and unpredictable sense of humour to produce a very funny and impassioned début. *Happy Birthday Gnatrat* parodies a *Batman* anniversary cover and casts the net far wider, lampooning early *Batman*, Bill Sienkiewicz, Truman Capote, old ads in comics, Rose O'Neill's Kewpies and more besides. A series of gags rather than a sustained plot, it points the way towards Martin's later extraordinary *20 Nude Dancers* 20. The third comic is an ill-advised and very thin take on Miller's *Daredevil* and *Elektra* stories, in which the more obvious focus seems more an exercise in selling comics than anything heartfelt. The same applies to the *Batman* movie parody, although the cartooning remains nice. A collection reprints all four issues.~FP
Recommended: *The Dark Gnat Returns, Happy Birthday Gnatrat*

GO GIRL!

Image: *5 issues 2000-2001**

Lindsay's mother was a superhero, Go-Go Girl, now retired, so when her friend Haseena is kidnapped, Lindsay decides to pick up where her mother left off. Having captured the kidnappers, Lindsay's subsequent adventures include visiting an alternate universe, fighting a demon who's been replacing the boys in her school with simulacra, meeting rustlers and aliens on a ranch and capturing an old enemy of her mother's, Chatty Catty. Trina Robbins is clearly aiming this at a young, female audience, but there is still some charm in its retro-superheroics for older readers. Anne Timmons artwork is simplistic, in line with the aims of Robbins' storytelling, but overall the lack of sophistication can make for uninspiring reading.~NF

GO-GO

Charlton: *9 issues 1966-1967*

The 1960s were swinging and so was Charlton, or, as it said on the cover, "Join the In-Crowd. We're so in we're out!" Of course, in reality, this being a Charlton comic, they missed the mark by a mile. The star was Miss Bikini Luv, world famous movie star and part-time secret agent whose catchphrase "Just call me Luv" probably tells you all you need to know. From 5 the bland Jon D'Agsotino was replaced by the much more appealing Denny O'Neil and Jim Aparo to great effect. In fact 'Miss Bikini Luv' was Aparo's first strip. The rest of the comic was padded out with 'Blooperman' (atrocious), 'Return to Peculiar Place' (like *The Munsters*, but not as funny), and 'The Rotting Stumps'. Clearly not an essential purchase, but what other comic would invite you to "Turn on with... Petula Clark"?~DAR

GO-MAN

Caliber: *Graphic Novel ('N') 1989, 4 issues 1989*

Graduating from its strip in *Nerve* magazine, collected as 'N', this buzzy and highly readable strip details the story of the corporate superhero of Hyperia, who dresses like a cool 1960s game-show host and fights an increasingly wild variety of supervillains with non-violent superscience, camera crew in tow. His 'Go-Show' is the top rated entertainment in the city, featuring as it does music videos, chat, recipes/infotainment and live superhero combat. Wacky and unorthodox, the series failed to find an audience and creator Bill Widener had to complete the initial storyline in *Caliber Presents*. See also *Go-Man/Mack The Knife* graphic novel.~WW
Recommended: 1-4

GO NAKED

Last Gasp: *One-shot 1993*

Following the notoriety of the 'punk' mini-comic *Yama Yama Ugly Head*, there was a sudden rush of cartoonists desperate to draw in a childish scrawl, and Go Naked was a collection of these 'explorations'. With a line-up that included Art Spiegelman, Robert Williams and Kaz, this could have been a fascinating anthology, but unfortunately it resembled nothing more than a bunch of scatalogically obsessed school kids let loose with felt pens and paper. Only Matt Groening and Charles Burns emerge with credit, but they are not enough reason on their own to buy the comic.~DAR

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* Available in a collected edition

THE GOAT

Acclaim: *One-shot 1998*

The four-footed sidekick of Quantum & Woody gets his own title, in which he, well, shambles around aimlessly, drinks out of the toilet, eats everything in sight... in short, acts just like a real animal would if he got super-powers. A perfunctory plot concerning the deadliest boy in the world (a contemporary Typhoid Mary) is appended, but, while convoluted, it isn't actually very interesting.~HS

THE GOBLIN

Warren: *3 issues 1982*

Although the Goblin first appeared in *Eerie* 71, this particular strip continues from the last issues of *The Rook*, and is typical of Warren's final years. The Goblin strip and its co-features Tin Man, Troll Patrol and the Micro Buccaneers were meant to appeal to superhero fans and horror fans, but end up falling between both camps, satisfying neither. There's lots of nice art on hand, though, from the likes of Lee Elias and Rudy Nebres, but particular mention should be made of Alex Niño's strip in the third issue, which is spectacular even by his standards and needs to be seen to be believed.~DAR

Recommended: 3

GOD NOSE

Rip-Off: *1 issue 1969*

This Jack Jackson strip was originally self-published in 1964, giving it some claim to being the first underground comic, though the humour is more beatnik than counterculture. As a historical artefact *God Nose*, literally the adventures of God, is highly significant, though to a contemporary audience it may seem little more than a dated curio with contents typical of the college humour of the period. It features such things as Jesus becoming a folk singer and God advising a young couple on birth control. Certainly Jackson was to go on to far better things.~DAR

GODDESS

DC/Vertigo: *8 issue limited series 1995-1996**

Rosie Nolan suddenly finds herself manifesting extraordinary and uncontrollable powers at a level at which she accidentally severs Scotland from the British mainland. This kind of behaviour attracts the attention of both a mad CIA agent and a misanthropic British bobby and his brutal Neanderthal henchmen. It's just as well Rosie has a more down-to-earth eco-terrorist companion, enabling her to stay a step ahead of her pursuers. Garth Ennis depicts almost the entire cast as levels of caricature, and Phil Winslade draws up a storm, and a missile attack, a plane crash, an ocean-liner crash... Don't expect anything more than a fast-paced romp with some terrific art and you'll enjoy Goddess.~FP

GOD'S HAMMER

Caliber: *3 issues 1990*

Moraldo is given a playing card, but then becomes the target of various factions fighting for it. With the help of Merlyn, he tries to avoid being killed whilst travelling to Merlyn's employer, who holds the key to the mystery. Written and drawn by J. Calafiore, apart from being one long chase, this is a metaphysical (or nonsense, if you prefer), science-fiction fantasy with a European (Moebius) feel.~NF

GODWHEEL

Malibu: *4 issue (0-3) miniseries 1995**

Ancient God Argus is a tad distressed to discover that the artefacts required to replenish his strength have been spirited away. Unable to expend the energy required to retrieve them himself, he summons the good and the bad from Malibu's Ultraverse to locate and return the artefacts. Predictably enough, the remainder of the series is good guys vs bad. The slim plot is stretched beyond belief, and beyond the capacity of some nice artwork to redeem it. Don't be suckered in by Thor's appearance in the cover box or prominence on the cover of the collection. He only turns up in the final five pages of the final issue.~FP

GODZILLA: King of the Monsters

Marvel: *24 issues 1977-1979*

Pitifully dumb but strangely entertaining series which sees the legendary lizard invade the USA and the Marvel universe, as a succession of superfolks (S.H.I.E.L.D., the Champions, Avengers, Spider-Man, Fantastic Four and even Devil Dinosaur!), ordinary people and cheesy giant monsters try to contain, coddle or clobber the misunderstood monster. Doug Moench and Herb Trimpe produce a weirdly illicit thrill, like playing with the action figures after the kids have gone to bed.~WW

GODZILLA, King of the Monsters

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1987, 6 issue miniseries 1988-1989*, one-shot 1992, one-shot ('Godzilla vs Barkley') 1993, 16 issues 1995-1996*, 6 issue miniseries ('King of the Monsters') 1996*, 6 issue miniseries ('Terror of Godzilla') 1998-1999*

The 1987 special was a horror story told from the point of view of a little girl traumatised during the reawakening of Godzilla and his fellow disaster monsters. Inagos, the Locust King, is particularly frightening. Steve Bissette worked excellently on the story and art and the issue also includes some smashing pin-ups by Paul Chadwick, Rick Geary, and Keith Giffen as well as an interesting article by Bissette that lists all the *Godzilla* films.

The first miniseries was a translation, in black and white, of the Japanese adaptation of the film *Gojira 1984*. It's a very ordinary story, with art to match by Kazuhisa Iwata. The 1992 *Godzilla Color Special*, superbly drawn, and co-written by Arthur Adams, is a grand story about a huge stone statue coming to life when the island it stands on is threatened by Godzilla. The less said about *Godzilla Vs Barkley* the better.

The brightly coloured 1995 series is a surprise treat. Brandon McKinney's art is the best the character has ever had in US comics, and Kevin Maguire's witty script, acknowledging that characters sometimes have more than one motive each, has some ironic plot twists and surprisingly black humour. This gets broader when Arthur Adams takes over on issue 5. The subsequent art by Tatsuya Ishida, and Adams (who drew most of the excellent covers), is exciting on the monster action and adequate elsewhere. McKinney later returned to the comic with scripts by Ryder Windham. This team's work is worth reading, though not as sophisticated as the early issues. The last issue features Godzilla in the days of the dinosaurs. What more do you want? Maybe some reprints to coincide with the release of the US *Godzilla* film. 'King of the Monsters' reprints the 1987 Bissette story, a story from *Dark Horse Comics* 10-11, and 1-4 of the ongoing series, while *Terror of Godzilla* is the Gojira 1984 adaptation in colour.~GK

Recommended: Ongoing 1-4

GOJIN

Antarctic: *8 issues 1995-1996*

Unlike most Japanese comics, or perhaps in reaction to them milking every aspect of a scene, *Gojin* cuts right to the chase, dispensing with vast quantities of story as precised captions. This tends to confuse, as does awkward and unclear art. The basis of *Gojin* is an alien invasion of feudal Japan, but any originality is washed away by the torrent of slapstick action. Issue 4 was published numbered 3.~FP

GOLD DIGGER

Antarctic: *4 issue miniseries 1993, series one 50 issues 1993-1999*, series two 42 issues +, 9 Annuals 1999 to date, one-shot ('Perfect Memory') 1996, one-shot ('Minus 18') 1998, one-shot ('Gold Digger-Beta') 1998*

Hit or miss American anime style comic by Fred Perry that recounts the adventures of cute archaeologist, scientist and action-heroine Gina and her Were-Cheetah step sister Britanny as they roam the universe, righting wrongs and having fun. With mixed success it switches from broad humour to pathos, always served up with huge helpings of breakneck action. Although often slipping into over-cutesy

mode, when at its best it is highly enjoyable. 'Gold Digger-Beta' is a full colour action adventure and 'Minus 18' is a black and white anthology of humour and slice of life set when the girls were children, hence minus 18 years, told from the point of view of their superhero parents. 1-35 of series two are also available in collections.~WW
Recommended: Miniseries (1-4), series one 9-16

GOLD KEY SPOTLIGHT

Gold Key: *11 issues 1976-1978*

Funny-animal and comedy strips from the Gold Key stable like Tom, Dick and Harriet and The Wacky Adventures of Cracky occupy most issues. The exceptions are a new Dagar story in 6, more from the Occult Files of Dr Spektor in 8 and Tragg and the Sky Gods in 9, all every bit as dull as in their regular titles.~SW

THE GOLDEN AGE

*DC: 4 issue miniseries 1993**

World War II has ended and many of DC's 1940s superheroes no longer seem to have a purpose in the post-atomic society. Most fall back into civilian life, but Tex Thompson parlays wartime acclaim as the Americommando into a fast-track political career. As America drifts from the golden age of post-war optimism towards McCarthyism a different threat manifests itself, and the retired heroes find themselves back in action as a new decade begins. James Robinson and Paul Smith produce a fond and nostalgic look at some second-string heroes barely given any kind of personality in almost fifty years. The fourth issue's big revelation comes straight from dopey pulp fiction, but the portrayal of the cast throughout the series is so well conceived that what might be a major flaw elsewhere can be forgiven.~WJ
Recommended: 1-4

GOLDEN AGE GREATS

AC/Paragon: *14 issues 1994-1999*

These volumes run to a minimum eighty pages reprinting material from 1939 to 1955 culled from a wide variety of smaller, less well-known publishers of the time. That's not to say that these comics don't have their share of good stories and art, though. Otto Binder and Gardner Fox, for example, produced hundreds of stories for Fawcett Comics and Magazine Enterprises respectively. There were plenty of good artists around, too, whether freelancers or members of one of the 'shops' such as the Jerry Iger/Will Eisner or the Harry 'A' Chesler studios. Bill Black, as editor, has been on a crusade for over twenty years to represent and preserve the best work from the period, and although in black and white, this is an excellent project that will provide something for anyone interested in the history of the medium.

There is some attempt to present the different styles in a complementary manner. Each issue has a theme and comes with historical articles and checklists. 1 features the Green Lama (two stories by Mac Raboy), Catman (Bob Fujitani), Rocketman and Miss Victory. 2 is dedicated solely to Matt Baker's work on Phantom Lady while 3 contains work by the Iger/Eisner studio – The Flame (Lou Fine), Espionage: Black X (Eisner) and The Black Terror and Fighting Yank, both by Jerry Robinson and Mort Meskin. The Fawcett Heroes are featured in 4 – Spy Smasher (Alex Blum), Minuteman (Phil Bard), Mr Scarlet (Jack Binder), Bulletman (Fujitani), plus Ibis the Invincible by Mac Raboy. 5 is a Crimebuster vs. Ironjaw story from Boy Comics 60-62, written by Charles Biro and drawn by William Overgard, Fred Kida and Norman Maurer. 6 and 8 are both fighting-females issues with examples of The Black Cat, Yankee Girl, Miss Masque, Phantom Lady, Blonde Phantom, Mysta of the Moon, Lorna, Jungle Queen, Miss Victory (different stories illustrated by Charles M. Quinlan, Nina Albright and L. B. Cole), Rulah, Senorita Rio (Nick Cardy) and Lady Luck (Klaus Nordling). The 'Best of the West' in 7, features Western strips from Magazine Enterprises, including 'Trail Colt' and 'Dan Brand and Tipi' by Frank Frazetta, Durango Kid, Tim Holt, The Lemonade Kid (Bob Powell), Straight Arrow (Fred Meagher) and the Calico Kid, The (original) Ghost Rider and The Presto Kid, all by Dick Ayers.

9 offers a selection of Fiction House fighting females (Sheena, Mysta by Ruben Moreira, more Senorita Rio, Firehair and Camilla, both by Bob Lubbers, Tyger Girl, Sky Girl and Glory Forbes, all by Baker, Kaanga by Maurice Whitman and Futura by Walter Palais). 10 collects stories that feature heroes fighting their arch-foes. There are several returns (Cat-Man, Crimebuster and Ibis) but also new faces, including Captain Flash with lovely work by Mike Sekowsky, The Avenger (Bob Powell), Frankenstein (Dick Briefer), Don Winslow of the Navy (Carl Pfeufer and John Jordan), Daredevil (Jack Cole) and, uh, Supermouse.

'Roy Rogers and the Silver Screen Cowboys' (11) contains a very comprehensive article (forty-eight pages) about the comic series featuring cinema cowboys along with strips by John Buscema (Roy Rogers), Russ Manning (Dale Evans), Alex Toth (Rex Allen), Doug Wildey (Lash Larue), Steve Ditko (Rocky Lane's Black Jack – his horse) and Al Williamson (John Wayne). 12 is 'Thrilling Science Fiction' with examples of artwork from Baker, George Evans, Reed Crandall, Wally Wood, Jack Kirby, Bernie Krigstein and Ditko. 13 features the stories by Robinson and Meskin, separately and together, 14 has a series of articles covering its theme of 'Jungle Comics', with another strip from Baker and one from Frazetta. Despite the quality of the artwork these later issues do largely suffer from uninteresting writing. All in all, however, a rewarding series that will have to do in the absence of any systematic reprinting of these characters.~NF
Recommended: 3, 8, 10, 11

THE GOLDEN AGE OF MARVEL COMICS

Marvel: *2 volumes 1997, 1999*

Volume 1, introduced by Roy Thomas, features strips from the first twenty years of Marvel's publishing history, when the company was known as Timely. Included are the very first Sub-Mariner strip from 1939 as well as two punch-ups with The Human Torch, Captain America, the supernatural Vision, The Angel, a costumed copy of The Saint, and The Destroyer, a masked freedom fighter in the European War. Following these are strips from the 1950s 'Atlas' period: Sub Mariner, Torch and Cap are joined by Pluvian super-kid Marvel Boy, the goddess Venus, Black Knight's medieval valour drawn by the great Joe Maneely, and The Yellow Claw, whose arch villainy was briefly chronicled by Jack Kirby and writer Al Feldstein in 1957. Volume 2, introduced by Mickey Spillane, features all Timely material, starting with the origin of The Human Torch as well as more appearances from Cap and his sidekick Bucky, Sub-Mariner and The Vision. There are also some more obscure 1940s characters: The Fiery Mask and The Red Raven by Joe Simon, the super-fast Hurricane and the beautifully inked Tuk the Caveboy by Kirby both from *Captain America Comics*, The Whizzer, a speedster whose origin might raise an eyebrow or two!, wartime fighter Citizen V, Black Marvel (the one in the panther skin), not forgetting The Fin, another elegantly drawn undersea character by Bill Everett. A planned third volume never saw print, but some strips ended up in 1998's *Marvel Mystery Comics*. This is fascinating reading for any fan interested in how crude but curiously exciting early superhero comics were. It is, however, less than surprising that so few script credits exist for these stories.~SW

GOLDEN AGE SECRET FILES AND ORIGINS

DC: *One-shot 2001*

Not connected with *The Golden Age*, this refers to the 1940s era of superheroes. Unlike most Secret Files issues, the content is almost all stories, the longest chronicling the past of DC's earliest superhero, the Crimson Avenger. It also features a glimpse at the social divisions among 1940s JSA members, a rare look at Zatara the magician, and a monologue from young scientific genius Sivana. It's all competent, if not enthralling, and should appeal to fans of DC's earliest superheroes.~WJ

John Bergin's GOLGOTHIKA

Caliber: *4 issues 1996-1997*

One has to admire John Bergin's imagination. He's created an entire world and populated it with extraordinary creatures and concepts, very few of them poor. Unfortunately, though, beyond that he hits a brick wall, having little idea how to marshall his bleak ideas into a plot and lacking the artistic skill that may have gone some way to compensating.~FP

GON

Paradox Press: *4 issue miniseries 1996*, one-shot (Gon Swimmin') 1997,one-shot ('Color Spectacular') 1998, one-shot (Gon Underground) 1998, one-shot (Gon on Safari) 1999*

Outstanding work from Masashi Tanaka, who draws stunning landscapes and depictions of nature. Throw in an anomaly in the form of a voracious mini-dinosaur, Gon, and you have a masterpiece. There's no natural predator that Gon won't attack to assuage his all-consuming appetite. Lions, bears, sharks and eagles all fall prey in these very funny strips. Each issue is a variation on the same theme, three to an issue, but the stunning detail of the artwork more than compensates, and each is given a separate title: *Here Today, Gon Tomorrow, Gon Again, Going, Going, Gon.* The colour one-shot collects strips originally published in colour sections of Japanese comic *Morning* and is the only comic size publication, the remainder being digest sized paperbacks. Because a collection comprising roughly the first four Paradox issues was published prior to them in the UK by Mandarin, the Paradox issues have never been imported to the UK despite Mandarin long ago giving up the ghost. As all strips are silent, however, they're easily understood from the European imported editions available in *Forbidden Planet* shops. Five Casterman volumes cover all but the colour issue.~WJ

Recommended: 1-4, 'Color Spectacular', *Gon On Safari, Gon Underground*

GOOD GIRLS

Fantagraphics: *5 issues 1987-1990*
Rip-Off: *1 issue 1991*

Carol Lay's solo showcase, this features two series, each drawn in a more realistic style than her later work. 'Ms. Lonelyhearts' describes the adventures of a columnist for a trash paper, as she gets involved with sundry weirdos and psychos. The ongoing saga of lost heiress Irene Van Der Kamp tells of her struggle to find love and acceptance in the modern world, even though her African tribal foster-parents ritually disfigured her to conform to their standards of beauty. Flip, insouciant, good fun. An anomaly is 4's 'The Visitation', in which, mid-story, Lay draws herself as giving up, uninspired. Cue a visit from her muse, who proceeds to gleefully trash her apartment. This is the first evidence of the looser, more manic style that would show up in her later strips.~HS

THE GOOD GUYS

Defiant: *9 issues 1993-1994*

The "unique selling point" of this woeful series is that the lead characters are all based on real Defiant readers. Quite why creative genius Jim Shooter thought this would make the comic more interesting is hard to fathom, as the adventures of The Good Guys are no more "realistic" than those of any other superhero team. Full of self-conscious references to popular comics – Rob Liefeld even makes a "special guest appearance" in issue one – The Good Guys gain their powers after they're exposed to a magical "wish box" which turns them into the hero of their dreams. Much of the action seems to take place in comic shops frequented by Shooter and his cronies. Bet they didn't sell many of this turkey...~AL

GOODY GOOD COMICS

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 2000*

Hi-jinks from Gilbert Hernandez as editor and major contributor (20 out of 28 pages) to this looks-good-and makes-no-sense anthology. He expands his cast of characters, but not his range, with the giant–economy sized Roy and friends in 'Extend the hand of Love to all who Can Use It'. It's a blend of fantasy, autobiography and allusion that is all but indistinguishable from most of his other short works, which of course means it's sad, funny, rude outlandish and stylish in equal measure, and shouldn't be missed if you like your comics with a bit of edge to them. His brother Jaime gets the back cover to play with and cartoonist cohorts Rick Altergott and Johnny Ryan pad out the package. 'Human Diastrophism' it is not.~WW

The GOON

Avatar: *3 issue miniseries 1999**
Albatross Exploding: *One-shot ('Color Special') 2002, 3 issues + 2002 to date*

Delicious pastiche of EC Comics, the works of Jack Kirby and Wally Wood and everything horrific and/or gangsterish. Eric Powell relates the hard-boiled adventures of The Goon, Enforcer, Leg-breaker and Muscle-for-Hire, who with his faithful sleaze-ball sidekick Franky, is just trying to make a few bucks and kill the scum-sucking Voodoo Zombie Priest who's trying to take over the rackets with his undead legions and other spooky tricks. There's undead giant apes, walking dead torpedoes, two-headed thugs, evil ghosts and big, dumb Palookas all vying for the honour of most gratuitous final, final moment from the best thug in comics. A veritable hoot for the black-humoured insensitives among us.~WW

Recommended: Miniseries 1-3, Special, 1-2

Batman: GORDON OF GOTHAM

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1998*

This is the untold story of how James Gordon came to leave Chicago for Gotham. It involves corrupt policemen, a politician who'd literally murder his own mother to get elected and an assassin whose help Gordon needs but for which he can't be grateful. Denny O'Neil rehashes the elements of Gordon's character with which we're already familiar, so this adds only a few narrative details to the established history. Dick Giordano and Klaus Janson's grainy artwork completes the sense that while there's nothing terribly wrong with this series, neither does it reach any particular heights.~NF

GORDON YAMAMOTO and the King of the Geeks

Humble Comics: *3 issue miniseries 1997-1998*

Gordon Yamamoto is a high school bully, but when he crowns newcomer Miles Tanner "King of the Geeks" he's unaware that their destinies are due to become inextricably entwined. Gene Yang's story has a point to make about forgiveness, a topic he muses over in the editorial pages, but it's largely an unpredictable romp involving blocked nasal passages, manifestations of hate, and a lot of laughs. Yang's cartooning improves immensely between 1 and 2, starting well but evolving into a less cluttered and more fluid style. This is good stuff, and it's a shame Yang produces very little comics work.~WJ

Batman GORDON'S LAW

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1996-1997*

A first solo fling for long-standing Batman ally Gotham Police Commissioner Gordon. A robbery goes wrong, but the perpetrators still escape, and after six months there are still few clues as to their identity. Gordon discovers, however, that the likely culprits are Gotham police officers, and has to root them out without tipping them off. Klaus Janson's art is moody and complementary to the tale, and it's a surprisingly impressive story from Chuck Dixon, better known for action adventure than characterisation.~FP

Recommended: 1, 2

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* Available in a collected edition

GORE SHRIEK

FantaCo: *6 issues 1986-1988, one-shot ('Delectus') 1989, series two 2 issues, 1 Annual 1990*

The first series contains some gruesome, but effective horror tales from Bruce Spaulding Fuller (1, 3), Steve Bissette (1-4), Rolf Stark (2-3) and Greg Capullo (1-4, on his own and with writers, Bill Townsend and Tom Skulan). With 5, and the addition of articles, including one on horror in the Undergrounds, some of the initial impact has been lost. Series two, which heavily features the work of Gurchain Singh, places too much reliance on humour and EC-style shock endings, though it does also offer the strangeness of Eric Stanway's adaptations of stories by Charles Dickens (1) and Robert Louis-Stevenson (2). An ashcan-sized 6_ was released, but not to the wholesale market, while 'Delectus' is a collection of the best strips from the first series, primarily from 1-4.~NF

GORGANNA'S GHOUL GALLERY

AC: *2 issues 1994*

Dismal cobbling together of sub-standard horror shorts with some 1950s reprints. The work has no redeeming features. You've read the plots a hundred times before and a hundred times better, and even the reprint material seems to be the worst they could possibly find. Gorganna herself is a character from the infinitely superior *Fem Force*. Avoid at all costs.~WW

GORGO

Charlton: *23 issues 1961-1965*

Gorgo was a *Godzilla*-style British movie and the first issue of the comic is an adaptation of the film; thereafter, they made it up as they went along. Gorgo is a huge reptile who's captured and exhibited at Battersea Park, but all too soon his mum comes to rescue him and tramples much of London in the process. Since they are both totally indestructible, further tramplings were inevitable, though the action moves from London after 1. However, in 10 the two save Earth from a Venusian invasion, and in 22 Gorgo chomps on Communist China, so they're not totally lacking in community spirit. It's standard giant-monster nonsense. Steve Ditko drew 1 and 2 and gave the monsters presence, but thereafter the art was generally uncredited and certainly unremarkable, from the likes of Ernie Bache, Vince Colletta and Bill Montes. There was a back-up "strange fantasy" story in most issues, presumably to make the Gorgo story look good.~FC

Batman: GOTHAM ADVENTURES

DC: *60 issues 1998-2003*

Based on the Warner Brothers' cartoon show, this essentially just continues Batman and Robin Adventures, with Batman supported by Batgirl, Nightwing and Robin. Most stories involve one or more of the well known cast of villains, including on their own, The Joker (1, 31, 60), Two-Face (2, 12, 44), Clayface (30, 39), Mr Freeze (5), Poison Ivy (20, 53), The Riddler (11, 28) and the Scarecrow (3, 32) and in pairs, Harley Quinn and the Joker (10, 14), Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy (29), Mr Freeze and Talia (40), and Mr Freeze and Clayface (51). There are few guest stars, but Flash (25), Superman (36) and the Creeper (58) make appearances and the origin of Deadman is retold in 6. In an excellent tale from Ed Brubaker, the Phantom Stranger shows Batman what life in Gotham would be like, if his parents hadn't been killed (33). A new villain, Kim, is introduced in 49, an intelligent young man, who believes that crime can be artistic and tries to use the robberies of Killer Croc to paint a picture across the map of Gotham. Kim returns for related stories pitting his wits against the Riddler in 56-57. Finally, mention must be made of three terrific issues featuring Catwoman (4, 24, 50), in which her relationship to Batman is both tested and confirmed. Like most of the comics based on the animated *Batman* shows, these are thoughtful, well crafted tales, exploring the nature of crime and Batman's reactions to it. Ty Templeton writes 1-12, 14 and 61, and Scott Peterson most other issues. Artwork is initially by Rick Burchett (1-13, 55), then by Tim Levins, who pencils all but a few issues from 15. Both provide clean and clear artwork, compatible with the source material, without really stamping any of their own personality on it, though this is achieved by Joe Staton (29) and Brad Rader (33, 51).~NF

Recommended: 4, 24, 33, 50

GOTHAM CENTRAL

DC: *3 issues + 2003 to date*

Ed Brubaker and Greg Rucka create a nastier and more human corner of the Batman universe as the ordinary cops of Gotham City try to do their jobs in a harsh urban environment that is also the arena of choice for many of the world's most powerful psychopathic thrill-killers. The careful blending of police procedural drama and classic Noir thriller with the careful non-use of the Caped Crusader makes for a compellingly novel read in a woefully over-familiar environment. Michael Lark's smoothly subdued art adds to the subtle tension. Definitely one to watch.~WW

Recommended: 1-3

GOTHAM GIRLS

DC: *5 issue miniseries 2002-2003*

Set squarely in the animated Batman Gotham, this teams Batgirl and Detective Montoya against Poison Ivy and Harley Quinn with Catwoman as a wild card. It's little more than one long well-choreographed and decently drawn chase sequence, with a few insights into the backgrounds of the various characters. The best aspects are the striking pin-up covers of the cast by Shane Glines (1-4) and Rian Hughes (5).~FP

GOTHAM KNIGHTS

DC: *34 issues + 2000 to date*

Each issue of this oddity is a sandwich of superb bread with iffy filling: Always exceptional covers by the unmistakable and brilliant Brian Bolland (from 2) top full-length colour stories in the front, and short black and white ones in the back. The lead stories, usually written by Devin Grayson, are pretty standard post *Dark Knight* fare, focussing on the close relationships among Batman and his many helpers, including Nightwing, Robin, Alfred, Batgirls old and new, Commissioner Gordon, Superman, and the local GP. Successive regulars Dale Eaglesham and Roger Robinson produce the majority of the art for the lead strips, and it's little more than functional and not well coloured. Despite this, Bat-freaks will dig the main man's impassiveness in the face of others' emotions, junior psychology students will thrill to the dissection of quasi-family life, but surely everyone else thinks that there are too many *Batman* comics already.

Not true! After an unpromising start in 1 with the most outrageous Frank Miller rip-off, by Jim Lee, the quirky black and white back-ups have been some of the best things in mainstream comics. Almost all of them are interesting, often by big stars such as John Byrne in 2, John Buscema in 7, and Dave Gibbons in 12, or unusual creative teams, including writers from other mediums such as Alan Brennert in 10, and Harlan Ellison in 13. Several are worthy of special mention: Paul Pope's 'Broken Nose' in 3 has a Batman seemingly out of the 1940s movie serial out for petty sadistic vengeance, and prompted complaints. Then there's Howard Chaykin and Jordi Bernet in 9 and Bob Kanigher and Kyle Baker's beautiful and barking mad 'Snow-Job' with Batman Junior, in 11. Best of all is a surpassingly funny and sexy story, perfect really, of Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy in Arkham Asylum by Paul Dini and Ronnie Del Carmen, in 14. A frightening hallucinatory effort by Alan Grant and Enrique Breccia is in 16, 'Fat City' by Mick McMahon in 18, Dan DeCarlo inked by Terry Austin in 21, and 'The Delusions of Alfred Pennyworth' by Danielle Dwyer and Scott Morse in 34. Many of these stories have been collected in a hardback book. It's a treasure trove.~GK

Recommended: 3, 9, 11, 14, 21, 34

Batman: GOTHAM NIGHTS

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1992, 4 issue miniseries 1995*

The first series is about a number of troubled couples whose problems cause them to converge on a particular area of Gotham when a lonely woman decides to attract the Batman's attention by shooting at people from a high tower. It's a nicely told tale by John Ostrander which heads towards sentimentality at the end but which perfectly encapsulates the Batman's feelings for his city. The artwork by Mary Mitchell is quietly effective and Eduardo Barreto provides some evocative covers. After this, the second series is disappointing. It sees Ostrander and Mitchell back with a story revolving around the people who inhabit or work on Little Paris, a floating theme park in Gotham Bay, but it takes rather predictable paths and Dick Giordano's inks overpower the pencils, removing many of the subtleties of Mitchell's landscapes.~NF

GOTHIC NIGHTS

Rebel Studios: *2 issue microseries 1995*

"A strange and terrifying romance" proclaims the intro page, referring to 'romance' in the classical sense, and so it is. While occasionally straying into the realms of the desperate to impress, thesaurus-assisted writer, David Barbour produces a Hammer Horror script with extra nudity and graphic violence. The alluring countess, pitiful villagers, werewolves, and Baron Frankenstein are all illustrated in fine Wrightsonesque style by Tim Vigil. If this mixture entices, don't be put off by Vigil's first issue cover painting of an unfortunately deformed woman.~FP

THE GRACKLE

Acclaim: *4 issue miniseries 1997*

The big surprise about this is how much Paul Gulacy's art had developed. Although he's still enamoured of zipatone special effects, most of the stiffness and fiddling around with fancy page layouts has disappeared, leaving a gorgeous, realistic but relaxed fine-line style behind. Pity the story's not up to much. Mike Baron has extracted a number of hoary plot devices from various hard-boiled concepts to give us Cross, an ex-policeman who, on the skids, was rescued by the mysterious Colonel. In return the Colonel uses Cross, and a number of other agents world-wide, for his own ends. In the first story-line we find Cross guarding a Chinese Triad boss from usurping Vietnamese gang members who're trying to muscle in on the trade in Firefly, a designer drug that turns users who OD into human torches. The plot is very complicated, but Baron doesn't seem to realise that complicated doesn't equal complex, or indeed good. Reading *The Grackle* you can't help but feel he's crammed a load of favourite things into one comic, rather uneasily. Would have gone down a storm in 1984, but now seems rather dated wish fulfilment stuff.~FJ

GRAFFITI KITCHEN

Tundra: *One-shot 1993*

Eddie Campbell: *One-shot 1998*

One of Eddie Campbell's semi-autobiographical Alec MacGarry stories, this is a tale of a compulsive relationship with a young girl, and the consequences on our hero and his circle of friends. By turns it's crass, lyrical, loutish, sparkling, sordid and poetical to heartrending effect. In some places, it's quite a horrible story, but still coughs laughter out of the reader at unexpected moments. At the conclusion, you're left depressed, spent and empty, but oddly, in a good way. Probably the best thing Campbell's done to date. A second printing was issued by the author's own imprint in 1998, and it's now collected as part of *Alec Three Piece Suit*.~HS

Recommended

GRAFIK MUSIK

Caliber: *4 issues 1990-1991*

Michael Allred comes into his own with this showcase title. It continues 'It Was' from *Graphique Musique* and runs 'Citizen Nocturne' into 'Goulash'. The latter, bringing in the Frank Einstein character from *Creatures of the Id*, is the strip that will soon become Madman, once Allred realised that a costume and codename was more commercial. Both strips provide a taste of Allred at his enthusiastic, least constrained best.~JC

GRAPHIC STORY MONTHLY

Fantagraphics: *7 issues 1990-1991*

Once again Fantagraphics rolled up their sleeves and prepared to give the American public a mostly humorous, intelligent, cultivated anthology of cartoons and illustrated stories. Once again the title folded just as it was getting interesting.

The first issues contained *Prime Cuts* leftovers, including Douglas Michael's 'Adventure Ohio' series and Rick Geary's illustrated version of *Flaubert's Dictionary of Received Ideas*, which is almost finished! 1-5 contain Jacques Tardi's adaptation of the Nestor Burma mystery, 'Fog Over Tolbiac Bridge', from the book by Leo Malet. It's faithful to the original, with its 1950s setting and atmospheric detail, as, typically, Burma receives a mysterious note from an old friend who abruptly dies, which draws him into the shady world of anarchist activists. The other translated material is Franquin's 'Gomer Goof', one page of which appears in all issues.

The other regular strips include yet another Jaxon horror tale set among missionaries and Indians in Mexico (4-6, dull as usual) and Craig Maynard's stories of childhood, which communicate mostly by what they don't say or show (1, 4, 5). There are also regular chunks of Disney producer Ward Kimball's car humour in 'Asinine Alley', a collection of observations and single-panel cartoons.

The Tardi is well worth having, but is available in a collected edition, and there's precious little else of a must-have nature in *Graphic Story Monthly*. Plenty of things raise the odd smile, such as Jim Siergey's 'America', written by Tom Roberts, in which artist Siergey takes a Bill Brysonesque role to praise burger culture and motel comforts in humorously overwrought language in 5, or Roger Langridge's 'Professor Cucumber and his Stereotyped Assistants' in 6. There's little consistency, though. 7 was a cartoonists-on-cartoonists special, ignoring regular strips, and was blessed with a great cover and series of pages by Joe Matt. There's also a sharp parody in the form of Dennis Pimple and T. Motley's 'I was a Self-Confessional Cartoonist', and Brian Sendelbach's absurdist 'Billy Mathers' strips which, rather in the manner of *Ernie Pook's Comeek*, ramble childishly on about dead dogs and haircuts.~FJ

Recommended: 7

GRAPHIQUE MUSIQUE

Slave Labor: *3 issues 1990*

This Michael Allred showcase contains two strips, 'It Was...' and 'Citizen Nocturne'. The former is a surreal adventure through the daydreams and subconscious of Calvin Lennox, a child who sees himself as an adult. The latter is a bizarre vampire love story. Allred's style is still in need of a little polish here as he finds his feet with the medium and plays around with the luxury of time to develop the stories, but his promise is already apparent and both strips are valuable to the later continuity of the characters depicted.~JC

GRATEFUL DEAD COMIX

Kitchen Sink: *Series one 7 issues 1991-1993, series two 2 issues 1993-1994*

Grateful Dead songs visually interpreted in underground style by a variety of artists (most notably Tim Truman) with little but song lyrics as text. Occasionally, experiences at live concerts are transcribed. Deadheads will lap this up. For the uninitiated, there is little point.~APS

GRAVEDIGGERS

Acclaim: *4 issue miniseries 1996-1997*

Complex whodunnit from Acclaim's crime-fiction line by Mark Moretti and Rodney Ramos. The title refers to a government department that handles long-unsolved cases. Well constructed with vivid backgrounds but it would be better served without the petty, snide asides at the comics industry giants.~APS

GRAVESTONE

Malibu:*7 issues 1993-1994*

A gravestone marks the location of something deceased and mouldering, so that would be about right, then.~WJ

GRAVESTOWN

Ariel: *1 issue 1998*

There's very nice artwork in places from Roger Gibson, but the twist on the woman at large in the haunted house scenario isn't as intriguing as it's intended to be. Further minus points accrue from having our otherwise independent heroine wandering around in her underwear and an open coat for the entire issue.~FP

GREASEMONKEY

Kitchen Sink: *2 issues 1995*
Image: *2 issues 1998*

Although the title is commonly applied to mechanics, in this case the Greasemonkey is actually a gorilla, living in the 21st century on an almost destroyed Earth. Following the devastation, with sixty per cent of humanity destroyed, some kindly aliens bestowed intelligence on various species. 'Mac' Gimbensky, the gorilla in question, is a star mechanic looking after his all-female squadron, the Barbarians, along with his young human assistant. Written, illustrated and excellently coloured by Tim Eldred, he produces entertaining human-interest stories in a clean, crisp style. It's a lot of fun, especially the sequences featuring the dreaded dentist. Mac, of course has nothing to fear as modern dentistry techniques often offer painless solutions. A shame this series never continued as there were lots of opportunities for some interesting space yarns. The Image issues are merely black and white reprints. Get the Kitchen Sink ones.~HY

Recommended: Kitchen Sink 1-2

GREEN ARROW

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1983, 4 issue miniseries ('The Wonder Year') 1993, series one 139 issues (0-137, 1,000,000), 7 Annuals 1988-1995, series two 18 issues +, 2001 to date*

Created by Mort Weisinger in 1941, DC's ace archer and his bag of trick arrows survived the cancellation of superheroes in the late 1940s, and was still around as a back-up feature in titles edited by Weisinger for their revival a decade later. Oliver Queen was a wealthy adventurer who fought crime with his trusty sidekick, Speedy. Always a second-stringer until the 1970s, in *The Brave and the Bold* 85 he was redesigned before sharing equal billing in Green Lantern 76-89, where he became a socially aware crusader without fortune. His first solo title finally appeared in 1983. Written by Mike W. Barr, an old flame of Oliver Queen's leaves him her company to run, much to the displeasure of the other relatives. Predictably enough he's soon a murder target. It's not the sort of story expected for an action-oriented character like Green Arrow, but the art by Trevor Von Eeden and Dick Giordano works well.

The ongoing series began where *The Longbow Hunters* left off, written by Mike Grell and illustrated by Ed Hannigan and Dick Giordano. All are on top form, as the relationship between Green Arrow and his lover/partner Black Canary is fully explored. They're now based in Seattle, and their adventures have a greater human-interest angle, concentrating more on down-to-earth criminal activities. The series carries a 'mature readers' advisory, as sex and violence play a major role, and while the violence is never glorified there's sometimes the feeling that Grell is setting out to shock. The problems of gay-bashing and local gang warfare are highlighted in 5-6, while 17-18 feature the sadistic 'Horseman', who butchers a stripper. Fans of Grell's Jon Sable title may want to check 15 and 16.

The mysterious Japanese warrior woman, Shado, from the *Longbow* series returns in 9-12 on the run from her previous employers, Japanese gangsters the Yakuza. This story introduces Eddie Fyers, a free agent who works for various organisations, and who is a catalyst for many plots to come. Shado nearly kills Green Arrow in the course of the story, but while he's recuperating something happens that's later beyond his recall. It's strongly suggested in her next appearance, that her child is also his. In 21-24 it's kidnapped by the Yakuza, who blackmail her to assassinate a famous politician. By this time Dan Jurgens is pencilling Grell's stories, reuniting a team that worked on *Warlord*, who duly makes an appearance in 27-28, with everyone confusing the two bearded characters. The succeeding story explores environmental pollution.

Green Arrow does some soul-searching in 33, after being tortured in the previous issue and rescued by Black Canary. He recalls killing Black Canary's torturer in *The Longbow Hunters*, although he could've stopped him without killing him, but decided not to. This was a major departure from the old Green Arrow, who was practically comatose when he killed a crook in the early 1970s. The 'Black Arrow' saga begins in 35, with Green Arrow having to hunt down Eddie Fyers, or be labelled a traitor. Black Canary enlists the aid of Shado, and the revelations of the conclusion force Oliver to reconsider his allegiances. Starting with 39 Green Arrow travels, stumbling across IRA gun smuggling, an adventure in Wales, and in 46-48 he tackles the problems of animal poaching in Africa. The series is now illustrated by Denys Cowan, who supplies a harsher mood reflecting Green Arrow's turbulence. Fulfilling his spiritual quest, he's back home with Black Canary in 50 and shows he can be quite nimble in bed for a man of forty-seven years. Hope for us all then.

59-60 deal with a killer released from prison wanting revenge, and 63-66 again feature Shado, whom Green Arrow is hired to find to repay a debt. Of course nothing is as clear-cut as it seems. Rick Hoberg has pencilled from 53, and Grell leaves with 80, but his swansong is splitting up the Green Arrow/Black Canary relationship, a DC fixture for over twenty years. Chuck Dixon writes from 83, with art by Jim Aparo, whose work looks wonderful under the inks of Gerry Fernandez. Their multi-part saga ends with the *Zero Hour* crossover in 90. Green Arrow's on the move again as he reaches a 'crossroads' in his life, but the series is now set firmly within the DC Universe, with guest appearances from Catwoman in 86 and the JLA in 88. Set between 90 and 91, Issue 0 between has Oliver Queen in a monastery re-evaluating his life as he gives up killing and playing Green Arrow, but he's befriended by a young monk, Connor Hawke, who, strangely, is old enough to be his son. Connor accompanies Queen when he leaves the monastery and the youngster dons the Green Arrow outfit, being a top archer and fan of Green Arrow. Artistically the feature is by now in the capable hands of rising star Rodolfo DaMaggio until 113. It's not before long that Eddie Fyers turns up to involve the archers in another espionage caper, and 96-100 involve Hal Jordan, once Green Lantern, and Arsenal, who used to be Speedy, Green Arrow's sidekick. Queen becomes involved with eco-terrorists, leading to a plane exploding with him on board.

The series carries on with young Green Arrow searching for his estranged mother. There's a blast from the past in 110-111 crossing over with *Green Lantern* 76-77, where the two youngsters, who are searching for Green Lantern's father (there are lots of displaced parents in the DC Universe), head for a town called Desolation. Their predecessors visited here during their early 1970s travels. The young Green Arrow certainly appears to be a chip off the old block, and with Eddie Fyers along as a good supporting character there's lots of scope for action-oriented adventures which Dixon never fails to deliver. Dougie Braithwaite keeps up the high standard of art from 118 when Connor and Eddie go in search of the adult Green Arrow, but encounter some dinosaurs instead. It's not all action all the way as Dixon adds various supporting characters such as Connor's old mentor, Master Jansen, and his mother's arms-dealing husband, and to top it all, he becomes the owner of a building. There's an impressive crossover with *Green Lantern* 92, in 125-126 where Dixon explores racial conflict, and in 132-133 Eddie Fyers returns with super-powers in an amusing tale guest starring the JLA. It's above average action again in 134-135 with the 'Brotherhood of the Fist' crossover with *Detective Comics* 723, *Robin* 55 and Nightwing 23. 136 is yet another crossover with Green Lantern, 104 this time, featuring Hal 'Green Lantern' Jordan hunting down Oliver Queen's "killers". Connor re-evaluates his life in 137 and the series actually ends with issue 1,000,000 featuring Oliver Queen's descendants... and they're not all from Connor either, so does this mean Oliver Queen is alive ready to produce new offspring? Actually, at the last count, it's been hinted that he's sired three children, none of which he knew anything about!

Mike Grell also wrote *Green Arrow: The Wonder Year*, fleshing out Green Arrow's origin as he's marooned on a desert island. Once back in civilisation he begins his crimefighting career and meets an old girlfriend, who's not all she appears. Despite trotting out Green Arrow's origin again, it's a decently produced series, nicely drawn by Gray Morrow. The origin is retold again in annual 7, bearing little resemblance to the Grell version. Of the other annuals 1-3 all guest-star the Question, and are written by Denny O'Neil, so make for good reading, with 2 the best of them, mainly due to the back-up story featuring Dinah (Black Canary) Lance and her mother, the original 1940s Black Canary.

More good reading is found in the second ongoing series written by film-maker Kevin Smith, with the art team of Phil Hester and Andé Parks. Smith knows his DC Universe and populates the continuing 'Quiver' story in 1-10* with strange concepts and guest stars. Oliver Queen is alive and well ready to produce more offspring, but how? And why is he ten years out of date? Well, the mystery is a complex one, but under Smith it all makes sense, and it takes someone with great skill to incorporate DC's old humour characters, Stanley and His Monster into the storyline! As well as bringing back the original Green Arrow, Smith handles his relationship with his two 'kids' Roy (Arsenal) Harper and Connor Hawke with great care and also shows respect to his ex-lover Black Canary. Throw in Jason (The Demon) Blood, Batman, Aquaman, Hal (The Spectre) Jordan, Barry (Flash) Allen, and others, and you have a wonderful cocktail of action and intrigue. Smith ends his run exploring the Green Arrow/Black Canary relationship against as backdrop of a nasty killer who endangers Connor's life. So how do you top Kevin Smith? Editor Bob Schreck pulls it off by hiring best-selling author Brad Meltzer. 16 starts 'The Archer's Quest', investigating who was at Oliver Queen's funeral and why, in the company of Arsenal and an old JSA villain, and thus far it's very entertaining. Credit must also go to Hester and Parks for keeping up the high standard of artwork. Definitely a title to keep an eye on.~HY

Recommended: Series one, 5-6, 9-12, 17-19, 21-24, 59-60, 100-101, 132-135, series two, 1-10, 12-18

GREEN CANDLES

Paradox: *3 issue miniseries 1995**

Written by novelist Tom DeHaven, *Green Candles* revolves around the idea of recovered memory. Under the care of her psychotherapist, Grace Penny has been remembering ritual satanic abuse and is now receiving a series of photos each showing a candle that's getting closer to burning out. Convinced that she's become a target of her abuser, she hires a private detective. He's not good enough to save her, but can he track down her killer? It's a reasonable, if predictable tale, ably if unimpressively drawn by Robin Smith.~NF

GREEN GOBLIN

Marvel: *13 issues 1995-1996*

Thirty-one years and three deaths (allegedly) since his first appearance, long-time Spider-Man villain the Goblin finally gets his own title. Teenager Philip Urich, nephew of the veteran *Daily Bugle* reporter, stumbles across one of the Green Goblin's infinite secret hideaways whilst investigating a Norman Osborn warehouse. Startled by a rat, he trips into a vat of Goblin creation chemicals, with predictable consequences. The tone is set for the rest of the series as Tom DeFalco attempts to mimic the teenage angst of Peter Parker's early days with sledgehammer subtlety, assisted by Scott McDaniel's Lego-brick artwork. Kudos goes to Philip's attitude (he just wants some kicks from the costume and glider, never mind the hero shtick) and the realistic conclusion. But hey, like, DeFalco's rad dialogue imparted to the gnarley dude is, like, so incredibly mega-cool, man, it really psyches you out and, like, leaves you totally kicking. Pass the barf bag.~APS

The GREEN HORNET

Gold Key: *3 issues 1967*

Expository dialogue and wafer-thin plots characterise this pedestrian attempt at transferring the Green Hornet from the small screen to comics. Look out for the third issue's cameo appearance of TV football commentator Jimmy 'the chin' Hill.~FP

The GREEN HORNET

Now: *Series one 14 issues 1989-1991, series two 39 issues, 3 Annuals 1991-1994*

Series one establishes a family legacy of Green Hornets and Katos in accounting for the original pulp incarnation of the 1930s and the TV version of the 1960s. Both take their share in the spotlight as Ron Fortier and Jeff Butler run through the family history in 1-7 and set up an inexperienced Green Hornet and female Kato for the 1990s. Series two sees Mishi Kato replaced by her brother in a more traditional pairing for comics distributed beyond comic shops, and has Chuck Dixon's more action-based scripts until 12, when Fortier returns. Later issues are written by Joan Weis, and changing artists are a feature of the title. Remaining light adventure throughout, there's not a bad issue in either series, nor is there an excellent one. For a sample of the first series issue 1 is as good as any, and 33-34 of series two feature a recurring villain and spotlight Green Hornet's romantic life.~WJ

Tales of the GREEN HORNET

Now: *2 issue microseries 1990, 4 issue miniseries 1992, 3 issue miniseries 1992, one-shot 1992*

Wanting to flog their *Green Hornet* licence for all it was worth, Now had created rather a sticky wicket for themselves by updating the concept to the 1990s in the regular title. Never mind, how about some miniseries of the 'classic' 1940s and 1960s versions? 1960s TV Green Hornet Van Williams plotted the first series, but it's nothing special, and inappropriate, foggy art from Del Barras rather scuppers the project. The following two series are dull. Avoid.~FP

GREEN LANTERN

DC: Series one: 224 issues, 3 Annuals 1960-1972 (1-89), 1976-1988 (90-224), series two 155 issues +, 9 Annuals, 3 80-page Giants, 2 Secret Files 1990 to date, one-shot ('Annual No 1, 1963') 1998

"In brightest day, in darkest night no evil shall escape my sight. Let those who worship evil's might beware my power: Green Lantern's light." With that oath Hal Jordan recharges his power ring, a device that enables him to do anything provided his willpower is up to the task. This was the concept as introduced in *Showcase* 22, when a red-skinned alien crashed on Earth, summoning test pilot Jordan, whom he's selected to succeed him in his role as an intergalactic protector. Given the power ring, Jordan must recharge it once every twenty-four hours from a power battery, which resembles a green lantern, the name Jordan adopts as his crimefighting guise.

The concept actually updated a 1940s character, although beyond the idea of the ring Jordan bore little similarity to his predecessor, whose background was more mystical. Editor Julius Schwartz, writer John Broome and illustrator Gil Kane were the initial creators. Broome's plots were science-fiction-based, but he was also adept at characterisation, and Kane was noted for his action-packed style: his layouts were very distinctive and dramatic, although he was often subdued by inker Joe Giella. The first issue reveals that Jordan isn't the only Green Lantern, but a member of a corps under the Guardians of the Universe, little blue men sworn to protect the universe and operating 3600 Green Lanterns. Jordan's personal life was a constant counterpoint to the superhero action. He was employed by Ferris Aircraft and had romantic intentions towards Carol Ferris, her father's choice of company M.D. She attempted to distance herself from Jordan while lusting after Green Lantern, which made Jordan determined to make her love him for himself. The other supporting character was a young Eskimo grease-monkey called Pieface, although his real name was Thomas Kalmaku. Despite the patronising nickname, he was actually a decently portrayed non-white character. Notable villains included the belligerent Weaponeers of Qward introduced in 2, the giant intellect of Hector Hammond, Sonar master of magnetism, and, in 7, the renegade Green Lantern Sinestro. The red-skinned Sinestro had been expelled from the Green Lantern Corps, but obtained a yellow power ring. The significance of this was yellow being the one weakness of the Green Lanterns, due to an impurity in the power source. His threat would be the most frequent over the years. Second on that list was actually Carol Ferris, who in 16 was transformed into Star Sapphire by a race of warrior women. It wasn't permanent, but did recur, mostly without her knowledge, thus presenting an extra dilemma when she fought Green Lantern. Their relationship was developed in a back-up strip concentrating on Hal Jordan's civilian life, from 22 the exclusive territory for Broome, who was replaced as writer on the lead feature by Gardner Fox.

13 featured the first teaming of the revived Flash and Green Lantern, a partnership successfully repeated many times over the next twenty years. By now Kane's art was looking even better due to the occasional inking of Murphy Anderson, to be followed by Sid Greene, whose delicate feathering style was very suited to dynamic superheroics. 1-29 have so far been gathered in four volumes of *Green Lantern Archives*. Broome was back as the writer for 40. It gave the Guardians of the Universe an origin and featured the 1940s Green Lantern, Alan Scott. He would make occasional appearances over the next few years, and there was always a nice feel to the issues in which the two characters got together. The mid-1960s saw some changes for Jordan, and after his relationship with Carol Ferris collapsed he quit his job to become an adventurer. 59 introduced Guy Gardner in an 'imaginary' story positing what might have occurred had the power ring initially been given to the second-choice Gardner, then a teacher and a very different character from the one who would later become popular. There were assorted creative changes from 61, with Mike Friedrich and Denny O'Neil contributing stories, and Kane's spectacular return in 68 after a short absence, now inking his own pencils. The big change, though, came with 76, now renowned, but at the time a desperate attempt to save a dying title. The title now co-credited Green (Oliver Queen) Arrow, who'd been given a personality refit in *The Brave and the Bold* 85, and was now a socially aware crusader and one of the first of the grittier superheroes. His teaming with Green Lantern led them to explore the social issues of the time in 76-89, marvellously written by Denny O'Neil, lavishly pencilled by Neal Adams and inked by Dick Giordano. The Guardians of the Universe had one of their number accompany the pair as they explored America to learn more about humanity. There was a far greater sophistication than in any other superhero comic to that date, and topics covered included corrupt slumlords, pollution, the treatment of Native Americans, small-town mentality, religious sects and overpopulation. O'Neil never forgets the superhero soap opera elements, and the reappearance of Carol Ferris in 84 is particularly touching. 85-86 are the most famous issues from this run, spotlighting the problems of drugs as personified by Green Arrow's former partner Speedy, Roy Harper. Commendably, it offers no easy solutions, but an understanding of how anyone can become hooked. There's also some fine characterisation as Green Arrow, knowing and self-righteous throughout the run, is faced with his own shortcomings. 87 introduces John Stewart, an African-American in a story focusing on racial prejudice. Stewart is the Guardians' choice of replacement for Jordan should he be unable to fulfil his duties, and will become an increasingly important character over the years. In the Green Arrow back-up titled 'What Can One Man Do?' a riot ends in tragedy, resulting in Oliver Queen deciding to run for mayor. The run ends with a powerful story counterbalancing ecological needs with employment needs. Despite winning numerous industry awards, the series wasn't popular enough with the readership to ward off cancellation. From that point the back-up strip in Flash was Green Lantern's home for the next few years. The O'Neil/Adams stories were later reprinted as a seven-issue series (including their final tale from *Flash* 217-219) titled *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* and more recently in a luxurious hardback.

Green Arrow was still part of the title when Green Lantern was revived in 1976, and O'Neil, in the company of artist Mike Grell, concentrated on superhero and human-interest stories without the overt social issues. The best of the early issues was a pseudo-medieval setting with Sinestro in 92. 100 introduced a new Air Wave, Hal Jordan's cousin, an introduction made when someone noticed the 1940s Air Wave was named Larry Jordan, so, of course, they had to be related! Alex Saviuk offered basic super-hero artwork. John Stewart along with Green Arrow's lover/partner Black Canary were featured supporting characters until Green Lantern flew solo again with 122, while 116 returned Guy Gardner, now a Green Lantern for the first time. O'Neil gradually defined his more aggressive and objectionable character up until 131.

123 introduced the artwork of Joe Staton, and new scripter Marv Wolfman, introduced Bruce Gordon, Eclipso, to the cast. Along with a greater soap opera feel he dropped subplots here, there and everywhere. Wolfman also began featuring other Green Lanterns, many of them aliens introduced in the Tales of the Green Lantern Corps miniseries, and 148 began a back-up strip with that title, replacing the uneventful Adam Strange series in place from 132. Wolfman introduced the Omega Men, later to have their own title, in the undistinguished 141-144, but his best idea was his swansong, exiling Green Lantern from Earth for a year, in 152-171. Although giving a needed change to the title, these attempts to emulate the old-style DC science-fiction stories didn't work, with a 1980s audience expecting a contemporary comic, not one rehashing old stories. Mike Barr's wonderfully titled 'Rotten to the Corps' in 154-156 was the best of the run, extrapolating the cultural differences between various Green Lanterns, with 156 drawn by Gil Kane. Keith Pollard replaced Staton from 157, and was far more suited to the space stories, and 171 is notable for the art of Alex Toth, inked by Terry Austin. It was all change with 172 as a vast improvement was instituted by the new creative team of writer Len Wein and artist Dave Gibbons, who'd drawn a few back-up strips previously. Gibbons was by far and away the best artist to work on the revived strip, with an appealing style and excellent story-telling skills. Hal Jordan was returned to Earth and to Ferris Aircraft, where company problems result in an ultimatum from Carol Ferris that sees Jordan resigning from the Green Lantern Corps, to be replaced by John Stewart. With 186, though, Wein and Gibbons left to allow Steve Englehart and the returning Joe Staton to take over. Neither were on good form. Stewart remained as Green Lantern, becoming romantically involved with red-skinned Green Lantern Katma Tui. Star Sapphire was also back in 192, and 194-198 involve the entire Green Lantern Corps, Sinestro, and a battle between Guy Gardner and John Stewart. Hal Jordan returns as Green Lantern with 199, and with 201 the title changes to *The*

Green Lantern Corps in order to accommodate the proliferation of Green Lanterns, although the series remains set on Earth. The unfortunately named Killowog becomes a popular character, and 208-210 see him enlisted by the Soviet Union. Not caring for the politically divisive nature of Earth politics, he's happy to develop battle armour for the Soviets, resulting in the Rocket Reds. The story is badly let down by an appalling 'oh, the Commies are bad after all' plot, painting Mikhail Gorbachev, the man who in reality revolutionised the Soviet Union and helped end the Cold War, as a deceiver and murderer! This remains Englehart's lowest career point. Fragmentation left the series too diluted from its main essence: one man with a ring able to do anything. Surrounded by a team of similarly endowed characters, endearing as they were, it lost any impact and the series limped to a close.

The first and second series were bridged by *Emerald Dawn*, recounting Hal Jordan's background prior to becoming Green Lantern. The first new issues, by Gerard Jones and Pat Broderick, reduce the cast to Jordan, Gardner and Stewart, with none of them predominating, and 1-8 collected as 'The Road Back'. Jones' tenure is very hit-and-miss, although a sense of humour serves well for stories starring the doglike Green Lantern G'Nort (9-12). 14-17 introduce the idea of 'Mosaic', battles between cities on the Guardians' home planet, and John Stewart is moved over into a solo series with that title. 19 was the fiftieth anniversary of the Green Lantern concept and features the 1940s version in a story drawn by his creator Martin Nodell. 30-31 cross over with *Flash* 69-70 for Jones to have some fun with the 'Gorilla Warfare' story, co-starring two more above-average intelligent animals, Detective Chimp and Rex The Wonder Dog. Apart from nostalgic interludes, though, there was little occurring to grab anyone's attention. 46, however, plays a big role in the advancement of Hal Jordan's character as his home city is destroyed, and 48 begins the 'Emerald Twilight' series written by Ron Marz. Jordan attempts to resurrect Coast City and all its inhabitants, apparently contravening the personal-gain clause of the Guardians' code. The Guardians demand the surrender of his ring and at the same time devastate the restored city, thus driving Hal Jordan to insanity. By the time the plot concludes in 50 (under a glow-in-the-dark cover) pretty much everything has been changed, and when the power ring is passed to the younger Kyle Rayner in 51 Guy Gardner is the only other Green Lantern left. There was a need to revitalise *Green Lantern*, both title and character, but the way it occurred defied all previously established facets of Hal Jordan's character. Short-term shock value pre-empted any consideration for the fans sticking with the character. The phrase "piss on them" comes to mind. The story has been collected.

With a new Green Lantern in place, the same old themes prevailed, the only difference being the aspect of someone learning on the job. Being an artist, Rayner uses his ring more imaginatively than his predecessors, but sometimes a good old-fashioned giant green boxing glove says it better. Hal Jordan is still around, now known as Parallax, and meets his successor in 55, while Guy Gardner drops by in 60. 71-73* feature 'The Hero Quest', as the new Green Lantern tries to discover just what it is to be a hero, encountering guest stars aplenty, each with a different idea. He's also been romancing Donna Troy, formerly Wonder Girl of the Teen Titans and now one of the Darkstars, the organisation replacing the Green Lantern Corps as protectors of the universe. 76 and 77 shadow those issues from the first series, guest-starring the new Green Arrow. Writer Ron Marz and artist Darryl Banks are no O'Neil and Adams, but they maintain a decent balance of superheroic battles and human interludes. There's a good homage in 81 to Hal Jordan, with many guest appearances highlighting his heroic past, and enabling Kyle Rayner to fly free of any previous associations.

Not a bad writer, Marz is more at ease concentrating on personalities rather than action. The 'Retribution' story in 83-85 was uneventful, but introduced a major new villain, Fatality, a warrior woman bent on killing any remaining ex-Green Lanterns out there. Things hot up for young Kyle in 86 when the green-skinned Jade, ex-Infinity Inc member and daughter of Alan Scott joins the series. She eventually takes over as the love interest (nothing like keeping it in the family) after Donna Troy departs due to a personal tragedy. Green Arrow and the Flash guest-star in a crossover in 96, while it's off to the 30th Century in 98-99 for an adventure with the Legion of Super-Heroes where they have to battle a bunch of Green Lantern baddies. On the way back to the present in 100 he overshoots and ends up in the past just in time to see Hal Jordan and Sinestro engaging in one of their regular skirmishes. Jordan follows Rayner to the present in 101-106*, where he discovers the fate of Coast City and his role in the destruction of the Green Lantern Corps. Various adventures with the JLA and Green Arrow follow, ending in a battle with Jordan's older self, Parallax. In 107 Jade, who has lost her previous powers is offered a Green Lantern ring. From 108 she is the new Green Lantern while Rayner goes off for a space adventure, continued in the 'Circle of Fire' miniseries. The next few issues reveal the past of the new Green Lantern, who is helped along with her adventures by Wonder Woman, Green Arrow and her father, now renamed Sentinel. Just as she's being clobbered by Fatality, Rayner comes back to assist in 112.

115-116 guest-star Plastic Man and Booster Gold and are a bit of a hoot involving a mis-delivered package, and Hal Jordan returns yet again in 119 this time in the guise of The Spectre. Marz's last major offering before he leaves in 125 is a rather convoluted space opera featuring a new Green Lantern Corps. New regular writer Judd Winick arrives with 129 and he's off to a bumpy start with his first few issues in which Green Lantern battles the robotic Manhunters and Fatality, and a prolonged battle with new villain Nero to 136, available as a collection. Winick is more successful concentrating on Kyle Rayner who takes a regular illustration assignment for *Feast* magazine and introduces a young assistant, Terry Berg, who would become the centre of media attention. Subplots involving Jade and Terry are interesting, especially when a proposal of marriage is made. Young Terry doesn't take the news too well in 137, as he himself has feelings towards Rayner. Winick handles the situation of a young man coming to terms with his homosexuality with sensitivity and maturity. It's not the sort of story expected in this series, but it makes a welcome change from all the mindless action. Winick's next major plot, though, is far more interesting as Rayner's capabilities undergo some fundamental changes. He becomes omni-powerful and takes up the identity of Ion from 146. Nothing seems beyond his abilities, which makes for interesting situations. Regular fill-in penciller Dale Eaglesham has by now progressed from regular fill-ins to regular. A spotlight on the now crippled, ex-Green Lantern John Stewart in 147 is worthy of attention, with this sort of personal stories Winick's strength. Continuing his Ion persona, Rayner restores Jade's original powers in 148, and worries the JLA in 149. Everything comes to a head in 150 where Rayner meets his estranged father, relinquishes his beefed-up powers and offers hope for a revived Guardians of the Universe. Oh, and he gets a nifty new costume. Continuing human-interest themes, 153 is an enjoyable tale about a high-school reunion and Jade meeting Rayner's mother. This rather good-natured story leads into 154, which attracted considerable media attention covering its theme of gay-bashing, as Terry Berg is brutally beaten. Even without mainstream acknowledgement, now that Winick has settled in, Green Lantern is currently experiencing its best period for many years.

None of the annuals are worth much attention, though 9 introduces a Tunisian heroine. The 80-page giants are a bit better, with 1 and 2 offering plenty of enjoyable short stories featuring various Green Lanterns and JLA members, while 3 is a full-length saga set on Darkseid's Apokolips, and deals with a forgotten Green Lantern by Scott Beatty. Early adventures can be found reprinted in DC's Archive series and in 1998, a special 'Green Lantern Annual No 1, 1963' , also reprinting early stories, made a long overdue appearance.~HY

Recommended: Series one 40, 52, 63, 76-87, 89, series two 81, 115-116, 137, 147, 150, 153, 154

GREEN LANTERN CORPS QUARTERLY

DC: *8 issues 1992-1994*

Spinning off from Green Lantern's own title, this explores various aspects of the intergalactic peace-keeping force, headed by the Guardians of the Universe. Each of the 3600 members protects a sector of the universe; they're limited only by their will in what their power rings enable them to do. Additionally, the series concentrates on Alan Scott, the original 1940s Green Lantern, and a man with no connection to the Corps. His stories are a bit of a treat for fans of the Justice Society of America, as various members guest-star, nicely told by Roger Stern. The story in 3 is a sad occasion, as it concerns the death of the original Black Canary.

The Green Lantern Corps are certainly a mixed bunch. In 1, we're introduced to Jack T. Chance, who's as bad as they come. He's from a long line of loveable rogues and is clearly inspired by that mean-son-of-a-bitch intergalactic hitman, Lobo, and it's no surprise that they meet in 8. The other regular feature stars G'Nort, a canine Green Lantern, who isn't very good at what he does and is played for laughs. Lots of choice creators contribute to some decent short stories, one of the best being in 6 by Mike Baron and Chas Truog, featuring a middle-aged female alien looking after a community based very much on the old West. She's the local sheriff, but tries not to use her power ring too often, and doesn't like flying because it makes her sick. Others to look out for include Doug Moench / Paul Gulacy collaborations in 1 and 2, a nicely drawn story by Dave Cockrum in 3, and fan favourite Travis Charest contributing to a tale in 6. There should be something here for everyone.~HY

Recommended: 3, 6

GREEN LANTERN Miniseries and One-shots

DC: *One-shot ('Ganthet's Tale') 1992, one-shot (Green Lantern/Silver Surfer: 'Unholy Alliances') 1995, one-shot ('Plus The Ray') 1996, 2 issue microseries (Green Lantern/Flash: 'Faster Friends') 1997, one-shot ('3-D') 1998, 3 issue miniseries (Green Lantern & Sentinel: 'Heart of Darkness') 1998, one-shot ('Fear Itself') 1999, 2 issue microseries ('Circle of Fire') 2000, one-shot (Green Lantern/Adam Strange) 2000, one-shot (Green Lantern/Atom) 2000, one-shot (Green Lantern/Firestorm) 2000, one-shot (Green Lantern/Power Girl) 2000, one-shot (Green Lantern/Green Lantern) 2000, one-shot (Green Lantern/Superman: 'Legend of the Green Flame') 2000, 3 issue miniseries ('Dragon Lord') 2001, one-shot ('1001 Emerald Nights') 2001, one-shot ('Willworld') 2001, one-shot ('Brightest Day, Blackest Night') 2002, one-shot ('Our Worlds at War') 2002, 3 issue miniseries ('Evil's Might') 2002*

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries (Green Lantern versus Aliens) 2000*

'Ganthet's Tale' is by Larry Niven and John Byrne and tells the secret of the Guardians' origin as Dawlakispokpok, an Oan, his Zamoran wife, and his son and daughter, attempt to undo the work of Krona, who is credited with unleashing evil upon the Universe. Ganthet is a Guardian, who comes to Earth to recruit Hal Jordan and some Earth-born Maltusians to help stop them. Despite being an interesting story about the folly of good intentions, the first section dealing with the Maltusians seems like padding, unnecessarily tagged onto the main theme.

'Unholy Alliances' is an uninteresting a tale of cosmic death and creation drawn by Darryl Banks and written by Ron Marz, who's also responsible for the team-up with the Ray as the pair battle Doctor Polaris. There's a cop-out ending and the Ray doesn't have much to do, though the script plays up the similarities between Ray Terrill and Kyle Rayner. 'Faster Friends', by Mark Waid and Brian Augustyn with artwork from Val Semeiks, begins in the past with Alan Scott and Jay Garrick handing an alien over to the government. Years later, the alien, much experimented on, dying and pissed off, directs a race of alien parasites towards Earth. It takes two Green Lanterns and two Flashes to sort things out while dealing with a dying Jay Garrick. Full of parallels and emphasising friendships, this just feels old and predictable. '3-D', in which Kyle and new Green Lantern, Jade, fight Dr Light inside Kyle's power battery, is forgettable, unless you're a fan of 3-D effects. 'Heart of Darkness' is another excuse to mess about with the ages and powers of the JSA and its children as an embodiment of chaos magic attempts to claim Alan Scott's children as its own. It's pretty much one long fight, while 'Fear Itself' features all three Green Lanterns in separate episodes, facing their greatest nightmares, but has particularly awful computer-generated artwork.

'Circle of Fire' begins with the defeat of the JLA by Oblivion, a villain that Kyle Rayner believes he created in one of his childhood comics. Wishing for help, Kyle draws Green Lanterns from the past and future, as well as from an alternate reality, to aid him, along with JLA reservists, Power Girl, Firestorm, Atom and Adam Strange over a series of one-shots. In the second issue, Green Lantern must face himself, while the remaining heroes struggle against an unstable quasar, created by Oblivion. Written by Brian K. Vaughan and drawn by Norm Breyfogle (1) and Robert Teranishi (2), the twist's not obvious, but the action itself lacks imagination. The one-shots try to offer some insight into its characters, more or less successfully, but none are particularly convincing.

Then novice comics writer Neil Gaiman originally wrote 'Legend of the Green Flame' for *Action Comics* (when weekly), featuring all of the then serialised characters in guest appearances or cameos. The plot is basic in that Superman and Green Lantern visit Hell after touching an old power battery, and have to work out how to return to Earth. The list of artists assembled for this is impressive (Michael Allred and Terry Austin, Eric Shanower and Art Adams, Mark Buckingham, John Totleben, Matt Wagner, Jim Aparo, Kevin Nowlan, Jason Little and Eddie Campbell), but the nature of the exercise works against any noteworthy result. In 'Dragon Lord', Earth's first Green Lantern, the monk, Jong Li, tries to rescue Jade Moon, concubine of a despotic Emperor, and her son, when they escape from his palace. Written by Doug Moench and drawn by Paul Gulacy, this is a compelling (albeit imperfect) story about the nature and meaning of love, freedom and heroism. The first Elseworlds *Green Lantern* story, '1001 Emerald Nights' is a clever use of the *Arabian Nights*, with Scheherazade telling Prince Ibn Rayner her tales of a jade genie and its owner, Al Jhor Dan. Terry LaBan tells an excellent story and Rebecca Guay's painted artwork works very well in this context.

Set in 1944, 'Brightest Day, Blackest Night' concerns a plane downed by Nazis in Gotham's swamp, which then becomes the battleground for Solomon Grundy and Alan Scott. Writer, Steven T. Seagle makes some attempt to provoke thought about the nature of evil and the devices that men create, while the painted artwork, by John K. Snyder III, is exaggerated and impressionistic, but not unpleasant. In 'Willworld', Hal Jordan finds himself (without any memory of who he is) in the Land of Odd. With the help of six-armed Kelly, Mu-Fon and the angel, Glance, he comes to realise that he's trapped in his own dreams. This is very enjoyable, almost entirely due to the terrifically imagined dream world, brought to life by artist Seth Fisher (influences include Moebius and Geof Darrow). On the other hand, J. M. DeMatteis' examination of the will and how to use it doesn't really bear close inspection. 'Our Worlds at War' is a standard crossover with the *Superman* series featuring a missing planet and the return of Sinestro.

'Evil's Might' is another Elseworlds story, this time by Howard Chaykin and David Tischman, with artwork from Marshall Rogers. Kyle Rayner is a cartoonist and member of a street gang, the Bowery Greens, led by Alan Scott. Kyle leaves the gang after they kill a shopkeeper, who can't pay for their protection, and is given a Green Lantern by another, grateful, shopkeeper. Thereafter, he becomes involved in the workers' rights and women's suffrage movements, much to the distress of City Hall, which hires Scott to kill him. He also manages to come between the rich Carol Ferris and her fiancé, Inspector Hal Jordan, creating another enemy. This is a good blend of established Green Lantern lore and Irish myths, very well presented. Hal Jordan meets and subdues some aliens in *Green Lantern versus Aliens*, re-locating them to the living planet (and Green Lantern) Mogo, instead of destroying them. In the present day, Kyle Rayner is called upon to help rescue a ship that's crashed on Mogo, but can he come up with a better solution than Hal, let alone survive? By Ron Marz and Rick Leonardi, this is okay without being inspired, making little use of the aliens themselves.~NF

THE GREEN PLANET

Charlton: *1 issue 1962*

This contains three science-fiction stories, the longest and most entertaining of which is 'The Green Planet', which deserves a special award for the lack of realism in its depiction of political exile on an uncolonised planet. The other two stories are just as ridiculous, but with no laughs.~FC

GREENER PASTURES

Kronos Komics: *7 issues 1997-1998*

It's a surprise for Farmer Russell Wells when his prize stud bull announces he's bored of being in the field and goes off to experience life, adopting the name Trevor. Originally published in Australia, and previously seen in *Hepcats* 7 and 10, Tim McEwan and Michael Michalandos use the comic to put over some points about society. There are funny moments, but in general it takes a long time to say little and there's no compensation in the form of great plot or characterisation.~WJ

GREENHAVEN

Aircel: 3 *issue miniseries 1988*

Barry Blair had so much story to tell in *Elflord* that he couldn't possibly fit it in the one title, hence this miniseries starring Falcon and Purebreeze. In no way a shoddy method of prising more money from a select group of fans for badly drawn startlingly average fantasy material.~FP

GREENHOUSE WARRIORS

Tundra: *1 issue 1992*

Phil Elliott Publishing: *4 issues 1993-1996*

Phil Elliott's plant-based superheroes are a great deal less politically correct than the concept may suggest. In fact they're a lot of fun, despite fighting eco-villains and occasionally coming on like public-service announcements. Elliott's art is extremely pared down for this title, giving it the feel of a comic for very young children, but his gentle humour and complex characterisation are certainly for adults.~FJ

GREGORY

Piranha Press: *4 issues 1989-1993*

Gregory conclusively proves that Marc Hempel is one of America's most consistently underappreciated comic illustrators. Almost every page in this series contains some delightfully designed drawing, a moment of inventive continuity or a piece of sly visual humour. Gregory is a virtually mute little boy who lives in a lunatic asylum. Although he's offered the chance of freedom, Gregory understandably prefers the comfort of his cell to the terrors of the outside world. His best friend is Herman Vermin, a wisecracking rodent who becomes a little bit tiresome when given the spotlight in *Gregory* 2. In fact, after the self-contained pleasures of the first and longest volume, the following three instalments all seem slightly superfluous, just rehashing the same scenes and situations found in issue one. 4 is particularly disappointing, as Hempel descends into bathos with a story about a dysfunctional family who adopt Gregory and are healed by his innocent goodness. However, for most of the run Hempel's craft and compassion ensure that *Gregory* is never less than an off-beat, pleasantly gentle read, one which should interest readers bored by the standard brutalities of most mainstream comics.~AL

Recommended: 1

GREMLIN TROUBLE

Anti-Ballistics Pixelations: *30 issues + 1996 to date*

Set at the end of the 21st century this quirky, seriously tongue-in-cheek Manga style fantasy from E.T. and Elizabeth Bryan primarily features the misadventures of a Stormfairy called Cypher. In this future humanity has indolently retreated to huge automated community edifices where they dream away their lives in virtual reality. With mankind pretty scarce on the ground, all the mythical races – elves, fairies, goblins and the like – have returned. Stormfairies take care of the weather and Cypher is just going about her business when she runs afoul of the Chief Imp, who steals her wings and mutates her with toxic waste into a Gremlin. She's adopted by the Gremlin tribe and becomes their official Princess. She is also instinctively attuned to human technology, which adds a nice edge of substantiality to the mystical fluffiness.

When the few conscious humans, who actually run the sleeping world discover the returnees they initially try to eradicate them, but eventually their leader Delage forms an alliance with Cypher and the tribe. His old boss though, forms a pact with the Forces of Darkness to take over the world, and to that end converts some of the sleeping human population into goblins to conquer the mythical races. The ensuing blend of intrigue, war, and hokey Japanese style humour interspersed with the obligatory soap opera love triangles between the ever expanding cast, makes for a light but engaging read. Not recommended for the serious, sober science fiction consumer, though. 1-20 are available as paperback collections.~WW

GRENDEL

Comico: *Series one 3 issues 1983-1984, series two 40 issues 1986-1990*

Dark Horse: *10 issue limited series ('War Child') 1992-1993, One-shot ('Devil by the Deed') 1993, one-shot ('Cycle') 1995, one-shot ('Devil Quest') 1995, 4 issue miniseries ('Black, White & Red') 1998-1999, 2 issue microseries ('Devil Child') 1999, 12 issue limited series ('Devil's Legacy') 2000-2001, 3 issue miniseries ('The Devil Inside') 2001, 4 issue miniseries ('Red, White & Black') 2002*

After first appearing in *Comico Primer* 2, Matt Wagner's Grendel enjoyed cult success in black and white. Wagner's early artwork showed promise but lacked finish, and these early strips remain more of a curiosity than an essential part of what would become a significant tale. Wagner's commercial potential was fulfilled with Mage, which, from 6, contained a Grendel back-up. Christine Spar's novel, 'Devil by the Deed' (reprinted by Dark Horse), is beautifully designed and rendered by Wagner, falling somewhere between comic strip and illustrated story. It relates the tale of the original Grendel, Hunter Rose, and his downfall at the hands of the wolf Argent. Christine is the daughter of Stacy, adopted daughter of Hunter Rose, who was his heir. From then the role of Grendel, a masked assassin who carries a deadly, dual-bladed spear, evolves into something more.

The second Comico series is a number of separate tales of various lengths in which the nature of the Grendel persona changes, moving on from one person to the next. 1-12 tell the story of how Christine Spar becomes Grendel after the kidnapping of her son by the vampire Tujiro. Though she can't kill Tujiro she forces him into hiding but can't relinquish the mask. It's very stylishly drawn by Arnold and Jacob Pander and reprinted by Dark Horse as 'Devil's Legacy'. Christine's boyfriend Brian Li Sung becomes the next Grendel (13-15), illustrated by Bernie Mireault and reprinted as 'The Devil Inside'. This is followed in 16-19 with tales of Hunter Rose as told by Captain Albert Wiggins, a policeman who had known, illustrated in an experimental manner by Wagner himself. The next four issues leap into the future and examine the way that Grendel moves from physical villain to archetype, the devil, illustrated by Hannibal King and Tim Sale. This is the precursor to 'God and the Devil' (24-33), in which a dominant Christian Church has become despotic under the leadership of Pope Innocent XLII. He plans to build a tower in Denver containing a nuclear-powered gun meant to eradicate the

Sun and is opposed by an idiot-savant Grendel, a terrorist, and politician Orion Assante. 'Devil's Reign' (34-40) sees the return of Tim Sale as Orion forges a worldwide empire. Orion's troops begin to refer to themselves as Grendels and following his code of ethics, and the first Grendel-Khan is introduced. 'War Child' picks up the story when, on his death, Orion's wife tries to assume power. The cyborg Grendel Prime kidnaps Orion's heir, Jupiter. After nearly being killed fighting the remnants of the vampires and his mother's troops, Jupiter becomes the second Grendel-Khan, in a series illustrated by Patrick McEown with inks by Wagner. 'Cycle' is a history of the title and character with a timeline and primer illustrated by Wagner. 'Devil's Vagary' (1987) was a special story produced for the Comico Collection, written by Wagner and illustrated by Dean Motter. 'Devil's Quest' is a single issue reprint of the Grendel Prime back-up story from *Grendel Tales*.

'Black, White & Red' is a series of short stories, written by Wagner but drawn by, amongst others, Tim Sale and D'Israeli (1), Tim Bradstreet and Paul Chadwick (2), Mike Allred, Guy Davis and the Pander Brothers (3) and Jason Pearson, Troy Nixey and Woodrow Phoenix (4). As the title implies, the stories are in black and white with the addition of red in appropriate places. As these tales mostly involve Grendel being very nasty to his enemies, there's a lot of red per page. However, the use of a wide range of artistic styles keeps the stories fresh and interesting. This formula is repeated, but not quite as successfully, for 'Red, White & Black', with good work from Jill Thompson, Stan Sakai and Tom Fowler on 1, Kelley Jones and Dan Brereton on 2, Mike Huddleston on 3 and Farel Dalrymple, Darick Robertson and Michael Zulli on 4. With 'Devil Child', Diana Schutz became the first person other than Wagner to write about the first Grendel. She explores the life of Stacy after Grendel's death, describing her period in an institution, her marriage and the birth of her daughter. Drawn by Tim Sale, this is beautifully crafted but very grim.

Grendel is an intelligent and ambitious series that thwarts expectations. It can be read simply as an adventure strip (albeit one with a long and complex plot), but it's also an examination of the nature of evil and a satire on the relationship between society and religion, politics and the media. Numerous collections are testament to its broad appeal.~NF

Recommended: Series two 16-40, 'Devil By The Deed', 'Warchild' 1-10, 'Black, White & Red' 1-4, 'Devil Child' 1-2

GRENDEL TALES

Dark Horse: *6 issue miniseries ('Four Devils, One Hell') 1993-1994, 3 issue miniseries ('The Devil's Hammer') 1994, 5 issue miniseries ('The Devil in our Midst') 1994, 2 issue microseries ('Devils and Deaths') 1994, 3 issue miniseries ('Homecoming') 1994-1995, 4 issue miniseries ('Devil's Choices') 1995, 6 issue miniseries ('The Devil May Care') 1995-1996*

Grendel Tales is the vehicle by which writers other than creator Matt Wagner can have a go at Grendel stories. Set in the world following 'War Child', these concern individual Grendel soldiers, the people they protect (or not) and the clan societies into which the Grendels have fallen.

James Robinson and Teddy Kristiansen get the series off to a good start with 'Four Devils, One Hell', starting as a character-based view of people in a Grendel-run society, and descending into a battle for the throne of France, climaxing in a violent New Orleans Mardi Gras. In 'Devil's Hammer' Rob Walton and Bernie Mireault have a young man, the lone survivor of a village destroyed by Grendels, who becomes one himself for revenge, but is unable to release the power of Grendel once that revenge has been taken. 'The Devil In Our Midst' has a Grendel seeking redemption at an Ice Station in Antarctica but there's a mysterious virus killing the crew and he comes under suspicion as the cause of the disease. This is a fine thriller by Steve Seagle, with excellent artwork by Paul Grist. Darko Macan and Edvin Biukovic's 'Devils And Deaths' seems like another straightforward tale of rivalry amongst Grendels, but blends deception, despair and heroism into a grim little tale about the need to belong.

Grendel Susan returns home to her lover Avril, who has become a whore to the local Grendel clan, in 'Homecoming', by Patrick McEown and Dave Cooper. When Avril tries to leave, she is killed and Susan exacts a bloody revenge. Similarly emotional, though not so violent, is Terry LaBan and Peter Doherty's 'The Devil May Care', a love story, albeit a doomed one. LaBan's script is complemented by Doherty's Moebius-like artwork. Macan and Biukovic return for 'Devil's Choices', which is about clan rivalries and an attempt by several of the Grendels to escape what they see as a life with no future.

Obviously lacking the direction that gave the Grendel series its coherence, *Grendel Tales* are generally of a high quality, enriching the Grendel world set up by Wagner as the creators stamp their individual visions onto the overall structure. 'Devil Quest', reprinted as a single issue, runs as a back-up by Wagner from 'The Devil's Hammer' to the first issue of 'Devil's Choices'.~NF

Recommended: 'The Devil in our Midst', 'The Devil May Care', 'Devils and Deaths', 'Four Devils, One Hell', 'Homecoming'

GREY

Viz: *9 issues 1988-1989**

The only way the exotically named Grey Death can escape the grim reality of life in the future is to join The Troopers and work his way through the ranks to Class A, at which point he'll be granted status as a citizen and afforded a comfortable existence. The odds against this are 33 to 1. Grey's progress is phenomenal, but then he begins caring, and to learn more of the world he inhabits. Long, albeit spectacularly drawn, battle-action sequences give the feel of watching someone play a computer game, and the payoff is predictable once issue 6 reveals the background to Grey's world. Warning: don't read Harlan Ellison's first issue introduction as it rather gives the game away.~FP

GREY LEGACY

Fragile Elite: *1 issue 1994*

The genial Les begins his university career by becoming starstruck in the presence of the glamorous Taija. His constant paeans of praise are a source of distraction and irritation to his room-mate, the studious Grey, who's apparently going to develop into someone who'll change the universe. This collects the first two issues, which were originally self-published, which accounts for the abrupt change of pace halfway through as Les befriends a small alien kept as a class specimen. There's an endearing charm and innocence to this story that might almost date it from the 1950s, but the dialogue is sharper than most 1950s material, and the excellent cartooning comes via Jaime Hernandez and Phil Foglio. Wayne Wise and Fred Wheaton are listed as creators, and it's a great shame there was apparently no second issue.~WJ

GREYLORE

Sirius: 5 *issues 1985-1986*

Heroic fantasy saga of two linked worlds, one technological, the other medieval, and rogue hero Greylore, who forms the nexus between them. Meddling wizards steer his actions to ensure that "destiny is fulfilled". Bat-like familiar Pox provides the better moments of comic relief. Production problems plague Bo Hampton's artwork and the absence of issue 6 in a six issue miniseries – advertised but never published – renders the whole affair irrelevant.~APS

GREYSHIRT: Indigo Sunset

ABC: *6 issue miniseries 2001-2002**

Alan Moore's tribute to Will Eisner's *Spirit* earns a longer outing after a run of shorts in *Tomorrow Stories*, with Rick Veitch once again handling the bulk of the creative chores with occasional guest shots from the likes of John Severin (4) to add spice to the mix. The eponymous hero is a business-suited mystery man, face obscured by a red bandanna, who strives to clean up the moral cesspool of Indigo City, a state of affairs he in no small part contributed to in his past life as racketeer Frank Lafayette. Good old fashioned masked guy fighting thugs'n'masterminds stuff using the narrative device of clippings and features from the evening newspaper the *Indigo City Sunset*. Adroit but somewhat short of the charm of the source material.~WW

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* Available in a collected edition

THE GRIFFIN

Slave Labor: *3 issues 1988*
DC: *6 issue miniseries 1991-1992**
Amaze Ink: *1 issue 1998*

In 1967 Matt Williams is recruited by an alien race called the Acacians and transformed into a super-solider. Homesick twenty years on, Williams returns to Earth, causing complications all round. Family and friends have assumed him dead for two decades, and the Acacians, believing him to have deserted, are prepared to destroy the planet to ensure his return. By concentrating on the emotions prompted by the scenario, and the political machinations on Earth and Acacia, Dan Vado and Norman Felchle construct a compelling story. Not the least of their triumphs is the transformation of Williams from boy hero with stunted emotional growth to possible planetary saviour. Fine artwork from Felchle and inker Mark McKenna rounds off an excellent title.

The Slave Labor issues are re-drawn as the first book and a half of the DC series, and the story returns to Slave Labor's Amaze Ink imprint for the second series. Intelligent writing is assured with Dan Vado, and he sets up an intriguing story, but sadly sales appear to have been more potent than the return of old enemy Anarchy.~FP
Recommended: DC 1-6

GRIFFITH OBSERVATORY

Rip-Off: *1 issue 1979*
Fantagraphics: *1 issue 1993*

By far Bill Griffith's most accessible work, *Griffith Observatory* is also a career peak, the success of *Zippy the Pinhead* notwithstanding. Collecting one-page syndicated strips, Griffith exposes the foibles, obsessions and trivialities of late-1970s culture with a venomous yet considered eye. Always interesting, by turns it's also wistful, heartfelt, angry and informative. Where else could one learn under one cover about Mansard roofs, that people collect barbed wire, and that Jimmy Durante once played a violin duet with Albert Einstein? And one of his predictions for the 1980s is distressingly true for the 1990s. Griffith would later mine similar territory in more abstruse fashion through Zippy, although never as pleasingly. The Rip-Off edition appeared while the strip was still in syndication, so the magazine-sized Fantagraphics collection reprinting the entirety along with sixteen new pages is the better purchase.~WJ
Recommended: Fantagraphics 1

GRIFTER

Image/WildStorm: *Series one 10 issues 1995-1996, series two 14 issues 1996-1997, one-shot ('Wild Times') 1999*

WildStorm's favourite tough-guy-with-a-heart gets his own series, and the opportunity to delve a little deeper into his past, motivations and psyche. Flashbacks to childhood abuse and his complicated relationship with Zealot flesh out the action, the continuing theme of which is that no matter how hard Grifter tries to live a quiet life, trouble always finds him. The series loses its way a little in the middle, due more to inconsistent artwork (between 4 and 10 there are five changes of penciller) than to Stephen Seagle's relentlessly action-packed scripts. The last issue finds our hero in a depressed and contemplative mood for a conclusion rounding off the series more logically and sensitively than you might expect. The second series, by Stephen Grant, Mel Rubi and Richard Friend, tells single-issue stand-alone stories which fill in more information on the character's background and motivations. Issue 3 is outstanding. He's now found in *Point Blank*.~JC
Recommended: Series one 2-6, 10, series two 3

GRIFTER/BADROCK

Image: *2 issue microseries 1995*

Amusing story of the mismatched superheroes trying to rescue Badrock's mother from The Covenant of the Sword, the plot elements continuing from *Badrock & Co* 5. Rob Liefeld and Chap Yaep don't produce many panels of artwork but it's well enough suited to the high action script from Eric Stephenson. Issue 2 is a flip-book, which the indicia claims is *Badrock* 2, guest starring Savage Dragon in another story continued from elsewhere. Issue three never appeared, leaving both stories unfinished.~NF

GRIFTER AND THE MASK

Dark Horse: 2 *issue microseries 1996*

If you enjoy the manic antics of the Mask you'll probably enjoy this tale entitled 'Cleaving Las Vegas' in which the two title characters clash at a gun show. Steven T. Seagle produces a script full of the sort of lame humour you'd expect from the *Mask* cartoon series without compromising the characterisation of Grifter but as stories go, it's not much more than one long fight and chase. There's some fun to be had with the rednecks vs. gun control subplot, but don't come looking for any deep insights into the subject.~NF

GRIFTER/SHI

Image/Crusade: *2 issue microseries 1996**

WildStorm's favourite gunslinger and Crusade's ninja babe team up to stop a Korean nuclear bomb from devastating Japan. It's prettily put together by members of both characters' regular creative teams, including some lovely pencil work by Travis Charest; the writing is adequate though nothing special. The "story so far" at the start of 2 takes a whole page of text and tells you a good couple of hundred years of Japanese history, in case you ever wanted to know where to find it in a comic.~JC

THE GRIM GHOST

Atlas: *3 issues 1975*

Satan offers a 17th-century highwayman the opportunity to return to 20th-century USA equipped with a flying horse and assorted superpowers. His purpose is to ensure a steady supply of evil souls flowing to hell. No classic, but readable, with nice art from Ernie Colón.~FP

GRIMJACK

First: *81 issues 1983-1991*

Grimjack should have been First's best title. It's set in the city of Cynosure, where the wily, grizzled bruiser John Gaunt initially showed great potential. Writer John Ostrander set up a peach of a situation, with Cynosure the place where all realities met. This let Grimjack have all sorts of adventures, from hard-boiled detective stories to dimension-spanning epics, from Cat-and-the-Canary-suspects-trapped-in-a big-house horror tales to Western shoot-em-ups. Grimjack himself is a classic anti-hero with a sob-story background and a tough reputation redeemed by random acts of kindness. And Ostrander is clever enough to underpin the series with a titanic struggle between Grimjack and the bunch of winning outsiders he has drawn around him, and an array of human and demonic villains, mostly from Grimjack's unpleasant past.

The title started life as a back-up in *Starslayer* 10-18, a pleasing mixture of sudden action and whimsy (particularly reflected in its own back-up strip, Munden's Bar, which attracted all sorts of guest writers and artists and its own special). Although Tim Truman was clearly still learning, he picked things up fast and the initial awkwardness of action is largely gone by the third or fourth issue. 1-12 are well worth reading for a satisfying mix of ongoing plotting and terse story-telling, as Ostrander fleshes out the mysterious city and his broody protagonist's many acquaintances. The *Starslayer* shorts and 1-4 are reprinted as *Grimjack Casefiles*. Soon afterwards, however, things get a bit too complicated for their own good. The balance between ongoing mega-plot and satisfactory short sub-plots shifts and suddenly there are so many things to explain that there's barely time to allow existing characters to grow. Ostrander solves this by introducing more and more bad guys from Grimjack's murky past, who pop up whenever the bodycount's getting too low. The other great problem is the characterisation of Grimjack himself. He's a pawn of the situation, changing from understanding old bouncer to killing machine to tortured soul depending on the needs of the month's plot. However, up until 19, when Truman left the title, there was enough going for it to keep it readable.

Replacement artist Tom Sutton did a competent job as plots nose-dived towards magic and demon wars. When Tom Mandrake took on the art chores with 31 (and he drew like it was a chore), the title was firmly in decline. Grimjack was about to be killed and re-born younger, one page relishing death, the next swearing to come back for revenge. Conveniently, his re-birth allowed him to develop psychic and mystical powers. Having faced up to his past for the umpteenth time, Grimjack mark two bit the dust in 54 after meeting his far-future self, and 55 saw the character re-born yet again, 200 years into the future. At which point most sensible people sighed and gave up, if only because in Flint Henry First found an artist even less capable than Mandrake. Maybe Ostrander fancied a bit more science fiction, a bit more American Flagg-style cleverness? Who knows, or indeed wants to know? Anyone who can enjoy the series beyond 50 is to be saluted.~FJ

Recommended: 1-12

GRIN AND BARE IT!

Boomerang: *3 volumes 1995-1998, 2 specials 2001-2002*
NBM: *3 volumes (1-2, 4) 1998-1999, 7 issues + 2001 to date*

Reprinted from material published in Europe by the Belgian publisher, Boomerang (e.g. in the Dutch magazine, *Rooie Oortjes*), these are one-page gag strips on a sexual theme, often wordless, usually amusing without being laugh-out-loud funny. NBM reprinted the first two Boomerang volumes, directly imported the third and then added a fourth. They're produced by a number of different writers and artists, the former normally unannounced and the latter only known through their signatures. Amongst the artists, Dany (real name Daniel Henrotin) has a detailed cartoon style on the first and third volumes, much like his countryman, Franquin, while Gursel bears similarities to Jack Davis (providing the only strips in the second and fourth volumes and the two specials). The regular series contains a mixture of creators including Gursel, Gurcan (who appears to be the same artist with a different writer), Jaap, Di Sano and Dixon (who draws like a sleeker Don Martin).~NF

GRIP: The Strange World of Men

DC/Vertigo: *5 issue miniseries 2002*

The first word that comes to mind is "bonkers". This Gilbert Hernandez tale contains: gangsters; vigilante Mystery Girls; a man in a woman's skin; a powerful cult leader (who can convince anyone to do anything, but who spends a lot of time out of his skin); a one-eyed girl with the power of life and death; a stripper; a gangster wannabe and his girlfriend; and a couple of police detectives. The storytelling's a demented mix of 1950's paranoia coupled with a healthy dash of Tarantino coincidence and violence. Of course, it's also very funny, and not just in a coal-black kind of way.~NF

GRIT BATH

Fantagraphics: *2 issues 1993-1994*

Deliberately provocative mixture of scatological black humour and child sexuality from writer/artist Renée French. Her crude, naïve art-style makes this a deeply unsettling comic, one likely to offend a great many readers. Certainly unique, but difficult to recommend.~AL

GROO The Wanderer

Pacific: *8 issues 1982-1984*
Eclipse: *One-shot 1984*
Marvel/Epic: *120 issues, 2 Graphic Novels 1985-1995*
Image: *12 issues 1995-1996*
Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries ('The Most Intelligent Man in the World') 1998*, 4 issue miniseries ('Groo and Rufferto') 1998-1999*, 4 issue miniseries ('Mightier than the Sword') 2000*, 4 issue miniseries ('Death and Taxes') 2001-2002**

Groo the Wanderer is an expert fighter whose sword is for hire to whomsoever will pay him or feed him. He's quite possibly the greatest warrior in his fantasy world (whatever you might hear from that blond braggart Arcadio). It has to be said, however, that Groo is a bit (okay, a lot) short on cunning and intelligence. Oh, and he's accident-prone. And he doesn't bathe. In fact, he's so fond of a fray that he's as likely to rush in and kill everyone as work out first which side he's supposed to be fighting for. And, whatever you do, don't invite him to build anything for you; or demolish anything, for that matter. And, especially, don't let him anywhere near your fleet – he can sink a ship just by looking at it. Groo has a sister, Grooella, who is always embarrassed by him, and he has a dog, Rufferto, whose devotion to his master is surpassed only by his willing blindness to Groo's stupidity. Groo's world is further populated by The Sage (a wise man who acts as occasional narrator, and is almost as accident-prone as Groo), The Minstrel, whose fondness for singing about Groo can lead to trouble in itself, Taranto (Groo's former mercenary buddy who's usually trying to kill him), the witches Arba and Dakarba, who want revenge on Groo, and Pal and Drumm, the one a promoter, the other a dumb fighter who can't believe that Groo's better than him. Not forgetting the beautiful Chakall, skilled she-warrior with whom Groo fancies himself in love.

Driven by a desire for cheese dip, a hatred of being called a mendicant and the inability to hold down a job for longer than it takes to ruin whatever semblance of civilisation he finds himself in, Groo somehow manages to survive. Even if he doesn't come out on top, he ends each adventure in a better state than the unfortunates he's been fighting (or, for that matter, helping). Created, written and drawn by Sergio Aragonés (with scripting assistance from Mark Evanier, lettering by Stan Sakai and colouring by Tom Luth), Groo can be achingly funny, but usually it's merely hilarious. The running joke is that every Groo story is the same, although you'll find you appreciate it more, the more you read. Aragonés is a genius cartoonist whose densely peopled panels are full of detail, interest and incidental humour.

In the first Dark Horse miniseries, most of the characters from the past appear in response to a mystery surrounding Groo's having become the most intelligent man in the world. Six issues of *The Groo Chronicles* reprint the Pacific and Eclipse issues and over half of the Epic issues have been collected. *The Death of Groo* graphic novel has Groo trying to play St George, but rumours of his death, greeted with some jubilation, are exaggerated. *The Life of Groo* covers his birth and youthful adventures, and is available in a standard-comic-sized issue – extremely difficult to find – and a Graphitti Designs book-sized package.~NF

Recommended: as many as you can carry

GROOTLORE

Fantagraphics: *2 issues 1989*

Certainly unique as a Dr Suess/Vaughn Bodé hybrid in four panel gag form, the gags never transcend the obvious *Garfield* style. Still millions of people love Garfield, and they can't all be wrong, can they?~WJ

GROOVY

Marvel: *3 issues 1968*

Not a comic per se, but a comic-shaped collection of gag cartoon panels from cheap men's magazines. Terrible stuff, badly reproduced.~HS

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* Available in a collected edition

GROSS POINT

DC: *14 issues 1997-1998*

This amusing and well-drawn parody takes on the horror genre, teenagers and small-town America, though the humour is noticeably strained by 9. Brian and Terri are the new kids in town, but, of course, their parents don't see the weirdness all around them. Living next door to a duck-shaped house might have been taken as a hint of strangeness by many parents. Matt Wayne and Dan Slott do most of the writing and Roger Langridge provides pencils or inks to maintain consistency. Other frequent artists include Joe Staton and Rick Parker.~NF

GROUND POUND

Blackthorne: *1 issue 1987*

A selection of underground cartoon strips from prestigious illustrator John (*Garbage Pail Kids*) Pound. Gorgeously illustrated, but tediously dated stories showing off Pound's artistic versatility as he lambastes both the funny animal and EC comics of his youth. Look, do not read.~WW

Mike Baron's THE GROUP LARUE

Innovation: *3 issue miniseries 1989*

The strained title-pun apart (the French for werewolf is loup-garue – geddit?), there's little of note in this inane fantasy title, where a group of gamers actually get to live out their fantasies, one of them being transformed into a man-wolf, hence the title.~FP

GROWING UP ENCHANTED

Too Hip Gotta Go Graphics: *1 issue + 2002 to date*

Jack Briglio and Alex Szewczuk continue the adventures of Olianna, a little girl who is also a baby sorceress in training, and her friends and neighbours in the little village of Anywhere. A charming all-ages fable that mixes the wide eyed excitement of growing up with knights, dragons and trolls leavened with the eternal verities and troubles of being a smart kid that grown-ups won't listen to. Exuberant and fun, two short tales appeared in the anthology title *Mythography*.~WW

Recommended: 1

GRRL SCOUTS

Oni Press: *4 issue miniseries 1999**

On the basis of this Jim Mahfood has a long career in trendy advertising illustrations ahead of him. He's fused *Deadline*'s Tank Girl and Wired World for this girls with attitude comic. Silly, enthusiastic, ephemeral and very much a snapshot of the times.~WJ

GRUNT

Grunt Records: *2 issues 1972-1973*

One of the strangest comics ever created, Grunt was supposedly a promotional comic issued by Jefferson Airplane's Grunt record label. In the hands of writer Tom Veitch and artist Greg Downs, however, it became a crazed satire of the music business, full of the requisite sex and drugs. The rather loose narrative charts the descent of The Ripped Whips from a good natured acid rock group to a degenerate satan-worshipping S&M band, with Irons gleefully delineating each tawdry excess in blinding dayglo colour. And not a single Grunt record is even mentioned. Weird.~DAR

Recommended: 1-2

GTO Great Teacher Onizuka

Tokyopop: *9 volumes + 2002 to date*

Onizuka is a former teenage gang leader who dreams of being known as great, but spends his time staring up the skirts of high school girls from the bottom of an escalator. Actually meeting one, and a succession of job rejections, convinces him the way to meet more high school girls is to become a teacher. The general direction from this shallow beginning is as might be expected, but not as directly as would be the case under lesser hands. Hefty doses of humour, both visual and narrative characterise the first volumes, and creator Tohru Fujisawa's comic timing is adroit. He further has a talent for setting up a scene and confounding expectations as to the outcome. His art is standard manga drama style, telling the story competently without flash, but also without any mistakes. Onizuka remains a likeable and unpredictable rogue throughout, his background providing unorthodox solutions to problem classes, although karate skills are sometimes useful. Having run the obvious new teacher plot in 1, there's a curve thrown in 2, but by 3 Onizuka is teaching in a private school where one troublesome pupil is confronted in the video arcade. Another is dealt with in a manner that brings the PTA down on him to start 4, by which point the formula is decaying. Fujisawa rectifies that rapidly, injecting more poignant plots and characterisation into 5, providing tougher opponents and challenges, and upping the adventure content at the expense of humour. While it renews the series, it's at the expense of ripping the unique heart out to be left with what's still decent drama for teenagers, but no longer standing so far above standard material.

It should be pointed out that whether for purposes of authenticity or saving on production costs these small paperback volumes have been published Japanese style. They have to be read from back to front, while on the page the story sequence reads from right to left. You'll soon get used to it.~WJ

Recommended: 1-3

GUANO Comix

Print Mint: *1 issue (4) 1972*

Discursive ramblings presumably passed off as being of some worth through peer group pressure. Those pointing out the emperor's new clothes were just not getting with the scene, despite the title's dead giveaway. Amid all the guano, though, there's an excellent fantasy illustration credited to 'DRT'. Oh yes, and to mess with your mind, the only issue was numbered 4, although only the terminally addled would want to search out the non existent 1-3.~FP

GUARDIAN ANGEL

Image: *2 issues + 2002 to date*

Christian Angelos is a movie star and orphan. When he's attacked by demons during a party at his mansion, he discovers he's also a lot more than that. Jonathan Peterson's script has managed to generate some anticipation for the revelations to come, whilst simply setting the scene so far, but, if the series can keep the clean, detailed artwork of Aron Weisenfeld, it should have a good future.~NF

GUARDIANS OF METROPOLIS

DC: *4 issue miniseries, 1994-1995*

Kirby's Guardian and Newsboy Legion get their own series courtesy of Karl Kesel and Keiron Dwyer. A dopey but entertaining romp through Project Cadmus and the big city as the boys aim to 'rescue' their mentor's great-niece from the clutches of Granny Goodness. Not the most intelligent comic of the decade, but great fun.~JC

GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY

Marvel: *62 issues, 4 Annuals 1990-1995*

This was originated by Arnold Drake in *Marvel Super-Heroes* 18 in 1968 where four rebels pool resources to fight for the Solar System after a 31st century invasion. There were later guest appearances in *The Defenders* and *The Avengers* spliced by their own feature in Marvel Presents in the 1970s. The 31st century boys are Charlie 27, a rotund, bullish native of the moons of Jupiter; Martinex, a crystalline scientist from Pluto; Vance Astro who is a thousand year old Earthman thanks to a space voyage made in suspended animation and a sail-headed bowman from Proxima Centauri named Yondu. *Defenders* 26-29, added the literally flame-haired Nikki from Mercury and the godlike Starhawk who is a cataclysmic amalgam of a couple from Arcturus named Stakar and Aleta (conveniently split apart in 3). The Guardians patrol the galaxy in their starship Captain America (later replaced by the Icarus), and have a headquarters of sorts on the planet

* Available in a collected edition

Klaatu, which is run by Mainframe, a computer intelligence formerly known as The Vision. The basic premise for the series is that the super-beings in the current Marvel Universe would profoundly affect the future. Legends, religions and whole cultures have sprung up in the millennium since The Avengers last assembled.

There are many, often overlapping, story arcs. After a quest to claim Captain America's shield The Guardians meet Malevolence, Mephisto's daughter in 7 and the Warlock-like Protege in 15 both of whom have a villainous impact on the series. They also travel to Haven, a planet of mutants, where they fight Rancor and eventually witness the transformation of Giraud, the Phoenix of the 31st century. Starhawk is expelled for reabsorbing Aleta before the team's return to Earth in 17, and Martinex also leaves. A cat-like Inhuman named Talon joins in 20 just as Astro renames himself Major Victory and adopts a woefully kitsch costume to go with Cap's Shield. They also meet a thousand-year-old Wonder Man who's now known as Hollywood (featured with Martinex in 1994s *Galactic Guardians* miniseries). A darker Starhawk returns in 22 and we find that The Silver Surfer has become The Keeper of Quasar's Quantum Bands in 24. This leads to a confrontation with Galactus and Yondu's departure in Annual 2, in which a recreated Korvac prompts a battle featuring every ally the team have ever had. 26 is a key issue that retells the Guardians' origins with extra details added. 20th century ex-villain Rita 'Yellowjacket' DeMara joins up in 29 and a freed Aleta escapes Starhawk in 33 boosting the female membership by two. Loki leads renegade Inhumans against Asgard where the tide is finally turned by Woden, son of Thor in 43. Yondu returns to the team in 44 as things get cosmic with The Beyonder and his meeting with Protege. What follows is a trial for the Arcturan Hawk God who created Starhawk. The Protege then makes his long-awaited move at the gathering of Eternity, The Living Tribunal and the Celestial called Scathan The Approver. Astro has returned to his all-over bodysuit in the meantime. Cuchulain, The Irish Wolfhound, was so popular in Annual 3, set in Killraven's time, that he's inducted in 51, at the same moment Charlie is imprisoned and Talon mutates himself into something wilder. An encounter with the Martian serial killer Ripjak in 54 leads the Guardians to a showdown with plague-bringer Bubonicus in 59, guest starring The High Evolutionary. Starhawk also discovers he's the son of Quasar and embarks on a quest of self-discovery, splitting the title to 62. Annual 1 features the Guardians first time travel meeting with The Silver Surfer and the introduction of Earth's current Sorceror Supreme, Krugarr. Annual 4 sees Rancor's revenge as well as finishing the 'Future History' serial begun in 50 and continued in *Galactic Guardians* 1.

Jim Valentino wrote and laid out the series up to 29 and the first two annuals. His storytelling is arch-derivative, and the series is essentially a licence to futurise existing Marvel concepts. It's the referential elements, though, that inject what little fun there is. The guest art by Mark Texeira in 23 shows just how exciting the title could've been. Finisher Steve Montano deserves a gold watch for long service on nearly every issue! Replacing Valentino as writer, Michael Gallagher's approach reads more along the lines of a cosmic soap opera with penciller Kevin West bringing nothing new to the table apart from an obvious over-interest in drawing cleavage and his character Ripjak. Unlike the far-from-perfect Starlin titles from the 1980s that it aspires to, *Guardians* has no central theme beyond strip-mining Marvel continuity for throwaway stories. A good idea betrayed by mediocre execution and crass content. 1-6 were collected.~SW

The Adventures of GUERRILLA GROUNDHOG

Eclipse: *2 issues 1987*

This was among the best of the anthropomorphic titles to slipstream Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Not concentrating on parodying other comics was a good start, taking its lead from 1970s Hanna-Barbera cartoons was a decent second step. Chuck Wagner's scripts raise a few grins, and Andy Ice's cartooning is fine. Fans of funny animal comics might want to investigate.~FP

GUFF

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1998*

Humour special that manages to gather together the worst material from some of the best cartoonists in the industry. Even Jay Lynch, John Pound and Sergio Aragonés can have off-days. Dismally unfunny.~WW

GUMBY'S FUN SPECIALS

Comico: *2 issues 1987-1988*

Gumby's Summer Fun Special is a lot of fun. Really. Despite being based on the green clay US children's character. Gumby and Pokey, his orange horse chum, some children and a baby-sitting werewolf get mixed up with hysterical aliens (bad guys) and space bears (good guys), a group of nice pirates and a crazy town where it's permanently Hallowe'en. Bob Burden's script is minimal and funny, with the plot always on the brink of coming apart at the seams The fact that he manages to keep all the plates in the air makes for manic fun, while Art Adams' detailed artwork is always a joy.

The *Winter Fun Special*, scripted by Steve Purcell, doesn't have the same effortless quality that makes the first special so good. Gumby and Pokey have an underground adventure with Mole Men, the Devil and Santa Claus in which the plot's stretched thin and the lunacy is forced in places, especially the satirical references. The joy of *Gumby* is that it is simplistic, pure entertainment. Not that the Winter Special doesn't have some good scenes, which, coupled with Art Adams' intricate, carefully-balanced artwork, make it worth seeking out.~NF

GUN FURY

Aircel: *10 issues 1988-1989, 4 issue miniseries 1990*

With marked similarities to The Tick, Gun Fury was an equally pompous and musclebound clod fighting a variety of media and reality inspired villains. As written by Barry Blair, it just doesn't have that offbeat wackiness that elevated *The Tick*, although it's not bad. With a four panel page crowded in comparison to most, *Gun Fury* is hardly a long read, but it should raise a smile or two each issue, and does have the early professional art of Dave Cooper, working from Blair's layouts. The miniseries ('The Return of…') takes obvious swipes at the comic industry and is far weaker for it.~FP

GUN RUNNER

Marvel UK: *3 issue miniseries 1993*

Fast-paced but incredibly predictable series, featuring an alien warrior with no memory who's befriended by an independent-minded female. He saves her from danger and they're attacked by other aliens. The appearance of Blaze and Ghost Rider just gives less room to develop any individuality the strip might have had. Impressive inks from Adolfo Buylla almost make this worth-while, though.~NF

Mobile Suit GUNDAM

Viz: *8 issue limited series (0079) 1994*, 13 issue limited series (0083)1994-1995**
Tokyopop: *4 issue miniseries ('The Last Outpost') 2002*
Viz: *5 issues + ('The Origin') 2002 to date*

Earth begins colonising space in the future, but far from being a solution to problems, it creates worse ones, particularly increasing conflict between the space dwellers and the home planet. Balancing the power of both sides are eighteen-foot-tall battle robots, known as Gundam. Enormously successful in Japan, where the saga is an animated film, the Viz comics take their artwork directly from animation cels, and dialogue directly from the film. It's sometimes an awkward procedure, despite similarities between the two media, and as much of the film is action-based there's a distinct lack of emotional involvement in the comic. After much to-ing and fro-ing everything amounts to an unremarkable series of battles in space. And you've never seen any less convincing military types than our two flighty leads Kou and Nina, who're more like two children playing at being soldier and pilot.

The Tokyopop series reads in authentic Japanese fashion from back to front and right to left, and draws on the rich legacy of the animated series, but appears to tie in more with *Mobile Suit Gundam Wing*. It's another alterniverse story of new pilots for new robots, but only those completely immersed in the premise should investigate.

The 2002 Viz magazine series is packed with new designs and poor story as the upstanding Earth Federation's war against the insidious Principality of Zeon is going badly. The noble crew of the White Base, burdened by cargo of revolting aliens, have to resort to the experimental new protection of the Mobile Suit Gundam. The battles are long, and the soap opera tedious.~WJ

GUNFIGHTER

EC: *10 issues (5-14) 1948-1950**

In contrast to EC's other western series *Saddle Justice*, *Gunfighter* contains several strips with recurring heroes. All issues feature Gunfighter (by Graham Ingels) whose adventures tend to involve his rescuing of ladies in distress, and The Buckskin Kid, a white man raised by Indians who spends his time in pursuit of the Blackfoot villain who killed his adoptive parents. All but 13 and 14 feature 'Saddle Justice', the name for a series of 'true' western tales (much as fill the issues of that title). This strip's replacement is 'The Old Prospector's Tale' by Fred Peters in which the old man recounts salutary tales of greedy miners, very much a precedent for the horror hosts to come. Sheldon Moldoff's superheroic Moon Girl appears in a western setting in the first two issues, though it appears that they are inventory material. The Buckskin Kid is given a new origin and The Six-Gun Sisters are introduced for 13 in an attempt to revamp the series but it was too late as the title joined the New Trend as *The Haunt of Fear*.

The stories are more varied and the artwork is of a higher quality than *Saddle Justice*, but *Gunfighter* suffers from much the same problem, a lack of consistently interesting characters. The tales written by Johnny Craig and Al Feldstein are largely precursors to the crime and horror strips to come, while Gardner Fox's unreconstructed Indians make for unsettling reading now. Craig and Ingels provide decent artwork throughout but with the latter often providing two strips in an issue, it can seem rushed. Ingels' pencils only the Gunfighter strip in 8 and the 'Saddle Justice' episode in 10 by F.C. Aljon (Feldstein and Craig) are worth mentioning. Other high points come towards the end of the series with Craig's return to The Buckskin Kid (from 11) and The Six-Gun Sisters in 13-14 by Harry Wood (Harry Harrison and Wally Wood).~NF
Recommended: 13, 14

GUNFIRE

DC: *14 issues (0-13) 1994-1995*

Introduced in *Deathstroke* Annual 2, Gunfire can agitate the molecules of solid objects. Simply put, it enables him to fire bullets from anything he picks up. If there were a template for the bog-standard superhero comic, *Gunfire* would be it. It's superheroics by numbers for the first few issues, but from 6 the art of Ed Benes transforms Gunfire into a distorted and crippled figure and the title from a 1980s template to a 1990s template. There's thousands of comics to read before you even think of sampling this.~FP

GUNHAWKS

Marvel: *7 issues 1972-1973*

Any comic starring Reno Jones and Kid Cassidy isn't going to be the subtlest of plagiarisms; this one is of interest only for featuring a black Western character.~FP

GUNHED

Viz: *3 issue miniseries 1990*

This is adapted from a Japanese movie: a giant robot has to be re-programmed to destroy a computer intent on taking over the world. Crash! Bang! Wallop! Oh, it's over.~WJ

GUNS OF THE DRAGON

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1998-1999*

Set in 1927, minor DC characters Bat Lash, Enemy Ace, Biff Bradley and Chop-Chop team up for an adventure on Dinosaur Island where they find themselves caught between Chinese and Japanese agents and the machinations of Vandal Savage. This is an intriguing pulp yarn from Tim Truman that plays to the strengths as well as the disparities between the leads – the cynical, but charming Bat Lash, morbid Enemy Ace, gung-ho Bradley and faithful Chop-Chop. Truman's artwork is the only letdown, his own inking often lacking consistency on the characters' faces.~NF

GUNSLINGERS

Marvel: *One-shot 2000*

Was some obscure trademark retention purpose the reason for publishing this? It was never going to sell. Hardly prime material at the time, and already reprinted as *Mighty Marvel Western* 3, these 1950s strips by Stan Lee, Jack Kirby and Dick Ayers have aged badly, and the Living Totem in the Rawhide Kid story beggars belief. The grittier Caleb Hammer (from *Marvel Premiere* 54) by Peter Gillis and Dan Day is better, but hardly a sought after back issue.~WJ

GUNSMITH CATS

Dark Horse: *10 issue limited series 1995-1996*, 7 issue limited series ('The Return of Gray') 1996-1997*, 5 issue miniseries ('Shades of Gray') 1997*, 7 issue limited series ('Goldie vs. Misty') 1997-1998*, 6 issue miniseries ('Bad Trip') 1998*, 9 issue limited series ('Bean Bandit') 1999*, 10 issue limited series ('Kidnapped') 1999-2000*, 11 issue limited series ('Mister V') 2000-2001*, 1 Special 2001*

Kenichi Sonoda's manga is the inspiring tale of Rally Vincent and Minnie-May Hopkins, two young women sharing a love of guns, cars and bombs. It's set in Chicago, where Rally is a gun shop owner who makes most of her money as a bounty hunter. Minnie-May is her business partner, ex-Mob, ex-prostitute, and current bomb-maker. Other recurring characters include their friend, Becky, an ex-criminal, Misty, who involves the girls with Goldie, a mob enforcer, Bean, the best getaway driver in the business and long-suffering detective, Roy Coleman.

Gray is the major villain of the first three series, Goldie of the next two and 'Mister V', in which she attempts to take over the mob and use Rally's father against her. 'Bean Bandit' and 'Kidnapped' are more relaxed after the intensity of 'Bad Trip', in which Goldie attempts to enslave Rally (for personal and professional use) with the mind-control drug, Ketamine. *Gunsmith Cats* is fast-paced, displays a deep appreciation of guns and cars and is not very politically correct. However, Sonoda knows how to make his action work on the page and there are some excellent set pieces that owe much to Hong Kong cinema. His main characters are well defined and even villains like Goldie display complex motivations.~NF
Recommended: 'Kidnapped' 1-10, 'Mister V' 1-11

GUNSMOKE WESTERN

Atlas/Marvel: *56 issues (32-77) 1955-1963*

This Western anthology was one of the few titles to survive Atlas' 1957 collapse. The one constant feature was the Kid Colt strip by Stan Lee and Jack Keller. Unfortunately it was as unexciting here as it was in the regular title, although fans might be interested in 72's origin story. In 32-35 a transparent Davy Crockett rip-off Billy Buckskin was enlivened by Mort Drucker art, but the remainder of the Atlas run consisted of short one-off stories. These were resolutely inconsequential, but also very nicely drawn, and the likes of Doug Wildey, Angelo Torres, Al Williamson, Gene Colan and Matt Baker crop up regularly. Atlas stopped commissioning new material after 42, but had stockpiled enough art to last a considerable time. 50 and 61 contained a couple of lovely Reed Crandall strips, but from 50 on *Gunsmoke* was more typically drawn by Marvel stalwarts Dick Ayers, Paul Reinman and the redoubtable Jack Kirby. The much maligned Don Heck produced some of his best work here with his strips in 70 and 76 particularly crisp and stylish. The Marvel era restored a second series with Wyatt Earp by Lee and Ayers appearing periodically in 45-56, and Two-Gun Kid (by Lee and John Severin) in most issues between 57 and 63. As ever, they were pretty to look at, but disappointing to read.~DAR

Recommended: 50, 61, 70, 76

The GUNWITCH: Outskirts of Doom

Oni Press: *3 issue miniseries 2001**

The Gunwitch is the corpse-like bodyguard of Doc Horror's daughter, Halloween Girl in *The Nocturnals*. Here the Gunwitch takes 'The Man With No Name' role in Heliopolis, a town torn apart by rival gangs of vampires as they fight over a young girl, who may be the means of resurrecting a lost vampire queen. Dan Brereton's script pays playful homage to *A Fistful of Dollars*, but Ted Naifeh's artwork fails to achieve a complementary atmosphere.~NF

GUTTERSNIPE

Fantagraphics: *2 issues 1994-1996*

Funny-animal (and funny-foliage) stories by Glenn Head, involving porn, violence, drugs, and the death of God. It's familiar territory for an underground comic, but there are a few surprises, mostly in 1. 'Happy Shiny Flowers' takes an unexpectedly positive view of the meeting of the 'good' flowers and the 'bad' weeds, 'Dream of the Porno Fiend' is good on the experience of being disgusted by your own imagination, and the autobiographical 'Ultra Violence' takes an intelligent approach to the common fascination with violence. After 1, the stories are still entertaining, but there are no new themes.~FC

GUY GARDNER

DC: *3 issue miniseries ('Guy Gardner Reborn'), 43 issues, 2 Annuals 1992-1996*

A one-shot character introduced in issue 59 of the 1960's Green Lantern series, Guy was brought back in the 1980's as a tonsorially-challenged misanthrope with a grudge against Hal Jordan for usurping Guy's 'role' as the Green Lantern of Earth. A major focus of the relaunched *Justice League* from 1987, he spun-off into his own miniseries, in which, having been stripped of his power ring, he acquires the yellow Qwardian power ring operated by Sinestro, and sets out to kick arse and take names. Written by Gerard Jones, drawn by Joe Staton, the miniseries, and the first 10 issues of the ongoing title, are fuelled more by violence and chutzpah than narrative skill. An attempt was made to add more depth in 'Yesterday's Sins' by Chuck Dixon (11-14), exploring Guy's troubled childhood, but before there was a fair chance to see if it helped, the title became Guy Gardner: Warrior from 17. From here Guy's temperamental 'foreign-made' power ring gave up the ghost, and he had to seek other sources of power. 'Emerald Fallout' in 18-21 effectively closes the book on Guy's days as a ring-wielder, and new writer Beau Smith settled on an *Indiana Jones* theme. Guy and a team of adventurers lead an expedition to exotic climes, and he ends up drinking the 'Waters of the Warrior' which activates his conveniently latent genetic potential. It turns out our all-American Guy was part alien. How embarrassing. This genetic gift enables him to armour up and construct both edged and projectile weapons out of his own tender flesh. From there, although often amusing in a boneheaded 'Manly Thrills' kind of way, the series wanders, with Smith unwilling to either espouse or take the piss out of his hero's attitude. Guy gathers around him a team of has-beens and leftovers from the far corners of the DC Universe, including Wildcat, Lead of the Metal men, a time-lost Lady Blackhawk from the 1940's, and fellow former Green Lantern Arisia. While the series is usually worth a glance (particularly issue 42, where our macho hero has to get in touch with his feminine side as 'Gal Gardner') it's seldom more than competent fight scenes. An honourable exception is 29, beautifully illustrated by Phil Jimenez, in which Guy's superhero theme bar, *Warrior*'s, opens, with guest-shots by almost every DC character active at that time. It's quite charming, and if you try it, you'll have sampled the best of this series by a very long way.~HS.

Recommended: 29

GUZZI LEMANS

Antarctic: *2 issue microseries 1996*

Guzzi Lemans is an outcast in a future society split into gangs and federal agencies. She lives in a garage with a beloved AC Cobra and her dog, and earns a living by making deliveries in a truck rigged to protect her against marauding mutants. Jim Lawson's art and storytelling style has a very sparse European feel to it, and while the lack of depth precludes wholehearted recommendation, these should not disappoint if found cheap.~WJ

GWAR

Last Gasp: *One-shot ('Skulheadface') 1994*

Gwar was a rock 'n' roll band with a flamboyant theatrical approach and fifteen to twenty members, but only about six musicians. The remaining members help make up Slave Pit, performing other creative duties associated with the band, and who had their own comic, *Slave Pit Funnies*. 'Skulheadface' is an adaptation of Gwar's video movie, providing an origin of sorts, and pitting them against a villain, who's trying to subjugate Earth under the orders of Cardinal Syn.~NF

GYRE

Abaculus: *3 issues 1997-1998*

Edgy supernatural thriller from Martin Shipp and Marc Laming wherein the US military hunts for Jacob Guyler a psychic of immense power, who can apparently channel the stored energy of the unquiet dead. Worth a look. 2 and 3 also contain short 'Six Degrees' fillers from Shipp and John Welding.~WW

GYRO FORCE

Rip-Off: *One-shot 1987*

Intended as the first of a series of related comics, Mark Bodé's fantasy pilots obviously never caught the imagination. The pilots are the first line of defence against alien attackers, and while Bodé has put a lot of thought into the background, it's at the expense of attention to plot, which is largely a mundane shoot-em-up.~FP

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* Available in a collected edition

THE HACKER FILES

DC: *12 issues 1992-1993*

Jack Marshall creates a computer operating system for Digitronix, but then decides that the corporation's evil and must be stopped. With the aid of friends Yoshio, an ex-wife, a gang of young hackers and Justice League Europe, he sets about confounding the company's plans for world domination through use of an Artificial Intelligence. As ludicrous as it sounds, writer Lewis Shiner clearly has something to say about freedom (information or otherwise) and individualism, including as he does the crippled Oracle (5-6) and a lengthy subplot about a renegade student from China (7-10). The artwork by Tom Sutton, inked by Mark Buckingham, lacks Buckingham's own flourishes and any real sense of place, experimentation with computer graphics in the later issues notwithstanding. This is a worthy, pre-*X-Files* attempt to show ordinary people caught up in conspiracies, real or imagined but fails in the end because there are too many compromises in the storytelling, particularly with the intrusion of superheroes.~NF

HAIGHT STREET STORIES

Streets of America: *One-shot 2001*

Three anecdotes transcribed in comic form by artist 'Ant', with an additional *Where's Wally/Waldo* aspect as he draws a likeness of himself into each story. The stories deal with a first tattoo, a drunken night out and its consequences and a missionary child. They're well told, but in places writer Harry Moss dwells a little, edging out a possible fourth tale. Why Haight Street when the subjects are universal? Well, in possibly the most encouraging aspect of the comic, many Haight Street businesses have not only sponsored it, but are selling it as well. Why not pop into *Say Cheese* or *All California Mortgage Inc* for your copy.~FP

David Zapanta's HAIRBAT

Slave Labor: *1 issue 1995*

In tone this is very much like the whimsical gloom such as *Squee* and *Lenore* with which Slave Labor would later enjoy success. Distinctively drawn, there's little else to recommend it, with a nonsensical story about a boy confined in a mental hospital hosting a talking bat in his hair. The puppet show prologue brings you up to speed from the earlier minicomics, but there's very little point to any of it.~FP

HALLOWEEN HORROR

Eclipse: *One-shot 1987*

The final issue of *Seduction of the Innocent* in all but name, this contains the brand mix of baby-eating ogres, slimy demons, and gruesome vampires. It's the underrated art of Lou Cameron that stands out in an issue also presenting Jay Disbrow and the eccentric 'Frankenstein' by Dick Briefer. Of interest, but hardly essential.~WJ

John Bolton's HALLS OF HORROR

Eclipse/Quality: *2 issues 1985*

John Bolton's understairs cupboard more likely; a ragbag of English reprints. Polished enough artwork, but the monster-club framing sequence can't explain away why the majority of the second issue is devoted to a 2000 Years BC caveman adventure.~FJ

HALO an Angel's Story

Siruis: *4 issue miniseries 1996**

Chris Knowles' story is a welcome departure from the norm. It details the 1980s experiences of the teenage Halo, drifting through various locations unaware she has a guardian angel looking after her, and intervening unobtrusively at pivotal moments of her life. The story is absorbing, despite a major drawback in Halo's passive blank slate of a character, and Knowles' deliberately heavyset art adroitly overcomes the limitations of a talking heads comic. Each issue is a largely self-contained slice of Halo's life, and should appeal beyond the conventional comic audience.~FP

HALO AND SPROCKET

Amaze Ink: *3 issues + 2002 to date*

Katie lives with an angel, Halo, and a robot, Sprocket. Given his mechanical nature, Sprocket can be infuriatingly and remorselessly logical, while Halo's celestial origins imbue a touch of arrogance. The sitcom set-up produces three short stories each issue. They're simple, funny, charming and well conceived, with Kerry Callen's polished cartooning a treat. Show it to people who don't read comics; it has a wide appeal.~FP

Recommended: 1-3

The Ballad of HALO JONES

Quality: *12 issue limited series 1987-1988**

Reprint of Alan Moore and Ian Gibson's futuristic coming-of-age tale that originally appeared in *2000AD*. Although limited by the need to provide a climax every six pages or so, Moore manages to create a cohesive overall story which attracted many female readers. Ian Gibson, frequently overrated, produces some of his best ever artwork. The lack of 'prettiness' in his open-lined forms and stubby blocks of ink suits the unromantic tone of the stories perfectly. The stories were planned as individual books, each occupying four issues.

Halo Jones begins with the heroine living in a violent future of floating cities and follows her attempts to escape from the numbing boredom of Earth. She has a naïve vision of what space travel will be like, and in the third book (9-12) is forced to join the galactic army when down on her luck. Each of the three stories has its own mood. In the first, incredibly, she and her friends strap on grenade-launchers and machine-guns and attempt to go shopping, as Moore gently takes the piss out of ultra-violent science fiction. It ends on a poignant note as, with a job on a space cruiser, she (and we) realise that none of her friends will make the same huge leap. 5-8 are a collection of largely stand-alone stories, including beautifully crafted shorts such as 'I'll Never Forget Whatsisname?', about a stowaway who's become so good at hiding that everyone forgets him seconds after meeting him (an idea Neil Gaiman would develop in his *Neverwhere* TV series). The third book is an unsophisticated, but very moving, diatribe against war. As excellent a way to introduce young girls to the delights of comics as you could wish, but by turns entertaining and moving for the rest of us, too.~FJ

Recommended: 5-12

The HAMMER

Dark Horse: *4 issues miniseries 1997-1998, one-shot ('Uncle Alex') 1998, 3 issue miniseries ('The Outsider') 1999*

Written and drawn by Kelley Jones, this is the story of a creature that attaches itself to the back of an archaeologist's head in order to fight an evil Death Cult attempting to bring Hell to Earth. 'Uncle Alex' continues The Hammer's humorous attempts to come to terms with modern life – including being led to a demon by the blending of the relish and mustard in a hot dog. 'The Outsider' introduces an other-dimensional patchwork man who comes to the Hammer's aid against Cthulu. With the trappings of Lovecraft and mythic heroes generally, this is not bad but doesn't really work, possibly resembling a superhero title too closely. The Hammer's naivety, love of junk food and single-minded approach are all sources of humour but the series as a whole lacks depth.~NF

HAMMER OF GOD

First: *4 issue miniseries 1990, 2 issue microseries ('Sword of Justice') 1991*
Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries ('Butch') 1994, one-shot ('Pentathalon') 1994*

Nexus supporting character Judah Maccabee takes the spotlight, dispensing his religion-fuelled sense of justice across the Galaxy. The idea of an alien from a persecuted race raised by Hassidic Jews should never, if we're being honest, have survived to be more than a one-issue joke, and the wackiness of the concept doesn't really hold up as the centre of attention. The first series is more interesting as a chance to see Steve Epting before he'd really learned to draw than for its often tedious plot of Maccabee fighting political corruption by standing for office himself. The Dark Horse issues bring nothing more to the title or the character. After all, apart from Steve Rude's beautiful pencils there was never a lot to the Nexus concept anyway. Take away those and the lead character and there's really nothing of substance left.~JC

HAMMER OF THE GODS

Insight Studios: *5 issues 2001-2002**

A glorious collaboration between Michael Avon Oeming and Mark Wheatley concerning the ancient Norse legends. It was Oeming's idea, and his jagged cartooning conjures a bleak world that Wheatley tightens into stories. They're skillfully and sparsely written, maintaining the detached quality of the legends, with mythical characters dropping in and out, and dragging the acts of the gods down to caprice and petulance. As the baby Modi lies dying, his distraught parents beg the Gods to intervene. They do, with a Valkyrie named Skögul ensuring not only his survival, but also bestowing a blessing of prodigious strength and great wisdom. It comes with a caveat, though: should Modi raise a weapon his sould will be forfeit. Despite his gifts the adult Modi becomes disillusioned with the Gods, and swears to destroy them. Of course, he'll have to find a way to Valhalla first, but another meeting with Skogul under completely different circumstances in 3 enables this, and Valhalla is not what he expected. The story originally appeared in black and white, but is best read in the recent Image collected edition with subtle colouring, also by Wheatley, and further issues are expected from Image in 2003.~WJ
Recommended: 1-5

HAMMERLOCKE

DC: *9 issues 1992-1993*

"Tomorrow's superhumans are here!" it says on the cover of Issue 1. They may well be, but it's hard to spot them among all the talk about corporate politics and the astral railway, which isn't nearly as exciting as it sounds. Boring beyond belief. One point of interest: all the women have lips like sink plungers.~FC

HAMSTER VICE

Blackthorne: *9 issues 1986-1987*
Eternity: *2 issues 1989*

Puerile and appallingly drawn anthropomorphic humour comic about police hamsters. Creator Dwayne Ferguson won Marvel's try-out contest, but on the basis of this the other entries must have been unmentionable. Blackthorne also published two 3-D issues, the second reprinting the first issue of the regular series.~FP

HAND OF FATE

Eclipse: *3 issue miniseries 1988*

It's unusual to find Bruce Jones writing a series about a hard-boiled detective. Of course there's plenty of fantasy, science-fiction and horror elements to the story: what else do you expect when the hero's called Artemus Fate, with a psychic girl-friend and a pet raven? The down at heel Artemus investigates unusual cases, from haunted lighthouses to a woman more spider than human, to killer pussy cats. Gerald Forton's artwork gives the whole thing a 1950s feel and his story-telling's good, although the overall look of the strip isn't particularly pleasing on the eye. A bit of a curiosity.~NF

HANDS OF THE DRAGON

Atlas: *1 issue 1975*

Kung-Fu comics by numbers. Got that checklist ready? Tibetan monastery? Yup. Mystical medallion? Yup. Aged mentor? Yup. Years of training? Yup. Typically dull Atlas shot at bandwagon jumping? Yup.~FP

THE HANGED MAN Chronicles of Mazeworld

Caliber: *2 issue microseries 1997*

During the course of his suspension by the neck the first man to be hanged in Britain for three decades is somehow transported, hood intact and irremovable, to Mazeworld. In this fantasy world controlled constructed from adjoining mazes, those who have the maps hold the power. Here Adam is believed to be a long lost hero to some and an inconvenient nuisance to others. In the UK 'Mazeworld' was seen in colour weekly instalments, and while completed in speedier fashion by Caliber that doesn't compensate for running the series in black and white, thus further reducing the detail of Arthur Ranson's sumptuous artwork. Alan Grant's concept is fascinating, and this is merely the opening chapter. It's a decent adventure story, but not, as yet, all it might become.~FP

HAPPY

Top Shelf: *2 issues + 2001 to date*

The title is, sadly, ironic as yet another twenty-something delivers his nihilism unto the world. Josh Simmons is so painfully self-aware that he devotes a seven page prologue, parading his nous and excusing his autobiographical piece in 2. It's a shame as while he might have little to say, he is a talented artist, and the pseudo-Victorian cartooning, again in 2, is very nice indeed.~WJ

HAPPY THE CLOWN

Caliber: *2 issues 1994, 2 issues ('The Return of') 1995*

Lenny is a shellshocked, government agent, nicknamed, Happy because of his lack of optimism. He's assigned as bodyguard to the U.S. President at his nephew's birthday party, but his own agency assassinates the President, framing Lenny, who's become glued into his clown suit. Writer, Gary Francis, is clever enough with words to use the names of a dozen different comic publishers on one page. The experimental storytelling techniques, though, both words and pictures, make it seem as if the writer and artist (not so much David Mack on the first series, but particularly Troy Boyle on the second) are working on different pages. It's difficult to tell, but the evidence suggests that the story is unfinished.~NF

HAPPYDALE: Devils in the Desert

DC/Vertigo: *2 issue microseries 1999**

Three murderous kids go on a killing spree before high-tailing it for the Badlands, where they decide to lie low in an isolated and picturesque little town in the middle of nowhere, populated by various hermits, recluses and retired side-show freaks. It isn't long though, before their urge for destruction overwhelms them again and they find to their regret, that nobody settles down in a place like Happydale unless they have secrets of their own to outrun. Good-looking but routine thriller from Andrew Dabb, Seth Fisher and Laura Allred.~WW

HAR HAR COMICS

Fantagraphics: *2 issues 1990-1992*

The last gasp at a Mike Kazaleh title in comics before he decided animation might be a better bet for a secure future. In the first issues there are a number of short gag strips, and a longer one wondering what it would be like if dogs really had anthropomorphic tendencies. 2 accompanies more shorts with the sad tale of Hyper-Al's birthday. The cartooning is brilliant and the comic is, at times, very funny, so well worth picking out of the cheap section if you see it.~WJ

HARBINGER

Valiant: *42 issues (0-41), 2 Yearbooks 1992-1995*
Acclaim: *One-shot 1997*

'Harbinger' is the term applied to those who'd be mutants at Marvel, teenagers with inherent natural superpowers who're harbingers of humanity's future, hence the name. It also applies to the Harbinger Foundation, run by Japanese businessman Toyo Harada, who gathers and trains Harbingers, allegedly in their best interests, thereby enabling them a degree of control over their abilities. This doesn't sit well with Peter Stanchek, a teenager with prodigious mental abilities, who rebels. 1-7, and the supplemental zero issue, are very much plot and character led by writer Jim Shooter and artist David Lapham. Nice touches include the rotund Zephyr, a major comic fan, delighted at becoming a superhero, and Stanchek mentally manipulating his team-mates, one in a particularly despicable fashion. The conflict over Stanchek between female members of the team comes over as puerile wish fulfilment, but otherwise 1-7* are solid enough superhero comics. 8 and 9 are part of Valiant's 'Unity' crossover, including an unlikely revelation for Kris, while Lapham writes and pencils 11-13. Most other issues to 25 are one round of skirmishes after another between Stanchek's team and Harada's agents, but Stanchek returning home to his father for the first time since he fully manifested his powers in 21 is nicely handled. It's the by then regular team of Maurice Fontenot and Howard Simpson, a much underrated artist. 25 is the final conflict between Stanchek and Harada, with more than a few surprises. 26 begins a new direction entirely, and introduces Sean Chen as penciller, but it's an era of high-school superpowered soap operatics with plenty of crossovers, most notably with *H.A.R.D. Corps* in 30 and 31. By 34's 'Chaos Effect' chapter *Harbinger* is almost without focus, and has deteriorated into mediocrity. Succeeding issues are an improvement, returning the title to more or less its original premise, but an abrupt cancellation means there's no real ending.

The Acclaim reboot takes its lead from Image's belligerent teenage team titles, but is merely a serviceable introductory issue.~WJ

HARD BOILED

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1990-1992**

Brash, ultra-violent, completely amoral. Is this what Frank Miller thought he needed to do to reinvent himself for the 1990s? *Hard Boiled* is a slick, magazine-size short story of a corporate robot whom renegade robots are trying to recruit. It's the blackest of black comedies, drawn by Geof Darrow, whose panels are crammed with detail and oddly disquieting. Many people rave about the detail in Darrow's pages, but his draughtsmanship and story-telling is merely average. Ultimately the series is a triumph of style over content, the violent excesses highlighting over and over Miller's message of the hopelessness of lost humanity.~NF

The H.A.R.D. CORPS

Valiant: *30 issues 1992-1995*

Using implants and satellites, the H.A.R.D. Corps are given a variety of abilities, including flight, power blasts and the projection of protective shields. The snag is they're only able to use one at a time, though can switch instantly by calling base. Teamwork is imperative to ensure maximum efficiency. Ostensibly an interesting concept, for most of the run it's never developed beyond the ordinary, with one-dimensional characters, as exemplified by the best issue being a fill-in starring a one-shot character in 24. Mike Baron improves matters as the team discover they've been manipulated in 26, but by then it's too little, too late.~WJ

HARD LOOKS

Dark Horse: *10 issues 1992-1993**

Hard Looks adapts Andrew Vachss' seriously mean short stories, with one new prose piece each issue. With artists like James O'Barr, George Pratt, Warren Pleece, David Lloyd, Dave Gibbons and Gary Gianni the visual interpretation is as dark as the original prose, and sticking to black and white artwork is very effective. The villains have usually committed sexual crimes of one kind or another and the heroes are often just looking for revenge, but these are powerful stories that steer clear of relying on a twist ending for suspense. A collection picks and chooses from the entire run.~NF

HARDCASE

Malibu: *26 issues 1993-1995*

Tom Hawke is Hardcase, an actor who woke up one morning with super strength. He soon linked up with three others as a super team called the Squad. After a brief string of successes, the Squad were attacked by a Techno-Organic creature called NM-E. Two died and Hawke's girl friend was put into a coma. The series begins a few years later, Hawk is now a movie star playing himself when NM-E returns and Hawke finds himself catapulted into a chaotic world of intrigue and slaughter, embroiled in the schemes of Rex Mundi, Master of Earth, and the builder of NM-E. Solid if uninspired superhero, tough guy action from James Hudnall and a variety of artists.~WW

HARDCORE STATION

DC: *6 issue miniseries 1998*

Ah yes, this is what creator Jim Starlin (helped by inker Joseph Rubinstein) does best: a good old fashioned space opera. The series stars Chief Justice Max, head of security of Hardcore Station, an intergalactic hub of activity that's the place to do business (legal and illegal) with five million aliens. Max dishes out his own brand of fascistic justice, obviously inspired by *Judge Dredd*, and has to thwart various threats and evil-looking baddies. Of course there's a larger plot at hand involving an powerful omni-being – what would we do without powerful omni-beings? – who's obviously up to no good. Starlin's a old hand at this sort of thing, but he goes through the motions with much style and professionalism. Interesting plots and top-notch artwork make for an entertaining read.~HY

HARDWARE

DC/Milestone: *51 issues 1993-1997*

In hero mode, Hardware is essentially a black version of Iron Man, but far more effectively so than Marvel's surrogate. Out of his gear he's Curtis Metcalf, scientific genius employed by ostensibly philanthropic businessman Edwin Alva, who in reality has his finger in any number of criminal pies. Instead of wiping him out straight off, Metcalf figures it's more satisfying to bring down the criminal activities one by one, with Alva, although beyond the reach of the law, powerless to stop a vengeful armoured warrior. It's a satisfying blend of action and personality that's provided by Dwayne McDuffie and Denys Cowan for the initial issues. In 14 Alva discovers the obvious, but the plot isn't resolved in the way everyone might expect. 17 and 18 are part of the *Worlds Collide* crossover, in which the Milestone heroes meet some of their DC counterparts. It's also the end for McDuffie and Cowan (for whom several other artists had already filled in), and the start of a forgettable run.

It's all change again from 32 as Metcalf forms his own company, taking several of his colleagues along, while continuing his fight for justice. An appealing aspect to *Hardware*, and indeed most Milestone titles, is that there's a strong editorial control. Different creators work on the title, and sometimes the change of artistic style can be jarring, but overall plot-lines are continued through to conclusion, and there's no new direction with every change of writer. Towards the end of the series Dan Chichester is in charge, and pulls elements of his stories straight from the real world, with government-sponsored covert-action teams, organ harvesting, and a retired general hawking his autobiography. These issues are deliberately more up front with action and wisecracking, and there's a far higher percentage of guns than previously. Despite being the first and last of the Milestone imprint, *Hardware* is one of the weaker titles throughout. While never bad, almost any of the others are worth investigating before this.~WJ

HARLAN ELLISON'S DREAM CORRIDOR

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1995, series one 5 issues 1995*, series two 1 issue 1996*

Not, as you might expect from the title, the infamous science-fiction writer and self-styled gadfly of the establishment rhapsodising about his ideal hallway, but a rather dreary anthology title featuring well-known cartoonists adapting Ellison's short stories. Ellison completists should note that he co-edits and writes new short prose fiction based on the cover illos and framing sequences (drawn by Eric Shanower) between the adaptations. As entertaining as Ellison's bluster and self-promotion can be, and despite nice packaging and a talented roster of contributors such as Peter David, John Byrne, Doug Wildey, Michael T.Gilbert, Jan Strnad, Skip Williamson and Mike Deodato, the stories are lacklustre. If Ellison's your cup of tea you'd be better off with his collections of short stories.~JC

HARLEM BEAT

Mixx: *9 volumes 1999-2002*

First serialised in *Mixxzine* and then collected and continued as separate volumes, this is the story of basketball player, Nate Torres. Initially playing for a team, Scratch, with Mizzy, Kyle and Masa, volumes 1-5 concentrate on the team's experiences during the Mixxhoopz 3On3 championships, as they beat tough opponents, Three Slam and the girls of Mermaid Force, before they must face the physical and psychological threats of the Ice Picks, whose tactics include kidnapping their friends. In 6-9, Nate is chosen to play for the Johnan High basketball team, which is struggling in the leagues, but still has a chance of playing in the National championships, aided by Nate and then Mizzy.

Realism is sacrificed to a large extent in Yuriko Nishiyama's manga sports series, mostly in the manipulation of timeframes, but also in the lives of the characters. This does not make the story any less interesting and, whatever one might make of the problems thrown in the way of our heroes, Nishiyama does succeed in making the outcome of each game thrilling, building suspense to keep the reader guessing. The uncomplicated artwork also helps to keep the action understandable even to non-sports fans.~NF

HARLEM'S HEROES

Quality: *6 issue miniseries 1992*

It is fifty years since the original Harlem's Heroes played their last game of Aeroball. Earth, now run in all but name by Mega-Corporations, is a totalitarian state where political prisoners and other dregs are sent to labour camps deep underground. The only surcease in a regime of unrelenting toil is the odd game of – you guessed it – Aeroball. The best team is sprung by the theoretically powerless US government for a special mission, but its all a set-up, and the released felons, calling themselves – you're way ahead here – Harlem's Heroes, must fight everybody to clear their names and stay free. Mindless rubbish reprinted from *2000AD*, with scripts by Michael Fleisher only just saved from total worthlessness by the art of Steve Dillon and Kev Walker.~WW

HARLEY QUINN

DC: *One-shot 1999, 28 issues +, 2 Specials, one-shot ('Love on the Lam') 2000 to date*

As was the case with the updated Batgirl in the 1960s, one of the most popular *Batman* characters of all time didn't originate in the pages of any Bat comic. Harleen Quinzel is a fresh young psychiatrist, who connives to get herself assigned to Arkham Asylum, where Batman's most deadly foes are confined between murder sprees, and where an ambitious shrink could get the goods for the biggest pop-psychology book of all time. Once she starts treating the Joker, however, she snaps herself and falls obsessively in love with the evil clown. That's her origin from the Batman animated TV series, it's how she's played in many issues of the various all-ages comics based on the TV show, and it still is when she's co-opted into mainstream Bat continuity

Her first such appearance is in the one-shot set during the 'No Man's Land' event and with Paul Dini and Yvel Guichet doing a bang-up job reprising her history for the grown-up comics crowd. Karl Kesel and Terry and Rachel Dodson are responsible for the regular series, as the ever more buxom, wacky would-be villainess decides to end her abusive relationship with the Joker and strike out on her own. She forms a gang – The Quintettes – and tries very hard to steal lots of money. The adventures are light in tone and roll along rapidly, with few subplots. She becomes the target of a team of bounty hunters and her own gang member Nix, and has lots of guest-stars but there's little to entice the casual reader. After many for forgettable tales, Harley and gal-pal Poison Ivy quit Gotham for the gleaming bright lights of Metropolis (14) where she's employed as the relationship counselor on the Daily Planet during the period of the 'Our Worlds At War' crossover. Her tie-in special is drawn by a host of alternative comics talent such as Paul Grist, Paul Chadwick and Amanda Conner.

She even plays fast and loose with the affections of Jimmy Olsen, and after a run-in with Bizarro and Superman she dies and goes to Hell, providing the most novel story in the entire run. She and the dead members of the Quintettes spend three very amusing issues (20-22) trying to escape Hell and another two getting her a new body. By 25 it's back to the same old eye-candy as Kesel and Dodson hand over to new creative team A. J. Lieberman, Mike Huddleston and Troy Nixey. It never sucks but there's way better comics you could spend your time and money on – such as Harley's appearances in the various *Batman Adventures* comics.~WW

HAROLD HEDD in Hitler's Cocaine

Kitchen Sink: *2-issue microseries 1984*

In a manner reminiscent of Carl Barks' *Uncle Scrooge* epics, Harold Hedd and his cousin Elmo set off in search of a cache of cocaine lost during World War II on its way to Hitler. With a parrot, a shark, a treasure map and two other groups after the loot, there's plenty of slapstick action. Rand Holmes' earlier *Harold Hedd* adventures, reprinted from the same Canadian newspaper that would later début David Boswell's *Reid Fleming*, were also published in two issues by Last Gasp.~NF

Clive Barker's The HARROWERS, Raiders of the Abyss

Marvel/Epic: *6 issues 1993-1994*

Tying into *Hellraiser*, the Harrowers are basically non-costumed superheroes with a mission to save souls from hell, run by the Cenobites. Considering their status as immortal demons the Cenobites are an unimaginative and dull bunch, not improved by Gene Colan pencilling as if he didn't give a damn. The best effort is 'Devil's Pawn' in 5 and 6, wherein the Harrowers have rescued the wrong soul and unwittingly returned a murderer to Earth, but their best story is the Alex Ross-painted début in *Hellraiser* 17.~FP

HARRY THE COP

Slave Labor: *One-shot 1992*

Simply told and illustrated indictment (by Brian McDonald and Wayne Cash) of the institutional racism of the Los Angeles Police Force, describing Harry's racism and bigotry. Produced like a children's story, with few words and a single panel per page, artistically this is at its best when the Eisner influence is clearest. Written before the Rodney King beating, its anger is clearly not misplaced.~NF

HARSH REALM

Harris: *6 issue miniseries 1993**

Dexter Green is your average hard-boiled private eye eking out a surprisingly lucrative living in the near future. Society has become overwhelmingly technologically and environmentally hostile, and a number of corporations offer escape into alternate realities created by supercomputers. Green is hired to retrieve teenager Dan Crawford who has disappeared into GameCorp's 'Harsh Realm' reality. Touted as the ultimate escape, the world can only be affected by people inside. On entering, Green discovers just how powerful the computers are, since even the laws of physics bend to the specifications of the game, and he has to learn to use and survive magic. A further complication occurs as Dan Crawford not only doesn't want to be rescued but is also well on the way to becoming the God of Evil in Harsh Realm. So-so adventure strip from James Hudnall, Andy Paquette and John Ridgway.~WW

HARVEST KING

Caliber: *3 issue miniseries 1997*

Petty criminal Michael Dean is in a quandry. On the one hand a renegade archangel is offering him everything he could ever want or desire in return for his soul, and on the other, his future self has come from the future to stop him from making the biggest mistake of his life... Intriguing take on the temptation parable from Joe Casey and Mike Macropoulos.~WW

HARVEY

Marvel: *6 issues 1970 (1-2), 1972 (3-6)*

Archie.~DAR

HATE

Fantagraphics: *30 issues 1990-1998*, 3 Annuals + 2000 to date*

Long before the term 'slacker' was first applied to a lost generation, Peter Bagge was producing stories about suburban teenager Buddy Bradley and his dysfunctional family in *Neat Stuff*. Given a new title, the misanthropic Buddy aged five years to become the focus. Initially sharing a Seattle flat with the disgusting Stinky and the anal-retentive paranoid George, Buddy stumbles from couch to fridge in a life defined by drink, sex and avoiding responsibility. In 4 Buddy's younger brother Butch drops by. In *Neat Stuff* he was tormented and set-upon, but here he represents redneck America, and is positively frightening. 16 is a turning point. Hate goes to colour as Jim Blanchard starts as inker, and given that the slacker culture is itself unknowing self-referential parody, Bagge was smart enough to move Buddy back to New Jersey, as Seattle went global in the real world. The vicious satire of earlier issues is muted somewhat by a return to the suburbs, but Bagge compensates by proving an adroit writer of domestic sit-com.

Bagge's cartoon style is extraordinary. There's a lineage back to Big Daddy Roth, but he's an original, able to convey a startling array of attitudes with a simple style. He's particularly expressive during moments of great stress for his characters. Eyes bulge, mouths rend agape with tongues elongated into spasm, limbs stretch, and bodies contort to comic effect, yet somehow there's a cohesiveness to the whole effect. At its best, which is most issues, *Hate* is a vitriolic dissection of blue-collar culture. Bagge's not unique in exploring suburban indignity and stereotypes, but only *The Simpsons* (to which he must have been an inspiration) hit the target as often, and he can descend to levels not permitted by network TV. Despite omitting Buddy's appalling girlfriend Lisa, 27 is as good a sample as any of the later issues, although holds a greater resonance for those familiar with Stinky. Various of Buddy's acquaintances are involved in a cover-up that complicates his life.

From 26 the page count is increased to permit outside contributions to sit alongside those from already in place Wally Wood influenced Rick Altergot (from 21). His Doofus strips polarise the readership, and sadly, few of the extra contributions stand out. In isolation Ivan Brunetti's gags in 26 horrify, Gilbert Hernandez illustrates some strange quotes in the same issue, and there's a decent Pat Moriarity one pager in 28. In 27 Bagge teams with Robert Crumb for a pointless pop at the blandness of *Cathy* newspaper strips, but his story of meeting Harvey Kurtzman, illustrated by Danny Hellman in 30, is sad and amusing. That issue also has Karl Willis, whose nihilistic strips at least display some imagination and Bagge collaborating with Alan Moore. Tom King and Walt Holocmbe's 'Fascist Cartoonist' in 27 satirises pre-politically correct cartoons, and while some consider Adrian Tomine a major cartoonist, his strip in 28 is a throwaway. Almost all the text pieces are wretchedly self-indulgent. The annuals are the first inessential *Hate*, although not without merit. The first two serve largely as repositories for illustrated essays that would only otherwise be seen by web browsers, all interesting reading, along with short Buddy strips and 10 more pages of comics. 3 is all comics, again with a short Buddy and Lisa strip, and a few one-joke strips about Murry Wilson, father of several Beach Boys. For the bulk of the issue Bagge resurrects his contented suburban couple from Neat Stuff, Chet and Bunny Leeway. They're used for a few gags about the addictive nature of computers and the web, the failure of dot.com companies and how life changes, and skate dangerously close to the cosy domesticity and predictability of syndicated daily strips. These are satirised via 'Dildobert' in the company of Johnny Ryan, incorporating terrorist references that, while not very funny, at least prove Bagge hasn't completely been emasculated.

Any issue of *Hate* can be read without reference to others, but the lifestyle and attitudes depicted will offend some. That shouldn't put you off as all are highly recommended. After the series concluded Fantagraphics issued the *Hate Jamboree*, containing interviews with Bagge and others and plenty of early Bagge strips and illustrations previously only seen by a limited audience.~FP

Recommended: 1-30

THE HAUNT OF FEAR

EC: *28 issues (15-17, 4-28) 1950-1954**
Gladstone: *2 issues 1991*
Russ Cochran: *5 issues 1991-1992*
Gemstone: *28 issues 1992-1997**

Published as *Gunfighter* for 1-14, the comic was retitled *Haunt of Fear*, but the eighteenth issue started numbering from 4, so there are two 15-17s, distinguished from their later counterparts by Johnny Craig covers. As with the other EC horror titles, there was some initial fumbling. The stories were categorised into four styles: a psychological study, an adventure in horror, a journey into the supernatural, and a scientific SuspenStory. As was the EC style, each story ends on a twist, usually quite predictable. There was of course the occasional early gem, such as Johnny Craig's 'Nightmare' in the first 17, where a certain 'John Severin' (a little in-joke on his fellow EC artist) allows himself to be immersed in concrete thinking it's just a nightmare. Craig was the most versatile artist on the early issues, and brought a certain film noir look to his stories before departing to edit *The Vault of Horror*. The other mainstays were luminaries such as Graham Ingels, who conveyed a great sense of grotesqueness and signed himself 'Ghastly', Jack Kamen, who couldn't draw anything looking horrible, Jack Davis, whose art had a slightly humorous tendency, and George Evans' nice polished look. When they were joined by the likes of Reed Crandall, Al Feldstein, Bernie Krigstein, Harvey Kurtzman, Joe Orlando and Wally Wood to name a few, there are no artistic complaints.

Within a few issues, the EC terror-tellers (the GhouLatics), the Old Witch, the Vault Keeper and the Crypt Keeper were introducing all the stories, the latter two always advertising their own titles. Perhaps that's why this title initially seemed the poor relation. Nevertheless, once it picked up stride, it equalled the others in quality. EC was the first major publisher to highlight their creators, featuring biographies of their top professionals. All appear to be happily married with families, which is why it's surprising that so many stories centre on marital unbliss. These Haunt of Fear stories prove the statistics claiming that most murders are committed by family members on each other. 'Take Your

Pick' in 14 is a good example, as is Jack Davis' 'Garden Party' in 17, highlighting his macabre sense of humour. Of course stories that predicted undying love also had their place. In fact 22's 'Wish You Were Here' was adapted for the 1972 *Tales from the Crypt* film. That issue also features a witty take on the Snow White fable. The grisly reworking (or perhaps reclamation) of fairy tales was a regular feature of EC horror titles, but its primary home was Haunt of Fear under the banner of 'The Old Witch's Grim Fairy Tale'.

Most material was written by Bill Gaines and Al Feldstein (although Carl Wessler and others contributed to later issues), who were caught out lifting plots from Ray Bradbury short stories. Far from being litigious, though, he enjoyed the comics and allowed the adaptations to continue, with the proviso that he was credited. Two of his stories do particularly stand out, 'The Coffin' in 16, and especially 'The Black Ferris', a time-travelling story in 18. Overall, after a shaky start, this became an entertaining title. After you've read a few the stories become predictable, but that won't stop you from enjoying them. If however you like a lot of gore in your reading, you may be disappointed. It's a myth that the EC horror tales consisted of many ghastly acts of vileness illustrated in detail. The vast majority of the horrific acts were either told off-panel, hinted at, or rendered in a shadowy silhouette – and rightly so – after all, it's up to your sick imagination, dear reader, to fill in the gaps...blood, guts, warts and all!

The Gladstone and Russ Cochran-published issues are reprints, with the Gemstone series exact facsimiles of the original comics, published in chronological order. They're collected four or five issues at a time as annuals, and the rich might afford the luxurious slipcased black and white hardback reprints.~HY

Recommended: 13, 14, 16, 18, 21, 22

HAUNT OF HORROR

Marvel: *Series one 2 issues 1973, series two 5 issues 1974-1975*

Series one was digest reprints of text stories. Fans might be interested in illos by Frank Brunner and Mike Ploog among others, but they're for completists only. Series two was a late entry in Marvel's black and white magazine line, but never achieved the coherency of its companions. The first issue contains text material planned for the unpublished third digest, although it featured two of the best strips of the run: 'In the Shadow of the City', a psychological shocker by Steve Gerber and Vincente Alcazar, and the beautifully drawn 'Rats' by Gerry Conway and Ralph Reese. The remaining issues were dominated by two continuing strips, 'Gabriel The Devil Hunter' and 'Satanna', the devil's daughter. Though neither was particularly inspired, the latter at least had nice artwork by Romero. The strips continued in *Monsters Unleashed* and *Marvel Preview* respectively.~DAR

Recommended: Series two 1

HAUNTED

Charlton: *75 issues 1971-1976 (1-30), 1977-1984 (31-75)*

Another Charlton mystery anthology hosted by a little white ghost occasionally referred to as Poltergeist. There's very little of note in the first thirty issues, with the same pool of contributors that wrote and drew for *Ghost Manor* and *Ghostly Tales* also submitting here. With 21 the title changed to *Baron Weirwulf's Haunted Library*, and the little poltergeist was evicted on the first page of Don Newton's introductory story. The Baron had a run in all of Charlton's mystery titles in a series of one-pagers by Newton called 'Baron Weirwulf's Library', and his popularity earned him this venue. Some of Newton's painted covers are memorable, but financial problems at Charlton resulted first in cancellation, then in revival as *Haunted*, now an all-reprint affair.~SW

THE HAUNTED

Chaos!: *4 issue miniseries 2002, 1 issue ('Gray Matters') 2002*

Four teens, manifesting strange abilities, are told by the mysterious Stitch that their mothers participated in a medical study they thought was for cancer, but which was actually Mr Gray's Gray Cell organisation trying to create children with occult powers. Now that these have manifested themselves, the Gray Cell has come to collect them. Creator, Peter David, expertly dialogues his characters' teen lives around the themes of death and sex, while they exhibit a post-modern understanding of the nature of the horror that surrounds them. Nat Jones' artwork is clear, atmospheric and the whole is well paced. The second miniseries was a victim of the Chaos! bankruptcy, but it would be good to see David finish this elsewhere.~NF

Recommended: 1-4

This Magazine is HAUNTED

Charlton: *5 issues (12-16) 1957-1958*

Named after its grislier pre-Comics Code predecessor this incarnation inherited its numbering from the obscure Zaza the Mystic. Here was the home of Steve Ditko's other shadowy storyteller Doctor Haunt. He insinuated himself into the artwork of the tales he told with at least as much style as The Mysterious Traveler. Unfortunately the stories he narrated were leavened with others by Charlton's incredibly poor creative teams. 12-14 and 16 feature Ditko stories.~SW

HAUNTED LOVE

Charlton: *11 issues 1973-1975*

One of a couple of Gothic romance comics, this was a decent if largely uninspired title mixing lengthy lead strips with short horror back-ups. Tom Sutton and Joe Staton were among those drawing the comic, and Joe Gill was the principal writer.~DAR

The HAUNTED MAN

Dark Horse: *1 issue 2000*

Intended as a three issue miniseries, this is a print version of an online animated series from Gerard Jones and Mark Badger. Jones' script, about a Jewish superhero battling The Daylight Saviour, who steals periods of time (like 1974), is a tedious attempt at being clever, while Badger's three-dimensional effects simply don't work on paper.~NF

HAVEN

DC: *One-shot ('JLA/Haven: Arrival') 2001, 9 issue limited series ('The Broken City') 2002, one-shot (JLA/Haven: 'Anathema') 2002*

Haven is an alien city spaceship, many of whose occupants have superpowers, which crash lands on Earth. 'Arrival' chronicles the crash as the JLA and members of the ship's Alliance attempt to save the lives of those in its path and stop it falling into the Pacific. 'Broken City' begins with battles between the JLA, Alliance and prisoners of Haven, who escaped during the crash. President Luthor assigns an Ambassador to the city and arranges for aid to be supplied, while Siv, Katalia, Nia, Valadin, Ivas and Mavaar, amongst others, interact with their new, human neighbours. They also have to discover who sabotaged Haven, before the traitor alerts Anathema, from whom they were fleeing. 'Anathema', naturally, covers what happens when she catches Haven and threatens the whole world. Writers Ashley-Jayne Nicolaus and Matthew P. Schuster create a varied set of characters, but are somewhat constrained by the length of the series, which necessarily concentrates of a relatively small number of heroes. Still, it's enhanced by crisp artwork from Ariel Olivetti, whose Moebius and European influences add to the otherworldly atmosphere. It remains to be seen whether other DC writers take the opportunity to embrace the inhabitants of Haven.~NF

HAVOC INC.

Radio Comix: *8 issues 1998-1999*

Gently humorous funny-animal science fiction misadventures of Chester and Chris, rogues in the Han Solo mold, and their perpetual hunt for The Big Score. Lightweight, but well executed.~WW

HAWAIIAN DICK

Image: *1 issue + 2002 to date*

So far decent first outing for down at heel private investigator Byrd, with the setting adding to the exotic nature for most. He's a sort of 1950s Hawaiian Rockford, hired to find a missing car.~FP

HAWK AND ANIMAL

Antarctic: *2 issues 1999*

Former WWF wrestlers Hawk and Animal are turned into superheroes for this worthless atrocity. In the introduction to 1 we are told that the comic's "stories are focused on educating the readers about the human body." Sadly it looks as if the (wisely) uncredited artists of *Hawk and Animal* have yet to benefit from any of this much-needed tuition.~AL

THE HAWK AND THE DOVE

DC: *Series one 6 issues 1968-1969, 5 issue miniseries 1988-1989, series two 28 issues, 2 Annuals 1989-1991*

Teenage brothers Hank and Don Hall were granted magnified athletic prowess and costumes that appeared by magic. This was courtesy of a mysterious voice in Showcase 75, where they débuted. Hank's belligerent temperament and Don's fervent pacifism determined their transformations into the Hawk and the Dove. The Hall brothers' constant arguing for or against violence and their subsequent styles of crimefighting provided the dramatic tension. Their father's career as a judge and their life at college in the late 1960s provided the criminals and crazies they fought. Created by Steve Ditko with scripts by Steve Skeates, the balance of allegory and drama didn't survive when Gil Kane took over the art with 3. It's interesting to note that the hippie killed at the beginning of 4, Warren Savin, bore Steve Skeates' pen-name from his days at Tower and Charlton. Perhaps this suicide signalled Kane's takeover of the writing with 5.

After the demise of his brother in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, Hawk lost his sense of moral balance, becoming an increasingly unstable and violent loose cannon. In the 1988 miniseries, admirably illustrated by Rob Liefeld back when he could draw, Karl and Barbara Kesel rectified this by providing a new Dove, a female representative of the force of Order, to counterbalance him. Three potential candidates for Dove's identity were offered, and a fun aspects of a fairly grim storyline is trying to follow the clues to determine who the new Dove is. An unexpected hit, an ongoing title arrived, still written by the Kesels, with very much the same style: flashes of humour, warmth and human concern, set against some quite grisly crimes, now illustrated mainly by Greg Guler. An ill-advised foray into mysticism (15-17) revealed the true relationship of Hawk and Dove to the forces of Chaos & Order, and gave new aspects to their powers. Guest appearances by the Creeper (18-19) and the Female Furies of Apokolips (21) were the highspot, fun, frenzied and flippant. Shortly thereafter, the title lost its way, and, in what most readers remain convinced was a last-minute notion, the events of 1991's *Armageddon 2001* crossover closed the book on this series in a singularly inappropriate and dismissive manner.~SW/HS

Recommended: Series one 2, miniseries 1-5, series two 18-21

THE HAWK AND THE DOVE

DC: *5 issue miniseries 1997-1998*

In late 1997, The Hawk and The Dove names were pasted onto a new and unrelated pair of characters. USAF officer Sasha Martens and grunge rocker Wiley Wolverman became the new Hawk and Dove, with enhanced strength, wings, talons, sonic screams, and a quasi-romantic rapport that may be more than just chemistry. An adequate, if banal, genetic-manipulation origin is given for the pair, but attempts (one suspects last-minute attempts) to tie it into the Genesis miniseries look forced and clumsy. Mike Baron's script overburdens the plot with far too may unemployed characters (Vigilante, Vixen, Suicide Squad) and while Dean Zachary's pencils are attractive, they're not remarkable enough to stop the whole thing from being a bit of a dodo.~HS

HAWKEYE

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1983*, 4 issue miniseries 1994, one-shot 1998*

Writer Mark Gruenwald stretches out on a rare yet very acceptable pencilling outing. Hawkeye takes a break from the Avengers in this competent superhero fare, which is slightly degraded by an oddball assortment of antagonists. Check out the last page of the final issue for a genuine surprise ending. Between the first and second series Hawkeye had a long run in *Solo Avengers* (later *Avengers Spotlight*). The second series, by Chuck Dixon and Scott Kolins, embroils the ace archer in a rites-of-passage drama as he struggles to come to terms with a singularly tragic occurrence. The pacing is questionable. Writing off supporting characters built up by issue 2 is an unwelcome lurch in a four-issue series. Inferior to the first take. The double sized one-shot pits Hawkeye and his protege reserve Avengers Justice and Firestar against an assembly of second string villains in a run of the mill plot by Tom DeFalco, routinely pencilled by many hands.~APS

HAWKMAN

DC: *Series one 27 issues 1964-1968, 4 issue miniseries ('Shadow War of...'), 1985, series two 17 issues, 1 special 1986-1987, series three 33 issues 1993-1996, 3 issue miniseries (Legend of the Hawkman) 2000, series four 9 issues +, 1 Secret Files 2002 to date*

Following their reworking from the 1940s characters in *The Brave and the Bold* 34-36, and continuing in 42-44 and a bizarre stint sharing *Mystery in Space* 87-90 with Adam Strange, Katar Hol and his wife were finally given their own title in 1964. Winged police officers of the planet Thanagar, they continued their fight against crime on Earth, posing as Carter and Shayera Hall, curators of the Midway City Museum. The collection of ancient weapons there proved very useful for their style of law enforcement. High points of the first run include the debut of Zatanna, itinerant female magician in 4, the return of the Shadow Thief in 5, the flying gorillas of 6, Ira Quimby and his I.Q. gang in 7, the Viking Queen in 13 and the criminal organisation C.A.W. in 14. Fans of the editorial team of Gardner Fox (writer), Murphy Anderson (artist) and editor Julie Schwartz will be delighted by the first sixteen issues. Anderson's meticulous art style and Fox's obvious enjoyment of scripting a married crime-fighting duo only started to tail off when the size of the original artwork was altered in 1967. This resulted in fewer panels per page and continued stories, something that didn't suit Fox's style at all. The art and story in 22-27 was ugly and feeble. The title was merged with *Atom* from 39 of that series to become *Atom and Hawkman*.

The second series continued directly from *The Shadow War of Hawkman* miniseries, in which Hawkman and Hawkwoman fight their fellow Thanagarians who seek to take over the Earth. This remains an ongoing plot. The rapport between the Hawks is interesting, detailed and quite realistic. Many of the stars of the original *Hawkman* series make welcome returns, in particular the villainous Shadow Thief and the Gentleman Ghost, who becomes a companion to the Hawks. The 'Shadow War' finally climaxes in 10 with the aid of Superman. The best issues of this run are 16-17 concentrating on the couple's relationship and the final fate of the Gentleman Ghost.

The commercially successful, though loudly criticised, revisionist *Hawkworld* series bridged the second and third *Hawkman* runs, and the first issues of series three follow closely from the conclusion of *Hawkworld*. Written by John Ostrander (until 7), readers are kept guessing as to who the latest incarnation of the character is. Once this has been established the plot concerns what happened to Hawkwoman. Both plots intrigue and keep up the suspense. 9-12 feature the 'Godspawn' storyline, the centerpiece of which is a well choreographed battle between two Hawkmen. One of the best ideas in this series is the interaction of the Hawkman with other DC superheroes. 'Eyes Of The Hawk' features the Justice League, Wonder Woman and Aquaman, and 22-23 are chapters of the crossover 'Way of the Warrior', which is linked with

Guy Gardner comics and the *Justice League*. 24 and 25 have the welcome return of Lionmane, a nemesis from the first series, and feature a real insight into Hawkman's character. The concluding story in 31-33 is 'Hunter, Hunted, Prey!', which is simple and effective fast moving heroic action. William Messner-Loebs wrote from 9, and he's particularly effective in explaining the pressure that exists in the life of a superhero. The art varies widely due to a large number artists, although Steve Lieber is responsible for the largest amount of issues. Unfortunately at this stage his art lacks detail and he has particular trouble drawing realistic looking faces.

The 2000 miniseries is an adventure featuring Katar and Shayera as they were in the 1960s, just after their run in *The Brave and the Bold* – although there's no trace of Mavis Trent thankfully! Ben Raab's unprepossessing writing adequately clothes a plot encompassing Thangarian Gods and relics, and Superman, whilst Michael Lark's capacious depictions of cities, shrines and spaceports are inhabited by anodyne figures with little life. The story is excellently told by Lark nonetheless and Lee Loughridge's colour work plays a key role.

After the Hawks were nullified in *Zero Hour*, the DC Universe was without a Hawkman or Hawkwoman for some time. A new incarnation of Hawkgirl (Kendra Saunders, grand-niece of the 1940's heroine) was introduced as a member of the JSA's 1999 relaunch. 24-26 of that series, débuted the new Hawkman, a smoother remix of the old versions with no problem integrating his various memories, was returned to activity, and launched into a fourth eponymous title shortly thereafter. Harking back to the first versions of the characters in 1940's *Flash Comics*, the pair are now established, in all their previous manifestations, as avatars of an ancient Egyptian prince and princess. They were slain by a high priest and destined to be reborn and fall in love time after time until their karmic balance is regained. Now based in the city of St.Roch, the Hawks are exploring the boundaries of their relationship. The twist is that due to an irregularity in the reincarnation process, this version of Hawkgirl isn't automatically in love with him, and isn't at all sure she even wants to know! The theme of reincarnation worked confusingly against the previous version of the character, but is being skilfully played here by writers Geoff Johns and James Robinson. There are frequent, but not excessive, flashbacks to earlier embodiments of the pair, including some familiar faces from more obscure recesses of the DC universe. Rags Morales' art has a power and fluidity unseen in his previous pleasing, but unexceptional, work, and the story so far, while not yet having truly hit its mark, is very promising indeed.~SW / HS

Recommended: Series one 4-6, 12-14, series two 16-17

HAWKMOON

First: *4 issue miniseries ('The Jewel in the Skull') 1986*, 4 issue miniseries ('The Mad God's Amulet') 1987, 4 issue miniseries ('The Sword of the Dawn') 1987, 4 issue miniseries ('The Runestaff') 1988*

Adaptations of Michael Moorcock's *Runestaff* novels. Dorian Hawkmoon is the last hope of an embattled post-Apocalyptic Europe as the Evil Empire of Granbretan consolidates its hold on the defeated continent. When a mind eating black jewel is embedded in his skull it becomes a race against time to gather allies and the mystic weapons The Mad God's Amulet, The Sword of the Dawn and the Runestaff needed to liberate humanity. Gerry Conway and Roger Salick script and Rafael Kayanan illustrates a competent if uninspired yarn of fantasy and high adventure.~WW

HAWKSHAWS

Image: *1 issue 2000*

The black and white artwork looks like it's been shot from coloured plates, making it difficult to read in places, and no-one bothered to proofread the script. Apart from that, this could have been an interesting murder mystery, set in a future Hollywood where guns are rare. Unfortunately, only the first issue was published.~NF

HAWKWORLD

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1989, 32 issues, 3 Annuals 1990-1993*

The miniseries is a drastic retelling of Hawkman's origin that has Katar Hol fall victim to an imperialistic, racist government and commit patricide and murder (albeit during a period of drug detoxification); it includes two Shayera Thals. Tim Truman's script is terse, but full of outrage at the treatment of races conquered by Thanagar, forced to live as slaves or outcasts while the Thanagarians themselves live off their labours. His artwork's harder edges are muted by Alcatena and there is a clear debt (acknowledged) to Joe Kubert.

The regular series, written by Truman and John Ostrander and pencilled by Graham Nolan, picks up from the miniseries with Shayera and Katar on Earth to assist the Thanagarian Ambassador mount an exhibit at a Chicago museum. There they must face the plots of Byth, whom Katar has forced into exile at the end of the miniseries. Shayera has an affair with a Chicago cop and struggles to keep up with Katar's increasingly liberal views. Their seemingly irreconcilable differences do much to keep the title interesting, as each has so much to learn about the other. With Byth captured (9), Truman departs and Shayera spends time back on Thanagar and learns about her past, getting involved again in the injustices still being perpetrated by the government (10-14), while Katar is courted by Mavis Trent. 15 and 16 are 'War of the Gods' crossovers, while 17-19 feature Attila, the vengeful robotic creation of a race destroyed by Thanagar. 'Escape From Thanagar' in 21-25 sees Katar and Shayera aid refugees from Thanagar seeking sanctuary on Earth. In helping them, they are themselves exiled. The final storyline, 'Flight's End', is in two parts. The first, drawn by Jan Duursema, ends in a battle with the original Hawkman, while Tim Truman pencils the final half, which sees the Thanagarian refugees established in their own Netherworld in Chicago but under the influence of Viper, who has apparently killed both Katar and Shayera. This story concludes in the disappointing 1993 Hawkman series. The 1990 annual is a continuity implant featuring two Flashes and revealing how there was a Hawkman on Earth during the 1940s, and Attila returns for the second annual. The third, in 1992, is an *Eclipso:* T'he Darkness Within' crossover. Overall, a better version of Hawkman than any since and certainly a better idea than the preceding 'Shadow War' story-line.~NF

Recommended: Miniseries 1-3, 1-4

HAYWIRE

DC: *13 issues 1988-1989*

If you're into action, mayhem, blood and guts, double identities, betrayal, Y-fronts and kinky villains look no further than this underrated series from writer Michael Fleisher and penciller Vince Giarrano. As the title implies, this was an all-action affair, involving super-psionic armour that gave its unknowing owner many powers. Originally corporate-controlled, Haywire breaks loose and subsequently has to fight agents of his former employers and those of rival organisations with an interest in the armour. They include a beautiful ninja character, White Lotus, who provides the love interest, and Nightlash, a leather-clad S&M villainess who provides... er... something else, especially with her all-powerful whip (be still, your beating heart). Fleisher keeps the readers coming back for more and Giarrano displays a fine artistic talent. It's a shame there's been no follow-up. We never did find out what happened to Nightlash... ~HY

Recommended: 1-13

HAZARD

Image: *7 issues 1996-1997*

Hazard's an enhanced human pumped full of nanotechs (that's little tiny machines that do the work of cells, to you and me) that give him superhuman powers. Unfortunately, without a computer to control them they'll also start reproducing at an alarming rate. A bounty hunter by trade, Hazard is souped up by the villainous Dr D'Oro, who wants him to assassinate Stormwatch's Weatherman 1. He escapes, but has just two weeks to find Dr D'Oro before his body starts eating itself up. Jeff Mariotte's plot is certainly contemporary. Roy Allan Martinez's angular, sub-Miller art has colour slimed all over it by computer, but is robust enough to stand this treatment. Entirely average chase book, hastily concluded in issue 7 after Hazard finds out he's not actually going to explode when the nanotechs inside him go haywire, and sets off to find out why.~FJ

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* Available in a collected edition

HE IS JUST A RAT

Exclaim! Brand: *5 issues 1995-1997*

The rat lives in scuzzy surroundings in a scuzzy town prone to happenings like invasions by drag-racing monkeys. His attitude ranges from surly to aggressive and few survive any meeting with him intact. All he wants, though, is to be left alone. The relentless nihilism of Tony Walsh's strip becomes tiresome after more than a single issue, but the cartooning is good and there is an appeal as proved by the rat's eight year plus career in a Canadian magazine. The comics are not now easily found, but the rat is located at www.secretlair.com/ratboy.~FP

HEADBUSTER

Antarctic: *1 issue 1998*

Think poorly drawn corporate Punisher. Then find something else to read.~WJ

HEADLIGHTS

Personality: *1 issue 1992*

When among the earliest lines in a comic you get "Someone wanted her for a superpowered lackey. They kidnapped her and installed headlights on her breasts" you've every right to expect a laugh-fest. Sadly, though, beyond the hilarious initial concept this runs out of steam quickly and even begins taking itself seriously. Very disappointing.~FP

HEADHUNTERS

Image: *3 issues 1997*

Chris Marrinan the artist delivers a bunch of stylish, if not always anatomically correct characters and scenarios, while the contribution of Chris Marrinan the writer is a bunch of clichés from every action film he's ever seen and every superhero comic he's ever read. Utterly unconvincing dialogue weighs the comic into premature cancellation and the bargain boxes.~FP

HEADMAN

Innovation: *One-shot 1990*

In the future criminals are punished by having their heads removed and sent to the penal colony in space. John Mann, framed for the murder of the US President, discovers that the Reds have been planning to conquer the Free World from space and has to thwart the plot and clear his name. More brainless than headless.~WW

THE HEAP

Skywald: *1 issue 1971*

Continuing the adventures of Skywald's muck-monster from their Warren-wannabe Psycho and Nightmare black and white magazines, this full-colour limp schlock shocker is notable only for a rather nice Kinstler reprint from *Strange Worlds* 8.~HS

HEART OF EMPIRE

Dark Horse: *9 issue limited series 1999**

The long-awaited sequel to *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright*. Twenty-three years later daughter, Victoria takes a central role after her mother, Anne, is beset by constant plots against her iron rule. Her father, Luther, is missing, presumed dead and her brother has been assassinated. While Victoria struggles to cope with constant headaches, she meets old friends and a new, oddly familiar one in Gabriel Shelley, spokesman for the Levellers. Meanwhile, at the centre of the alternate histories, Rose Wylde is called upon to help prevent the end of existence, scheduled for the upcoming Victory Day anniversary in Victoria's reality.

Bryan Talbot has exceeded all expectations, from the strength of line and composition in his artwork to the wealth of detail in his dialogue, pacing and narrative (though some acknowledgement is also required for the rich colouring of Angus McKie). The complex plot reveals many surprises, but apart from the thrilling adventure, *Heart of Empire* blends comedy, social and political satire, romance and fantasy to create a compelling experience that you won't want to end.

For anyone interested in the background to the series, as an alternative to the collection a CD-Rom is also available. It includes high resolution images of the comic pages with annotations, features on the creative process, biographies and several interviews with Talbot – highly entertaining and educational to boot.~NF

Recommended: 1-9

HEART THROBS

Quality: *47 issues 1949- 1957*
DC: *99 issues (48-146) 1957-1972*
DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1999*

One of the handful of titles DC continued publishing when they bought the defunct Quality line in 1947. The Quality issues are distinguished by very verbose scripts and a tendency to focus on marital or near-marital misunderstandings, with an emphasis on 'good girl' art as supplied by Bill Ward and Gill Fox or their imitators. With 47, the first under the DC banner, the title was retained, but the emphasis changed to conform to DC romance style. The heroines were younger, and stories focussed on first loves, dating triangles and so on. This continued until 1972 with only hairstyles, hemlines and a downslide in the quality of contributors indicating the passing of time, as established talents moved on and the stories were passed to neophytes. 102-123 feature a serial '3 Girls – Their Lives and Loves', obviously intended to ensure a continuing readership a la TV soaps. The title changed to *Love Stories* with 147.

In 1999 DC's 'Mature readers' imprint, Vertigo offered a new spin on the old title. It offered a stellar roster of talent, including Brian Azzarello (2), Timothy Bradstreet (2), Richard Corben (3), Steve Gerber (4), and Daniel Zezelj (4). Each issue presented one outstanding story (Ilya and Frank Quitely's 'Romancing The Stone' in 2; Peter Milligan and Eduardo Rizzo's 'Death of a Romantic' in 3; Bob Fingerman and Pat McEown's 'Kissin' Cousin' in 4.), plus a couple of 'almost theres'. But the first issue is the one to treasure. There's Brian Bolland's long-deferred return to comics with the bitter fairytale 'The Princess and the Frog', Robert Rodi and Phil Jimenez's 'Genes & A T-Shirt', in which a gay man struggles to find true love with the opposite sex, and the disturbing 'Diagnosis' by Steven T. Seagle and Tim Sale. Wry, insightful, winning and unnerving, it set a standard that subsequent issues couldn't quite match. Sadly, sales do not seem to have warranted a further series.~HS

Recommended: Vertigo 1

HEARTBREAK COMICS

Last Gasp: *One-shot 1984*
Eclipse: *One-shot 1988*

The nominal star of this book is Laszlo, the great Slavic lover, but it's his affair with Lena Fleming, wife of Reid Fleming, that provides the plot and slapstick action as Laszlo winds up in jail with the maniacal milkman. The original strip appeared in the Vancouver underground paper *The Georgia Straight*. David Boswell re-drew the stories in 1984 and they were published in magazine format by Last Gasp. The Eclipse edition is on better paper as part of their graphic album series. Though Reid Fleming doesn't play a great part in *Heartbreak Comics*, it is his sociopathic behaviour, compared and contrasted with Laszlo's, that provides most of the story's humour. David Boswell is one of the most under-appreciated of all cartoonists and it's easy to see from the detail in his work why so little has been published. *Heartbreak Comics* is a seminal work which all lovers of the medium should read.~NF

Recommended

* Available in a collected edition

HEARTBREAKERS

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1996*
Image: *2 digests 1998-1999*

There's a complex back-story to *Heartbreakers*, resulting from previous appearances in *Dark Horse Presents* (50-52, 100), which is collected as 'Bust Out', but don't let that bother you and step right into the shoot-out starting the first issue. The lead characters are two clones of a now dead bio-geneticist, each reflecting aspects of her personality. Vector has the scientific mind and Queenie is aggressive and adaptable, which is just as well since there's a corporation on their tails wanting to study the remnants of their creator's work. There's also a growing movement to remove the second-class status accorded clones on Earth. Anina Bennett and Paul Guinan weave a tautly plotted and absorbing tale, while Guinan's art is extremely appealing. His storytelling is compact, expressively portraying the characters without resorting to exploitation or exaggeration, and such is the dominance of his style that Lenin Delsol pencilling the final two issues from layouts meshes seamlessly. Fast-paced and engaging, shame on Dark Horse for letting this sit on the shelf for years.

The digests are fun, but move the feature more into comedy action, and it just doesn't work as well, although other creators drawing stories means some lovely Steve Leialoha art in the second. There are feature and puzzle pages, a 1940s style origin, and those who preferred the characters for themselves rather than the skeletons for a plot will enjoy the digests~FP

Recommended: 1-4

HEAVEN SWORD & DRAGON SABRE

Comics One: *1 volume + 2002 to date*

Kung-fu appears the comic orhodoxy in Hong-Kong, and this example was published there and drawn by former Jademan artist Wing Shing Ma, collecting the first four issues, with more planned. Comparisons with Jademan are inevitable, as this follows the same action template with the characters' kung-fu serving more in the way of super powers, and the status quo shifting each chapter. The nominal plot concerns Wu Tang Clan member Jay Shan searching for the murderer of one of his six brothers, and the dragon sabre of the title being taken by a brute of a man. By the end, though, this is already shifting towards a generational saga. If you can't get enough kung-fu comics this will appeal, but despite the good art, there's little new otherwise.~WJ

HEAVY Tragi COMICS

Print Mint: *1 issue 1969*

An early graphic-oriented offering from the great Greg Irons. Always pretty to look at, if occasionally brutal, this is a little short on narrative for most contemporary tastes.~DAR

HEAVY LIQUID

DC/Vertigo: *5 issue miniseries 1999-2000*

Paul Pope has long been one of comics' most mercurial talents, and this is once again an exciting and innovative strip. It stars ex-cop 'S', a cross between Phillip Marlowe and Iggy Pop, and the story revolves around his search for a long-lost lover and a (sort of) drug-deal gone bad in the late 21st Century. Comic strips have often wrongly been compared to cinema, but for once that analogy is spot-on; this strip really moves! It is essentially one long chase, as various terrorists, secret agents and girl gangs pursue 'S' across two continents, but Pope's gift for dialogue and characterisation also imbues the feature with real depth. Throw in all manner of off-kilter art references and an elegiac twist in the tail and you have one of Pope's finest works.~DAR

Recommended: 1-5

HEAVY METAL

HM Communications: *137 issues, 8 Specials 1977-1992*
Metal Mammoth: *65 issues +, 22 Specials 1992 to date*

Heavy Metal came into being when the editors of *National Lampoon* chanced upon *Metal Hurlant*, the flagship magazine of a group of radical French cartoonists calling themselves *Les Humanoides Associés* (Druillet, Dionnet, Moebius and Farkas). Initially, under founder editors Sean Kelly and Valerie Marchant, the magazine was content to translate French strips, and since *Metal Hurlant* had begun in 1975 there was a body of work to fall back on. Home-grown product was gradually added. The magazine started as a glossy monthly and its 'adult' persona was defined from the beginning by a choice of contributors whose science fiction and fantasy strips offered plenty of sex and violence. Though it was rarely particularly explicit, a large number of topless and naked women in the title appear to have been a priority, whatever the editorial incarnation.

For the first three years the editorial policy was to offer a mixture of short episodes of long stories, short, stand alone pieces and illustrated text stories. The best strips from this period are the French translations, of which there was almost an embarrassment of riches: Moebius' 'Arzach', 'The Long Tomorrow' and 'The Airtight Garage of Jerry Cornelius' (the latter in two-page episodes from 1-37); Lob and Pichard's 'Ulysses'; Jean-Claude Forest's 'Barbarella'; and Bilal shorts and 'Exterminator 17'. Unusually Serge Clerc's 'Captain Future' was printed complete in 27, setting a trend. Translations of Druillet's extraordinary space stories (mostly shorts but also 'Gael') appeared alongside Dionnet and Gal's 'Conquering Armies' (1-10), Picaret and Tardi's 'Polonius' (5-8) and single pages by the politically-minded Chantal Montellier.

Meanwhile American contributors were being encouraged. *Heavy Metal* became a home for Richard Corben ('Den', 1-13, 'The New Adventures of the Arabian Nights', 15-28, written by Jan Strnad, then 'Rowlff', 'The Beast Of Wolfton', 'Bloodstar' and 'Den II', taking us up to 72). He still occasionally contributes, with 'Fur Trade' in January 1998. Other regular US contributors in the early years include Vaughn Bodé, E.E. Davis (with a Frazetta-ish barbarian tale in 3-8), Gray Morrow ('Orion' and 'Amora'), Angus McKie ('So Beautiful And So Dangerous', collected), plus Trina Robbins and the young Steve Bissette and Rick Veitch. Howard Chaykin did some of his most experimental work here, making a brave if failed stab at adapting Samuel Delany's complex novella about the power of communications, 'Empire', into comics form, and having more success with Theodore Sturgeon's seminal *The Stars My Destination*. So did Walt Simonson, illustrating Archie Goodwin's adaptation of *Alien*. Oddities worth mentioning are Alex Niño's spot illustrations for Doug Moench's version of Sturgeon's *More Than Human* (collected) and the amazing psychedelia of Marshall Rogers drawing Mark Arnold's sexy script for 'Entropics' (26).

With 35 (Jan 1980) Ted White became editor, introducing regular columns on comics, science fiction, music and film. While neither long nor particularly good, they added to a reputation as more of a gentleman's read than a mere comic, the same trick Playboy had pulled in the 1970s. A year later Leonard Mogel took over and replaced the named columns with 'Dossier' (in 51), a freeform arts column that also included interviews. Finally Julie Simmons-Lynch became editor in December 1981 and settled in for an eleven-year stretch.

Initially little changed under Ted White. There was still prose (by the likes of Norman Spinrad, Arthur Byron Cover, Harlan Ellison and Stephen King) and the usual mix of American and European strips, with new translated creators filtering in providing a high-quality backbone. These included short stories by Dick Matena (35, 36, 45, 60, 74, 82), the Schuiten Brothers (36, 39, 45), Caza, Trillo and Breccia's 'Mr Valdemar' in 67, Magnus (48), Gillon (58) and Paringaux and Loustal (58). Alongside these were longer pieces: 'Cymbiola' by the Schuiten Brothers (56-64) paving the way for their 'Hidden Cities' sagas; the excellent if rather poorly translated Christin and Bilal strips 'Progress' (40-44), 'The Voyage Of Those Forgotten' (62-68), 'The City That Didn't Exist' (72-78) and 'The Hunting Party' (87-96), all collected, as well as Bilal's own 'Gods In Chaos' (as 'The Immortals' Party' (50-57) and Christin's popular collaboration with

Mezieres, 'Valerian: Ambassador of the Shadows' (46-49). Heavy Metal also introduced the work of Crepax to America ('Valentina: Reflections' in 45-51) and serialised his moody jazz drama The Man From Harlem, as well as continuing to print work by the founders of Metal Hurlant. Druillet's 'Salammbo' (41, 42, 47, 48) and 'Salammbo II: Carthage' (83-90) appeared along with his 'Yragael' (61-70). Moebius' mindbending collaboration with avant-garde film-maker Jodorowsky, 'The Incal', appeared in 59-65 and 82-87.

You may wonder why *Heavy Metal* isn't the best regarded comic in the world. This is because readers also had to put up with a number of tedious, long-running series like Godard and Ribera's 'Alchemist Supreme' and 'What Is Reality, Papa?', and Fernando Fernandez' 'Zora', which seemed to go on forever but actually only lasted two years (59-78). And then there were the innumerable contributions from Jeronaton. Technically better, but also interminable was Segrelles' 'Mercenary' series (55-62) and Barriero and Juan Gimenez' 'Good-bye Soldier' (49). Also there were few great works by American contributors in this period. Matt Howarth makes an appearance in 35 before beginning his science fiction epic 'Changes' (which introduced *Those Annoying Post Brothers*) in 36. Berni Wrightson's comic 'Captain Sternn' in 39, Jeff Jones' 'Yesterday's Lily', Chaykin's 'Cody Starbuck', Arthur Suydam's 'Mudwogs' and Bruce Jones and Wrightson's 'Freak Show' (65-70) are bursts of creativity, but these have to be weighed up against incredibly long-running duds like Rod Kierkegaard Jr's 'Rock Opera' (34-105). John Findley's grotesque Western 'Tex Arcana' (48-105, with odd issue gaps), ties with Steranko's dire 'Outland' (51-58) for stiffest load of nonsense in the entire run. Fortunately Elaine Lee and Mike Kaluta's groundbreaking 'Starstruck' (68-76) and 'Robot Love' from Charles Burns (70) suggested a new generation of creators to come.

76 was the start of an attempt to free the title from a rut, with the serialisation of Tamburini and Liberatore's 'RanXerox'. Just as a radical movement in French cartooning had produced Metal Hurlant, now Italy's Young Turks were ready to inject some life into the genre. With its high quotient of sex and violence, and a disregard for morality, 'RanXerox' was youthful and rebellious, unlike the rather tired hippy values of many of the strips (though it seemed less fresh by the time of Ranx 3 in September 1997). Charles Burns' weird wrestling detective 'El Borbah' (77, 84-87, 94-99) and Drew Friedman's irreverent cinema strips completed the reformation. By 1984 *Heavy Metal* was attracting interviews with the likes of Roger Corman, John Sayles, John Waters and Federico Fellini. The Schuiten brothers were among the old guard still translated, while 77-81 had Arno and Jodorowsky, Crepax was in 80-85, and Manara's 'An Author in Search of Six Characters' featured in 93-99. They were supplemented by Liberatore (76-86, 94), Pepe Moreno's bold, violent 'Rebel', and stylists like Yves Chaland ('Atomax' in 91 and the excellent 'Elephant Cemetery' in 99-104). Daniel Torres ('Triton' in 92-95 and 'The Whisper Mystery' in 98-102) and the master of clear line, Joost Swarte (81, 92, 93, 101), were also notable among the new blood.

As issue 100 approached the title was in trouble again. From 99 it was no longer printed on glossy paper, and with 106 frequency was reduced to quarterly, at which point issue numbers no longer appeared, and publication cover dates are used for identification. Citing reader frustration over the time it took to complete some stories' serialisation (and on a quarterly schedule this time would be even longer), a new editorial direction promised all-new stories, complete in each issue. With minor variations, this policy has been pursued ever since, one long story backed up by a greater or smaller number of shorts. All non-story pages were dropped, as was the long-running surreal cartoon series 'The Bus' by Paul Kirchner, collected, which had been appearing in an editorial capacity since 30. However, the changes were also the nail in 'Rock Opera's' coffin, proving that every cloud has a silver lining. The quarterly schedule continued until March 1989, when an upturn in sales enabled the title to return to a bi-monthly schedule with no change in format.

Thereafter until Metal Mammoth took over publication, *Heavy Metal* published a lot of excellent material, maintaining the principle of running European strips in translation, and although many of the full-length stories do not warrant individual recommendation it was a good period for the magazine. The big stars of the show were: Hugo Pratt (Winter 1986), Sampayo and Solano-Lopez (Spring 1986), Prado, Bilal ('The Woman Trap', Fall 1986), Yves Chaland (Freddy Lombard in Fall 1987), Torres, Manara, Ruben and Zentner (Summer 1988), Crepax (Fall 1988), Peeters and Schuiten ('Utopias', Winter 1989) plus the Schuiten Brothers ('The Hollow Planet', May 1989, and 'Nogegon', July 1991), Hermann ('Revenge', September 1989, and 'The Towers of Bois-Maury', July 1990), Tronchet and Gelli (January 1992) and Milan Trenc ('Morocco', March 1992). In addition there was Adamov and Cothias' epic five graphic-novel adventure, 'The Waters of Dead Moon' (May 1990, September 1990, May 1991, September 1991, September 1992).

The new format suited a series of short graphic novels such as 'Hombre' by Segura and Ortiz (set in a post-holocaust world similar to Hermann's Survivors series), nine episodes of which appeared between Fall 1986 and September 1998, 'Druuna' by Eleuteri Serpieri (big-breasted sci-fi epic, very well drawn), 'Burton And Cyb', also by Segura and Ortiz, a comedy science-fiction series (fourteen episodes between Summer 1988 and March 1997), and 'Dieter Lumpen' by Pellejero and Zentner, an excellent Hugo Pratt-inspired hard-boiled detective strip (seven episodes 1987-1990). Look out particularly for the Summer 1988 issue, all about censorship and civil rights, after the previous issue had been seized by Canadian customs officials because of the 'Druuna' story. With work from Breccia, Segura and Ortiz, Manara, a Serpieri Western, Prado, Ruben, Zentner, Will Eisner and Yves Chaland, it has a well-drawn and nicely written something for everyone.

When *Heavy Metal* was acquired by Metal Mammoth there were immediate changes, including the addition of a short-lived Striptease slot, a collection of single-page strips by the likes of Mark Martin, Peter Kuper, Kaz, Scott Cunningham, Eric Drooker and Jim Woodring. It's not entirely out of place, but the cartoonists chosen owe more to the underground than to any science-fiction and fantasy background. New owner Kevin Eastman waited until January 1993 before taking on the reins of editorship himself, and started introducing new creators. While some of the material is worth unearthing (Ian Edginton and Matt Brooker's 'Kingdom of the Wicked' springs to mind) most of it isn't. 1993 saw more 'Hombre' stories and lots of Prado shorts, a late, episodic reprinting of Vittorio Giardino's *Little Ego* in the March 1993 issue (already published by Catalan for several years, and distinctly unsexy) plus the return of Den. There are oddities like Turf and Joel Mouclier's 'Ramparts of Spray', in which the softness of Art Suydam meets the rotund cuteness of Mike Ploog for a strange fantasy in a Mark Twain riverboat setting. May 1993 has Antonio Segura and Ana Mirallés' 'Eva Medusa', a stylish noir tale set on a steamy supernatural plantation in South America, and in July 1993 there was Duranoña's atypical 'Hiding', set in 1930s America, about a shoot-out between police and a family of gangsters. Remembering the appeal of Liberatore, and figuring that his work's still rebel-rousing, Heavy Metal began printing creators of strips in a similar vein (Stan & Vince's 'Eden' in November 1993 and later with The Imploder in July 2000 and 'The Bomb' in January 2002, Siro's 'Master Volume' in March 1994 and 1995, and Gess' 'Teddy Bear' in January 1995, May 1997 and September 2000). There was better material from Alfonso Azpiri, Matthias Schultheiss and Font (especially his hard-boiled 'For Private Eyes' in the November issue). Burton and Cyb returned in 1994 (and several times since), and Tronchet and Gelli contributed a Raoul Fleetfoot story, 'Killer Death', to the January issue. Highlights of the year, though, were Baudoin's 'The 11.23 Bus', and Fernando de Felipe's 'The Man Who Laughs', which looks like Jack Davis meets Berni Wrightson. De Felipe would return with 'Museum' 1995-1996 and 'Black Deker', November 1995 and March 1998.

The next few years settle into a pattern of regular contributions from Caza, Azpiri, Ortiz & Segura, Prado, Risso & Barriero, and Schultheiss, and each new volume from Manara (Gullivera, July 1997, 'To See the Stars Again', July 1998) and Serpieri (Mandragora, September 1995, Aphrodisia, September 1997, The Forgotten Planet, May 2001). Only occasionally does something new seem to be offered, whether the modern approach of Baru (September 1996) or the retro, *Storm*, by Lawrence and Lodewijk (January and March 1997). Other strips of note are the stylish, Koshka: 'Death By Betrayal', by Di Marino and De Vicentiis (May 1998), Joe Pearson and Young Gi Yoon's 24 Hour Man (July 2001), a science fiction horror tale with artistic debts to Mike Mignola, and Beatrice Tillier's 'The Fairy and the Gentle Robots' (May 2002). New series include Frezzato's 'Keepers of the Maser' (one episode a year from 1997), Marini and Smolderen's 'Gypsy' (four episodes from May 1995), Felix Vega's 'John Seaseeker' (January 1998, January 2001), in which the seas have dried up, and Adamov's Dayak (three episodes 1994-1998).

Annoyingly, strips began to be serialised. This was not particularly important for gag-strip fillers like those produced by the Morvan & Buchet partnership (1997-2001), that of Trillo, Maicas and Seijas (sexy Flopi, 1999-2000) or the more recent Goupil and Walter efforts (2001-2002). However, it has also been applied to Gimenez's 'Choose Your Game' (over eight issues between July 1999 and January 2001) and its sequel, as well as Ranx 3 and Bernet & Abuli's 'Snake' and Boucq's latest (which is given a new title each time, as if not connected to what has gone before). This is symptomatic of slovenly editorial guidance, as is the lack of co-ordination between the credits on the Contents page with those on the story pages. And the gushing praise for the works of Eastman and collaborator Simon Bisley is in direct disproportion to their quality (*F. A. K. K. 2* – the second *Heavy Metal* film - and 'Fistful of Blood', May 2001 until January 2003). While the short material continues to please, therefore, fewer of the new main stories are of note, suggesting that it's time for another shake-up on the editorial front. The magazine's commitment to European material has been consistent throughout, and without *Heavy Metal* there might never have been European reprints, even if the magazine shied away from many of the more extreme experimental strips printed in Metal Hurlant, as well as the less futuristic strips it serialised over the years. Many stories have been collected, most prominently by Catalan and NBM, and by *Heavy Metal* themselves.

There have been a number of regular special editions, some containing new material, others reprints. In the latter category fall *One Step Beyond, Greatest Hits, Best of Heavy Metal* (2 volumes) and *Fifteen Years of Heavy Metal. Son of, Bride of* and *Even Heavier Metal* all date from the early 1980s and feature a good cross-section of the usual suspects – Crepax, Gimenez, Brecchia, Azpiri, Moebius, Gillon and Loustal. 'War Machine' contains lots of material commissioned by the defunct Tundra, the best of which is material by Garry Leach and Dave Gibbons. Software has 'Druuna: Carnivore' to titillate, 'Special Edition' has the multimedia computer-generated Sinkha and 'Overdrive' contains Charyn and Frezzato's Margot. 'Pin Up' and 'Havoc' both star Jodorowsky and Bess' 'Hannibal 5', while The Venus Interface is a single, hallucinogenic storyline by Lou Stathis and a host of artists including Rick Geary, Peter Kuper and Arthur Suydam. Amongst various themed Specials (1997-2002) are two badly censored 'Erotic' issues featuring the otherwise smart short stories of Horacio Altuna, 'Diabolic', 'Fantasy', with a short Taxi strip from Font and the allegorical 'Wedgwood Tea Set' by Tunic and Stefanovic, the not very horrific 'Horror' with shorts from Azpiri, Bilal and Hermann, Sci-Fi, actually containing Frezzato's fantasy 'The Isle of Dwarves', 'Taboo' with the visually impressive, 'Land Of No Evil', about a white woman living amongst a South American Indian tribe, drawn by Emmanuel Lepage, and shorts from Esteban Maroto, Homs and Andreas, and 'Techno' with Martin, Liberatore and Segura. Others include reprints from Creepy and *Eerie* in *The Best of Richard Corben*, 'Crossroads' containing a second Leo Roa story from Gimenez, the horrible *F.A.K.K.2* movie adaptation, 'Mind Melt' (2001) a showcase for the artwork of Saverio Tenuta, and 'Poster' (2001) with shorts from Cinzia DiFelice, Caza and Pablo Marcos. The '25th Anniversary Special' (2002) has some cute horror strips from Cromwell, but is otherwise undistinguished. Finally, despite its title, 20 Years of Heavy Metal is all new, with strips by Azpiri, Bilal, Boucq, Caza, de Felipe, Frezzato, Liberatore, Ortiz & Segura, Prado, Segrelles, Serpieri, Stan & Vince and Torres.~NF

Recommended: 26, 27,45-51, 65, 67, 73-85, 99-104, Winter, Spring, Summer & Fall 1986, Fall 1987, Spring, Summer, Fall 1988, May 89, September 1989, January, March, May 1990, November 1991, March 1992, May, July, November 1993, January, July 1994, May, September, November 1995, May, November 1996, 20 Years of Heavy Metal

HEAVY METAL Graphic Novels

Early in *Heavy Metal's* run several stories serialised in the magazine were collected, most notably Archie Goodwin and Walt Simonson's adaptation of the *Alien* movie. Thoroughly entertaining, it remains the best of the home-grown material. Other collections included Angus McKie's *So Beautiful and so Dangerous* and Howard Chaykin's *The Stars My Destination*, but this flurry of late-1970s activity came to a halt until 1989s *The Venus Interface*. Published in the same format as *Heavy Metal* magazine, it's a Lou Stathis story about a shape changer, split into several chapters as she adopts different forms. The art throughout is unappealling, with Peter Kuper, Mark Pacella and Kenneth Smith among the guilty parties. Only the Rick Geary drawn portion about a form of blobby sex-obsessed aliens holds up.

Published first in conjunction with Tundra, and later Kitchen Sink, the editorial aim of the 1990s selection of graphic novels was to present the best European graphic albums in an equivalent hardbound format at an affordable price. Published monthly for almost two years, many of the titles initially saw English-language print in the pages of *Heavy Metal*, so those wanting cheaper-format versions punctuated by ads and strangely separated by other strips are referred to the cover dates of Heavy Metal bracketed by titles.

There's a high percentage of decent material, but overall the writing lags way behind the quality of artwork, never more demonstrably so than in the first release, Margot In Badtown ('Overdrive' Special). Reading as if every third page is missing, the attractive Margot is a naïf in the big city, but Charyn's plot never goes anywhere, while Frezzato's art is gorgeous. Sadly, it's not as good for the sequel Margot: *Queen of the Night* (Winter 1994), but Charyn's plot is better with Margot becoming a protector of the homeless. On his own Frezzato turns out volumes of 'The Tower', which displays a prodigious imagination, great designs, and very good artwork, but where's the story? *The 2nd Moon* (March 1997), *The Isle of Dwarves* (Sci-Fi Special Spring 1998), *Eye of the Sea* (July 1999), and *The Iron Tower* (November 2000) feature a disparate group of humans who've survived a global catastrophe. They're searching for the remainder of humanity believed to be sheltering in a technological haven known as the tower. Having spent so long on his designs, Frezzato seems determined to spin out his thin story as long as possible. The same applies to *FAKK 2* ('Crossroads' Special), endlessly and tiresomely promoted within *Heavy Metal* magazine for what seemed like years. What this movie script adaptation amounts to is one long, violent chase sequence of a woman hunting down the man who murdered her lover. If Simon Bisley couldn't give a toss when he drew it, why should you? Kevin Eastman wrote that and conceived or plotted *Underwhere*, on which he collaborates with Mark Martin for the art and Paul Jenkins for the script. It's a children's fantasy story about a boy transported to a strange world for adventure. The lack of any further plot rather lessens the impact of the very good art, with Martin's bright colouring particularly beautiful. Well drawn in a gloomier style is *Ramparts* (March 1993). Joel Mouclier's exceptionally well conceived primitive mechanical world is engagingly designed, but Turf's accompanying script is a woolly tale of doomed love and a disease without cure.

Big-breasted babes are a *Heavy Metal* staple, and top of that category is Serpieri's *Druuna*, dealt with in a separate entry. Azpiri's Lorna, who stars in *Leviathan*, is equally buxom, naked in even more panels, and indulges in a bit of lesbian sex besides, making it the *Heavy Metal* graphic novel of choice for teenage wankers. *Leviathan* actually achieves a little more plot than the competition to boot. The post-apocalyptic shenanigans of *Attila* (March 1991) ramble, and Attila's breasts aren't as big. What a quandry! There's also an enormous nipple count to Jodorowsky and Bess' *Anibal Cinq: The Last Ten Women I've Known*, which is very silly indeed, but outstays it's welcome even with a giant mutated female ape. Vince's Eden (November 1993) is another step down, with big-breasted babes and gruesome mutants mixing it up in a bog-standard to-be-continued thriller, that never was. More distressingly, neither was Adamov's Dayak: Ghetto 9 (September 1994), a well-drawn ligne claire thriller set in a future where whites are almost extinct, but one of the few remaining has a date with destiny. Adamov's also on hand to draw the samurai tale *Wind of the Gods*, incorporating a particularly detailed and stomach-churning depiction of seppuku, but otherwise ordinary. The same applies to Siro's *Maximum Volume* (March 1994), a confusing story about the mastery of sound, but with semi-naked women aplenty.

Hord (November 1994) actually has a decent, if confusingly released, plot about a role-playing computer game that seeps out to affect reality, but the gruesome art and horrible colour render it almost unreadable. It also shudders to a halt in what seems a very forced fashion, prompting the belief a conclusion was planned. The only total stinker in the entire selection is *The Man Who Laughs* (July 1994). We're back in doomed-love territory, with a mutilated man the heir to a throne, but Fernando de Felipe's art is monotonous, gloomy and ugly and his story trite. Eva Medusa (May 1993) displays how dark and gloomy, and tragic love can be handled with dexterity. It begins with the awakening of a teenage girl in Brazil, who realises she's inherited her mother's charm, beauty and eldritch abilities. Segura's excellent story combines voodoo, desire and degradation, with the subtle colouring of Ana Mirallés adding significantly to her already accomplished art. *Apocalypse* (July 1993) tells of a Vietnamese teenager able to make objects and people explode just by looking at them. There's the germ of a movie, but the story is strangely paced and with no great pay-off.

The two volumes of Régis Loisel's *Peter Pan, London* and *Neverland*, are puzzlers. Presenting the life of Peter Pan in the days before Barrie's novel, they could read to children were it not for the unsubtle insertion of unrequired adult scenes. It's as if Loisel was somehow ashamed to produce childrens' books. His art is gorgeous, very expressive and able to evoke the squalor of Victorian London in the first book equally as well as the fantasies of Neverland in the second. They're an oddly contrasting pair, with the more upbeat *Neverland* more in tune with the children's adventure of the novel. The Julien Boisvert stories of Dieter and Plessix also stretch over two volumes. *Neekibo* is an excellent statement about colonialism and exploitation in Africa, and a coming-of-age story as junior Foreign Office official Julien Boisvert is prompted to uproot against his inclination by the return of his domineering mother. The unpleasant lesson he learns in the ways of the world carries him through the succeeding story *Grisnoir*, concerning an apparently kidnapped child. Plessix's ligne claire art is stunning – expressive, subtle and humorous. Of particular note is the manner in which Boisvert has perceptibly aged between the stories.

Scott Hampton's *The Upturned Stone* (September 1993) is a pre-teenage bonding story in the manner of *Stand By Me*, but with more sinister overtones. Deftly told and atmospherically painted, *The Upturned Stone*'s tale of ghostly retribution should be saved for a dark and stormy night. Oddly enough, over the past four decades the American Western strip has been far more popular in Europe than at home, and *Adios Palomita* (January 1993) is a fine example of the genre. Sumptuously drawn by Fabrice Lamy, it's told equally by flashback and contemporary occurrences, its central characters live and breathe, and it surprises with every plot twist. It concerns a love triangle and the consequences of a bungled bank robbery five years previously, but with great verve and imagination. *Desperadoes* is also set in the American West. Although appealingly drawn in typical European cartoon style and with charm and whimsy, the comedy adventure about a trio of female outlaws never quite takes off. The silhouette cartoons at the bottom of each page are a nice touch, though. Milo Manara's *Fatal Rendevous* is a gorgeously drawn, but thoroughly unpleasant revenge fantasy about a spoiled little rich girl. Perhaps blinded by his fine-lined art, there seems a blithe acceptance of Manara's consistently poor attitude to women throughout his canon. Previously this has been tempered by some wit and imagination, but both are lacking here.~FP

Recommended: *Adios Palomita, Eva Medusa, Grisnoir, Neekibo, Peter Pan: Neverland, The Upturned Stone*

THE HECKLER

DC: *6 issues 1992-1993*

Stu runs a small diner in a big city, but sometimes he has no choice but to don his Heckler costume and cut some trouble-maker down to size. There are nice ideas – like the Generic Man and his plot to reduce everything to his own faceless uniformity – and there's lots of humour in the details of the city and in street-level incidents, but far too much of the comic is given over to the fights, and unfortunately these aren't funny and don't make sense as action. The Heckler would be great as an eight-page strip, but it drowns in twenty-two pages, and it's not surprising to find the following in the last two panels of issue 6:

Heckler: "Hey, don't worry, kids... It'll take a lot more than that to kill the Heckler."

Caption: "Yeah, it'll take crummy sales figures."

Heckler: "... Well, true, that would do it, all right..."

The most tightly told story is in 4, with the Heckler out on patrol with an assassin in pursuit, which has the spirit of a good Roadrunner cartoon. It would be nice to enthuse about all six issues because the artwork's great (Keith Giffen and Malcolm Jones III) and there's no problem with the ideas (Keith Giffen, plot) or the script (Tom and Mary Bierbaum), but those superfluous fourteen pages per issue are just too much to demand of a reader's goodwill.~FC

Recommended: 4

HELL RIDER

Skywald: *2 issues 1971*

A dreadful magazine attempting to attract the audiences flocking to see the lame biker movies made in the wake of *Easy Rider*'s success. A Vietnam vet is injected with 'Serum Q47', which gives him superstrength. Being named Brick Reese, he sensibly opts for the alias Hell Rider, but it's about the only sensible decision he makes in two issues, both of which have predictable endings. There's good bikers vs bad bikers in 'The Wild Bunch', a sort of grown-up Archie gang, and The Butterfly is soul singer Marion Michaels, who takes almost all her clothes off, attaches a rocket pack and flies off to deal with ne'er-do-wells. 2's Ku Klux Klan story is particularly daft. It's all intended as vaguely titillating, with skimpy costumes and the odd glimpse of breast, but it's dreadful throughout.~FP

HELLBENDER

Eternity: *One-shot 1990*

A Shuriken special that has the martial artist trying to track down a serial killer who is killing women who have degraded themselves. This includes pop stars and actresses as well as the usual call-girls. Insincere moralising as well as bad story and art. Not worth the paper it's printed on.~WW

HELLBLAZER

DC: *62 issues, 1 Annual 1988-1993*
DC/Vertigo: *117 issues + (63-179), 1 Special, 4 issue miniseries ('Bad Blood'), 1988 to date*

Despite the fact that no-one calls him Hellblazer, that's the title of John Constantine's comic. He's a seedy English magician and all-around nasty piece of work, who makes a habit of sticking his nose where it's never welcome but always necessary. He was introduced by Alan Moore in *Swamp Thing* 37, whimsically because artists Steve Bissette and John Totleben were big Sting fans and wanted a chance to draw him in some fashion. The manipulative, smug, cocky and ever so dangerous enigma kept popping up until awarded his own "mature audience" title, where his features slightly altered and something of a character deconstruction began. Jamie Delano and John Ridgway's Constantine was no longer suave and inexplicable, and no longer looked or acted like a popstar. Without giving any secrets away, we saw the uncertain underside of a man who was used by, as much as used, magic, and many of his contradictory aspects were established. We learned that his friends tended to die blaming him for their fates, and that they usually hung around after death to remind him of it. We also saw that in the world of the supernatural, bluff and "face" are often more effective than power.

Constantine is no hero. Long-term enlightened self-interest is what makes him work. When he saves the world, its so he has somewhere to live. If he takes down a hunger demon (1-2), or quiets places of mystic disturbance (a platoon of dead Vietnam GI's in 5) it's a kind of pre-emptive strike. If family are endangered (a cult tries to co-opt his niece Gemma in 4, and his estranged father is menaced by a serial killer 24, 28-31), he responds because they're his. And should his own life be endangered, there is nothing he will not do. After all, this is someone who's led a bad life even by his own standards, and he knows that there is a Hell. Badly injured by a cult, he accepts a blood transfusion from the demon Nergal, which almost drives him to suicide on his 35th birthday. 9-11 feature elements of *Swamp Thing* 76's purpose, where he's Constantine is used as a sperm donor to create the bog monster's daughter. The oft mentioned debacle at Newcastle, which had resulted in his brief stay in Ravenscar Metal Health Facility, used as a plot McGuffin since before *Hellblazer* began, was finally revealed in 11-12. Here a young and arrogant Constantine leads an exorcism that goes horribly wrong, with repercussions that impacted on the series for almost the next hundred issues. 1-16 were collected over four volumes by Titan Books in the UK, while the American 'Original Sins' collection gathers 1-9 in colour.

Under Moore, and especially Delano, social issues and contemporary politics were inextricably entwined with the character, and in many ways the early series can be seen as a barometer of contemporary British life. A flashback in 3 describes an encounter with Yuppie demons on the day Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister, and continual reference to poverty and substance abuse make for a truly modern horror experience. Themes featured include ecological trauma (13), child abuse (4), neo-Nazism (6), computer-geeks (7), nuclear paranoia (Grant Morrison and David Lloyd's 25-26), and social neglect ('Hold Me' by Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean in 27). Richard Piers Rayner replaces a Ridgway reportedly ill at ease with the subject matter in 9, offering a lighter style of art. The ambitious 'Fear Machine' occupies 14-22. On the run, Constantine is leading a sedate life with Neo-Pagan Travellers when he uncovers a Masonic plot to use ley-lines to power a psycho-mystic terror weapon. This is where the magician works best, floundering but conquering the massed forces of privilege and entrenched power. Constantine as the Arch Anarchist proving that The People just won't take any crap anymore. Mark Buckingham and Alfredo Alcala take over the art from 18 as Piers Rayner finally succumbs to his struggle with a monthly deadline, and it becomes clear that *Hellblazer* is fundamentally a writer's comic, and that the series will always reflect their character and interestsr. The annual, from Delano and Bryan Talbot deals with old Paganism, and introduces the idea that the Constantine family was always involved with magic, as Kon-Sten-Tyn, ancient King of Cumbria, embraces both the new Christianity and the Dark Gods to keep his hold on power. Delano completes his tenure with 'The Hanged Man' (39-40) where Constantine confronts the knowledge he murdered his twin brother in the womb; a child who would have led mankind to a new Golden Age.

The next creative team of Garth Ennis and Will Simpson immediately produced one of the most memorable stories in the series with 'Dangerous Habits' (41-46*). Constantine's life-long smoking leads to terminal lung cancer, and the convolutions he undertakes to beat the rap are, to many, his finest hours. It's also introduces the closest thing to an arch-foe that the series ever had, The First of the Fallen, better known to us as the Devil. Again the interests of the writer are foremost, as Constantine reveals friends he hasn't killed yet, gets a Northern Irish girlfriend, Kit, and drinking plays a greater part in the proceedings. 47-48 deal with property developers and a haunted pub, and 'Lord of the Dance (49) is a Christmas tale with a difference as Steve Dillon draws his first issue, John drinks a skinful and saves the pagan spirit of Drunken Revelry from oblivion. Simpson is back in 50 as the King of Vampires confronts and tempts Constantine, and 'Bad Blood' (52-55) tells of the power elite, English aristocracy, and a sex club where the Heir to the Throne is possessed by the demon who used to be Jack the Ripper.

Dillon joins as regular artist with (57-58), as Constantine stops a scheme where a lab steals corpses to test new firearms on, before a string of tales setting up his eventual showdown with the Devil (59-61). London burns as a mystical plot causes race riots, Constantine's friends start dying again (62-67*), and when Kit leaves him (70, for her own one-shot Heartland) the manner of his eventual victory leaves Constantine a drunken derelict. He's homeless on the streets of London and seemingly helpless prey for the returned and vengeful King of Vampires. Ennis' disgust with British Institutions is obviously as nothing to his feelings for the Catholic Church, and the special highlights this in the tale of a priest who nearly abused and might possibly have murdered the young runaway Constantine. The events of 71 bring him back from the gutter, and Constantine returns to America for a final confrontation with sometime ally, Papa Midnite, and a trawl through the subconscious of the concept of the USA (72-75). Ennis' final tale is 'Rake At the Gates of Hell' (78-83) where the deal Constantine made to stave off cancer rebounds on him and those he cares for. Despite the long build-up, the culmination is everything that could be hoped for and a worthy end to a good run. All issues between 62 and 77 are available in three collections.

New regular artist Sean Phillips illustrates a low-key issue from Delano in 84, then, Eddie Campbell's engaging ghost story (85-88) that leaves Constantine stuck in New Guinea. Paul Jenkins, swiftly ends the Antipodean adventures with a tale of property speculators and the Aborigine Dream Serpent (88-89), before returning to London for an uninspired run echoing better issues. There's another new cast of "old friends" (where do they keep coming from?) and a return to pagan magic, fascist thuggery, haunted houses, post-punk drinking, and the return of the First of the Fallen (in 92-96, and again in 121-124). Jenkins' unremarkable tenure ends in 128 leaving Constantine pretty much as the writer found him. Ennis and John Higgins then bring us 'Son of Man' (129-133), a nasty tale of supernatural gang war, before Warren Ellis and Higgins dredge up Constantine's past as he goes after a gang of London mystics responsible for the ritual slaughter of an old girlfriend (134-139*). Issued at this time 'Bad Blood' is set in 2025 and revisits themes in Ennis' tale of that name, but is unrelated. An aged but unredeemed Constantine chafes under the twin leashes of the fascistically moral New Republic and adherents of the lost Monarchy. Meanwhile, the crazed worshippers of Diana, long dead Princess of Wales follow their own insane agenda. Rumours that the Republic have been assassinating the remaining members of the House of Windsor persist, but a bastard heir to the throne is still out there, and die-hard Royalists will do anything to get her. Delano, Philip Bond and Warren Pleece have a last pop at those institutions that annoy them so much in a light-hearted black comedy.

Brian Azzarello is the first non-British writer of *Hellblazer*, and his 'Hard Time' (146-150*) has Constantine transplanted to the USA, beginning a life sentence in prison for murder, using his "powers" to swiftly make himself top of the heap. Rich Corben provides the requisite gritty visuals, and Marcelo Frusin draws 151-156 as yet another girl from his past embroils Constantine in the grubby underside of rural America. Steve Dillon returns for a bar tale in 157 and Frusin for 158-161, a simple tale of ordinary folk snowed in at the local diner, except that one of them is a legendary serial killer and another is our English magician. With 'Lapdogs and Englishman' (162-163) Azarello finally remembers he's on *Hellblazer*, not *100 Bullets*, in a flashback to John's days with punk band Mucous Membrane, and a scam played on a rich American that will impact upon the rest of Azzarello's time on the series. Although a quality creator, his Constantine is uncomfortable to read, and the unshakable feeling is that nobody concerned really wanted to be doing this.

In recent months Mike Carey has slipped behind the keyboard (175 to date) returning Constantine to England, and sucked into magic conspiracies that directly endanger his family, and with Dillon and Frusin on the art the series is rapidly improving. Let's keep our fingers crossed.~WW
Recommended: 1-27, 41-46, 49, 76-78, 81, 82, 175-176, Annual 1

HELLBLAZER/BOOKS OF MAGIC

DC/Vertigo: *2 issue microseries 1997-1998*

Tim Hunter, potentially the most powerful mystic in the DC Universe, is still a schoolboy. When a class project involving time-capsules reveals a small wooden toy buried thirty years previously, demons start popping out of the woodwork and street-smart arch-mage John Constantine finds his life and what's left of his soul on the express route back to hell. So-so horror mystery from Paul Jenkins and Paul Lee.~WW

HELLBOY

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries ('Seed of Destruction') 1994*, one-shot ('The Wolves of St.August') 1995, one-shot ('The Corpse and the Iron Shoes') 1996, 5 issue miniseries ('Wake the Devil') 1996*, 2 issue microseries ('Almost Colossus') 1997, one-shot ('Christmas Special') 1997, one-shot ('The Chained Coffin and Others') 1998, 2 issue microseries ('Box Full of Evil') 1999, 4 issue miniseries ('Conqueror Worm') 2001, 2 issue microseries ('The Third Wish') 2002*

In the closing months of World War II a satanic rite by a team of Nazi sorcerers is disrupted by a team of Allied Mystics leading to the hijacking and materialization of a demonic baby from under the Germans' very noses. The apparition is red and muscular with a huge stone gauntlet for a right hand. "Hellboy" is adopted by a British Parapsychologist , and nearly fifty years later he's a respected Ghostbuster working for the Bureau of Paranormal Research and Defense, an international anti-monster task force. When a mysterious outbreak of sinister frogs causes the death of his adopted father, Hellboy and his BPRD team discover that one of the Nazi mystics is behind a plan to destroy the world and that Hellboy himself was to be the instrument. 'Seeds of Destruction' is by Mike Mignola with John Byrne providing dialogue (and Art Adams' Monkeyman and O'Brien running in the back), but for 'The Wolves of St August', originally run in *Dark Horse Presents* 88-91, Mignola graduates to full creative chores for a different spin on a hoary horror icon. 'The Corpse' and 'The Iron Shoes' is also a collection, this time of two tales set in 1960s Ireland and dealing creditably with spooky segments of Gaelic mythology, originally serialised in Dark Horse's promotional giveaways.

'Wake the Devil' has more of those darned left-over magic Nazis reactivating a decades old plot to revive the king of all vampires, leading to another brush with Hellboy's own intrinsic dark side. The series is rounded off with a MonsterMen back up feature from Gary Gianni, also present in 'Almost Colossus' as Hellboy meets an Homonculus and solves the mystery of where all the bodies in all the graveyards disappeared to. *The Hellboy Christmas Special* is an excellent collection of Yule-themed shorts featuring our eponymous lead, Gianni's Monstermen (redubbed Corpus Monstrum), a seasonal spread from Geoff Darrow and a little gem on the nature and rewards of giving called 'Toybox' from Steve Purcell. 'The Chained Coffin' collects previously published tales along with one new tale ('The Baba Yaga'), and 'Box Full Of Evil' returns to the continuing sub-plot of Hellboy as the means by which the earth will be destroyed. It features an evil wizard not unlike Peter Lorre, and a scheme to free the devil from the chest into which St. Dunstan sealed him. A final confrontation with the ubiquitous Nazis comes for Hellboy and Roger the Homunculus as the fruits of the Wehrmacht's space program return to threaten humanity in 'Conqueror Worm'. After a catastrophic conclusion Hellboy quits the BPRD to find himself, for which reason he travels to Africa in 'The Third Wish'. This is possibly the weakest Hellboy tale. Mignola's spectacularly minimalist and usually classically composed art seems rushed and unfinished here, perhaps as at the time of production he was heavily involved with the pre-production of the *Hellboy* movie.

Throughout the run Mignola's obvious love for the horror genre combines with an innovative approach to telling tales and an instinctive certainty as to what makes good comics work. Another innovative and successful ploy is to tailor each tale to its own proper length and not lose quality by churning work out on an arbitrary and unachievable schedule. He's also not afraid to let others play with his toys, as can be seen in the prose novels and short stories from Christopher Golden and others, and inter-company crossovers with Batman, Savage Dragon and others.~WW
Recommended: 'Seeds of Destruction' 1-4, 'The Wolves of St.August', 'The Corpse and the Iron Shoes', 'Wake The Devil' 1-5, 'Christmas Special', 'Conqueror Worm' 1-4

HELLBOY JUNIOR

Dark Horse: *Halloween Special 1997, 2 issue microseries 1999*

Under the warped leadership of Bill Wray, *Hellboy Junior* is a collection of bizarre short stories parodying all manner of loveable Harvey characters. The quality of craft from the likes of Dave Cooper, Hilary Barta and Stephen DeStefano, as well as Wray and Mignola, is outstanding but the comic is not entirely successful. There is a (deliberately) dark tone to the stories, and all the blood, guts and subversion are ultimately wearying and a tad childish.~DAR

HELLCAT

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 2000*

Steve Englehart (ably assisted by Norm Breyfogle) turns the spotlight on Patsy (Hellcat) Walker. He brought the character from her girls' fashion title beginnings into the superhero wing of the Marvel Universe in *Amazing Adventures*, and his obvious interest in a character he sees as his own comes through here. After being rescued from Hell (in the *Thunderbolts* 2000 annual), the former daughter-in-law of Satan wrestles with literal and metaphorical demons on her way to becoming a regular member of the *Defenders* cast. Honestly, Ms. Walker's life is so utterly bonkers, even by comic standards, that you just know anything she appears in is going to be worth the price of admission. This doesn't disappoint.~JC

HELLCOP

Image/Avalon: *4 issue miniseries 1998-1999*

The Judeo-Christian Hell is in fact an alternate reality catalogued as KRP 1301-A. People who fall through the 'soft spots' between this reality and our own appear to be those who believe they deserve to be there. 'Hellcop' Virgil Hilts is a human working to try and maintain some sense of order and justice in KRP 1301-A. There are some nice ideas buried somewhere in here, but all in all it's little more than the usual good-cop-discovering-inside-corruption-fare, all executed as ham-fisted hack work. Writer Joe Casey can do much better, leaving you wondering how much his hands were tied by editor Brian Holguin, who co-created the character with colourist Brian Haberlin. 1 and 2 have variant covers; 1's by Todd McFarlane.~JC

HELLHOLE

Image: *3 issues 1999*

Policing an inner city area home to a few demons is tough, particularly when the dead can return to life. Wise-cracking Cabrini and monosyllabic Wilson are set on the trail of a demonic arsonist and police corruption. It's decent enough adventure, irritatingly presented in the form of movie storyboards. Why bother working up a separate version if Scott Lobdell's agent can just submit the comics to Hollywood? Artist Adam Pollina couldn't be bothered either, bailing out after 2, and neither creator had enough respect for the readers who bought the comic to conclude the story.~FP

HELLHOUND

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

A gunman and a guitarman (a thinly disguised Robert Johnson) are sent up from hell to stop a woman who is healing the sick and raising the dead. They meet the angel Gabriel, sent down to do the same as 'the balance must be protected'. By no means the mindless bloodfest implied by the covers, though there's certainly enough violence for them as likes it. John Miller's story evokes sympathy for the plight of virtually every character, a very skilful trick indeed, and Floyd Hughes' daring experiment in switching style and technique to suit the scene hits the mark far more than it misses. Flawed, yes, but one to watch out for.~HS

HELLHOUNDS: Panzer Cops

Dark Horse: *6 issue miniseries 1994**

Long, wordless would-be cinematic action sequences are the highlights of this otherwise dull police politics and terrorism manga thriller translation.~GK

Clive Barker's HELLRAISER

Marvel/Epic: *20 issues, 4 Specials 1990-1994*

A horror anthology nominally featuring the Cenobites from the *Hellraiser* films. In reality their appearance is forced in earlier issues, so 7-16 feature chapters of a series titled 'The Devil's Brigade'. The lives of six humans are divined to have a lasting effect on the realm of the Cenobites, so they must ensure that the humans follow the paths of order. Serving to introduce a recurring cast, chapters can be read as individual stories.

Many creators of note (John Bolton, Denys Cowan, Dave Dorman, Neil Gaiman, Sam Kieth, Dave McKean, Mike McMahon) contribute alongside relative unknowns to produce an eclectic, although unremittingly gloomy, mixture. Mark Kneece, Scott Hampton and John Van Fleet's 'The Tontine' in 9 is the best story of the run, depicting the claustrophobia, hope and despair involved in an annual game of Russian roulette, without moral commentary or resorting to gratuitously illustrated violence. 17 introduces 'The Harrowers', a story prefaced in 16 and sumptuously drawn by Alex Ross. To all intents and purposes they're a group of non-costumed superheroes empowered to combat the Cenobites. The best of four specials is the Christmas-themed *Dark Holiday Special*, and stories from 1-4 feature in an **Epic** collection. More recently Checker have published a far larger *Best of* collection covering the entire run.~WJ
Recommended: 9, 15, 17

HELLSHOCK

Image: *4 issue miniseries 1994, 3 issues 1997-1998*

A mundane story concerning the results of a coupling between angel and teenager occupies the miniseries. Jae Lee's plot is confused and padded beyond belief with purple prose and pin-up pages. While anyone having the gall to fill their first issue with pin-up pages and ads would normally be castigated, here it spares us the tedium of more poorly portrayed angst. This is all rather a shame considering Lee's gloomy stylised art, distinctively coloured by José Villarrubia, is worth a look. The progress between the first and second series, though, is astounding. Lee's first person narrative disturbs and cajoles as a psychiatric unit intern faces a reality beyond her naïve conceptions in 1-2. They're dense, bleak and harrowing comics, and stunning work. While still good, 3 is a drop in standards, and according to Lee's editorial pages they form little more than a prologue to the intended tale. That it was again left dangling is testament to Lee's incapacity to complete a story very close to his heart, which is a great shame. 1-2, though stand alone and are well worth reading anyway.~FP
Recommended: 1-2

HELLSPAWN

Image: *14 issues + 2000 to date*

Trapped in the living hell of New York's sleazy shadows Al Simmons is trying to deal with the aftermath of Angela's death in the main title. Spawn and his untrustworthy guide The Clown seem locked in a battle of wills involving the latter's evil influence on daytime TV shows and internet chatrooms. 5-11 are driven by whether Al will take Malebolgia's place on the throne of Hell – numerous demons, monsters and some decidedly deviant angels go to great lengths to dissuade him. There's also FBI Agent Damascus on Al's trail as well as investigating journalist Mike Moran. In 12 Hel is born fully formed and announces that she's Hellspawn's future wife just before he descends the throne in 14. This is a lot clearer than the travesty of continuity this hateful aggregation of smeared semi-illustration and typesetting represents. The always reliable Brian Michael Bendis, skating on thin ice with the prejudicial diatribes in 2 and 3, floats dialogue strings over Sienkiewicz wannabe Ashley Wood's fazed tableaux before caption-meister Steve Niles takes over in 6. The messy Ben Templesmith takes over the art in 11, completing the handbasket the series has been gradually fashioning for itself. Wood is clearly very talented but his illustrative noodlings are about as inappropriate as Moran's appearances amid this hogwash.~SW

HELLSTORM

Marvel: *21 issues, 1993-1994*

In a feeble attempt to do a Vertigo-style horror comic, Marvel took down the *Son of Satan* from the shelf (admittedly not an A-List character by anyone's definition) and turned him from ridiculous to merely repulsive and tedious, an irritating, amoral and enigmatic poseur. Warren Ellis' intervention on the scripts from 16 merely turned up the squalor. The title has a cult following, but then, so does *On The Buses*.~HS

HELL'S ANGEL

Marvel UK: *16 issues 1992-1994*

Shvaughn Haldane adapts future science for her own ends to avenge her dead father and battle the evil Mys-Tech Corporation. Bizarre attempt to create a New Age hi-tech superheroine, riddled through with pointless guest appearances by sundry X-Men. Following a lawsuit by the international organisation of Hell's Angels (!), the character's name was changed to *Dark Angel* with issue 6, at which point the series was promptly sued again by an independent publisher who had previously issued a title of that name. All this helped the comic not one iota, and it eventually staggered to cancellation, weighed down by its own pretentions.~HS

Tales of HELPLESS ANGER

Helpless Anger: *One-shot 1993*

Sharp political and social satire in the tradition of the Undergrounds. Several of K. L. Roberts' 'Don Thompson: Former Negro' and 'Bill and Al's Totally Excellent White House Adventure' strips appear as single pages throughout, whilst his 'Terroress' continues the story from her own title (she's a mass murderer now exploiting, and being exploited by, the media from prison). 'Spectracide' features an exterminator who acts like a more radical Reid Fleming. Only the 'Miss Lovedoll Beauty Pageant' seems overlong.~NF

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* Available in a collected edition

HELSING

Caliber: *3 issues 1997-1998*

Yet another outing for the old 'Carrying on the Family Tradition' plot as the last of the Van Helsings (if only by marriage) joins the rest of the Caliber Core characters to make the world safe for people who aren't dead. Amnesiac Samantha Van Helsing is plagued by horrific dreams of her dead husband and joins the family business to track down the Tophet, a secret organization that holds all the answers to her questions. Crucifixes and shadows abound and it's all quite entertaining but Gary Reed and Chris Wozniac are capable of better.~WW

HELTER SKELTER

Antarctic: *7 issues (0-6) 1997-1998*

This is a generally sound magically engineered teen-romance and martial arts comedy manga strip. Artist Duc Tran is good at the action and the funny stuff but, when issues don't provide more than a couple of minutes reading each, the repetitious splashes of 'pretty girls' in bikinis with limbs so absurdly extruded that they look anorexic or nine feet tall can become wearing. Unless, by chance, that should happen to be your special thing...~GK

HELYUN

Slave Labor: *One-shot ('A Simple People') 1990, 1 issue ('Bones of the Backwoods') 1991*

Helyun is from the American south and he believes himself to be a changeling, something that came from the wild to take the place of a human boy. He lived as a human until he finished school, never quite knowing how to fit in, and soon returned to the wilderness, though he found it impossible to avoid humans altogether. Chas Berlin handles the changeling idea and other fantasy elements well, but the comic is mostly about an outsider's view of disgraceful human behaviour, and this is fascinating and unsettling, with artwork that is appropriately grotesque. 'A Simple People' contains four stories, including a lynching in small-town Arkansas, and Helyun's origin, but the best is 'High School Helyun', which makes some very perceptive comments on the various tribal groupings. 'Bones of the Backwoods' is the first issue of a longer story which features Helyun going back to his home town and the brewing of a powerful local cider, but it doesn't stand well on its own, and was never completed.~FC

Recommended: 'A Simple People'

HEMBECK

Fantaco: *7 issues 1980-1983*

Marvel: *One-shot 1989 ('Fred Hembeck Destroys The Marvel Universe'), one-shot 1990 ('Fred Hembeck Sells The Marvel Universe')*

In the late 1970s Fred Hembeck ran one-page humour strips titled 'Dateline -!!?#' in trade paper *The Comics Buyer's Guide*. Imaginative, informative, well cartooned, detailed and funny, these strips comprise the entirety of 1 (later re-issued with extra pages), 2 and 7. The first eight pages of 1 have interviews with Spider-Man and the Flash, synopsise a silly *Lois Lane* story, spotlight some of comics' daftest heroes, discuss old TV shows and Roy Thomas' work on Thor, and revive a horror comics host. This variety is maintained throughout, and that some events featured are then contemporary news is offset by Hembeck's always incisive commentary. Any 'Dateline -!!?#' pages are still worth reading today. There are too few of them in *The Hembeck File* (5), padded with sketches and sample pages, and *Bah, Hembeck* (4) exclusively concerns Superman and Fantastic Four, the lack of diversity weakening the premise. 3's *Abbott & Costello Meet the Bride of Hembeck.* has characters from different companies meeting each other, as does 6, and while both contain plenty of good jokes they stretch slapstick too thin. The same criticism applies to Hembeck's first Marvel work. The second, collecting one-page strips from the promotion title *Marvel Age*, while seemingly tempered by the desire not to bite the hand that feeds, is a partial return to form.~FP

Recommended: 1, 2, 7

HEMP FOR VICTORY

Starhead: *One-shot 1993*

In 1943 the US Department of Agriculture produced a documentary encouraging American farmers to grow marijuana and extolling its use in the war effort. This adaptation of that film by Art Penn is both educational and propagandist, as its final pages detail statistics about hemp and explain more of the history of its persecution. Interesting, but more an illustrated pamphlet than a comic.~NF

HEPCATS

Double Diamond Press: *12 issues 1989-1994**

Antarctic: *13 issues (0-12) 1996-1998*

By the time *Hepcats* appeared 'serious' funny-animal comics were two-a-penny. Although well-liked by fans of this particular genre, *Hepcats* lacked the deftness of touch to break through to a wider audience. Creator Martin Wagner's art is serviceable if not particularly eye-catching. The scripting, however, is laden down with concerns and good intentions. His nice but whiney college buddies act out a soap-opera plot, complete with dark secrets and sudden returns of unmentioned spouses/relatives, which tries to pass itself off as meaningful drama. The reader swiftly gets the feeling that Wagner loves his creations to bits, getting so involved with them that he cannot be objective, to the detriment of the story. The cumulative effect can be both dull and irritating. The Antarctic issues begin with a new colour story in 0, but then simply reprint the first twelve.~FJ

HERBIE

ACG: *23 issues 1964-1967*

A+: *5 issues 1990-1991*

Dark Horse: *2 issues 1992*

ACG: *1 issue 1996*

In thirty years nothing has approached the surreal whimsy of *Herbie*, although *Flaming Carrot* is a spiritual cousin. Débuting in *Forbidden Worlds* 73, and returning in 94, 110, 114 and 116, Herbie Popnecker is presented without an origin. He's a near-somnambulant little fat kid with coke-bottle-bottom glasses who can do anything and is known the world over by human and animal alike, but hides his abilities from his parents, turning the other cheek when referred to as "a little fat nothing" by his father. For variety, Herbie is also an occasional superhero, The Fat Fury, with a sink plunger on his head and a threat of "Bop you with this here lollipop". Without the comic before you it sounds pathetic, but conceive attempting to describe the humour of *Monty Python* to an alien. It can't be done, it has to be experienced, and so it is with *Herbie*. It's the non-existent immaculate 1950s TV suburban life twisted 180 degrees and ironically produced at the birth of drug culture by two men already well into middle age. Writer Shane O'Shea (one of many aliases used by ACG editor Richard Hughes) and artist Ogden Whitney concoct bizarre fantasies in which Mao Tse Tung is fed worms and uniformed animals aid George Washington in defeating the English. It's all presented in totally po-faced fashion, with Whitney excelling at the realistically proportioned art extending the joke. A generation will testify to the appeal of Herbie, so while recent reprints have sunk without trace, a collection is surely more practical. The Dark Horse issues provide cheap samplers of the original material and let John Byrne have a shot at approximating it, which he does with aplomb. The ACG that published the 1996 issue bears no relation to the original publishers, and their issue has a new story (originally prepared for Dark Horse) with astoundingly shoddy Dan Day art.~FP

Recommended: 1-23

* Available in a collected edition

HERCULES

Charlton: *13 issues 1967-1970*

A late addition to the Charlton line of Action Heroes, *Hercules* was the only title to survive their 1968 cancellation. Written by Joe Gill and drawn by comics evergreen Sam Glanzman, the young demi-god's earthly adventures got more and more psychedelic before cancellation in 1970. Steve Skeates and Jim Aparo produce the 'Thane Of Bagarth' back-up strip in the early issues. Issue 1 was reprinted as a one-shot black and white magazine in 1968.~SW

HERCULES

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1982*, 4 issue miniseries 1984, Graphic Novel 1985, 3 issue miniseries (Hercules and the Heart of Chaos) 1997*

Hercules had around for fifteen years with but one ordinary solo appearance in *Marvel Premiere* 26 before writer and artist Bob Layton took interest. Hercules is banished from Olympus to learn humility, and acquires a robotic being, The Recorder, whose task is to record the exploits of Hercules as they carouse around the galaxy. The first series is consistently funny, and generated a second, in which the jokes about a vain, yet genial, musclebound clod begin to wear a little thin (although there are still many amusing moments). By the time a graphic novel followed the idea had been bludgeoned to death. That's still better, though, than the 1990s miniseries lacking Layton, almost any humour and all sparkle, in which Hercules could have been replaced by any other Marvel superhero to little discernible difference. *Thor* 356 is, to all intents and purposes, also an okay Hercules solo, and Layton delivers a short in *Solo Avengers* 12.~FP

Recommended: Series one 1-4, Series two 1

HERCULES AMONGST THE NORTH AMERICANS

Penguin: *1 volume 1986*

This collects the very funny strips of the same title produced by Mark Marek for various magazines and anthologies. The Greek demi-God of myth is placed in the USA where he holds down blue collar jobs utilising his great strength, while in a state of perpetual befuddlement at the modern world. The bathos is very finely observed, and the scenes of Hercules confidently applying the skills and social conventions of ancient Greece to everyday situations, hilarious. Marek's distorted, scratchy and seemingly crude art will be very off-putting to many, but those who venture through it will be rewarded.~WJ

Recommended

HERCULES: The Legendary Adventures

Topps: *5 issues 1996*

Quality tie-in to the hit TV show with scripter Roy Thomas in his mythic/historical element providing solid adventure entertainment. Jeff Butler and Steve Montano are equally dependable on the art chores, and fellow TV star Xena: Warrior Princess appears in 3-5. No-nonsense comic storytelling, and dedicated watchers should be satisfied readers.~WW

HERCULES Unbound

DC: *12 issues 1975-1977*

The appealing combination of José Luis Garcia-Lopez and Wally Wood draw 1-6, taking the Hercules of mythology into an alternate Earth dying through nuclear warfare in 1986. Hercules has good reason to be peeved, having been chained to a rock for a thousand years, and his mood darkens on learning that his old enemy Ares is behind the war. With 7 the series is used to tie up a few loose ends in DC continuity as Hercules and companions roam the devastated planet; it's ably illustrated by Walt Simonson. Every issue is better than average, with the encounter with the Atomic Knights in 10 and 11 a good sample. Commendably, the series was actually properly concluded when the sales dried up.~WJ

THE HERETIC of Little Faith

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1996-1997*

A forty-something old-style superhero undergoes a transformation at the hands of celestial entities in order to save the world. Joe Phillips' story is disjointed, with too many seemingly throwaway ideas included for no good reason and other items unexplained. Why is our hero called the Herectic, for instance? Because all decent names are already copyrighted? That doesn't prevent his wife being named Nike, surely product placement of the daftest kind. The abrasive Heretic has his moments, though, although few are in 4, and the lead strip is a work of genius when contrasted with Brian Stelfreeze's back-up 'Maximum Velocity'. That's seven pages each issue of total cack.~WJ

HERMES VS THE EYEBALL KID

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1994-1995**

In a story from Eddie Campbell's *Deadface* continuity, the Eyeball Kid and Hermes finally sort out their differences, unaware that Chyson, god of Capitalism, has made a pact with the Society of Evil. As the ancient enemies escalate the slaughter and Chyson and the Society double-cross each other, Joe Theseus tries to prevent the unravelling of reality. Witty and entertaining, but hard to read without considerable back story. Originally presented in **Dark Horse Presents** 77-85.~WW

HERO

Marvel: *6 issue miniseries 1990*

Coby Pace, self-centred 1980s business courier, is transported to a fantasy world to become a hero despite himself. Occasionally amusing, but by and large no better than the fantasy it parodies.~FP

HERO ALLIANCE

Sirius: *2 issues 1985-1986*
Wonder: *1 issue 1987*
Innovation: *Series one 18 issues 1989-1991, series two 4 issues, 1 Special 1991-1992*

Despite the needlessly gratuitous good-girl art which always formed a major part of the series, *Hero Alliance* generally presented a solid superhero yarn with entertaining soap-opera overtones in a number of sub-plots which often outdid the main action and probably accounted for the series' surprising longevity.~JC

Luke Cage HERO FOR HIRE

Marvel: *16 issues 1973-1974*

Consciously introduced as Marvel's first ongoing title featuring a black superhero, it didn't get off to a good start with Luke Cage introduced as a petty criminal who's framed and imprisoned. He participates in cell-regeneration experiments in exchange for parole, and they leave him with bullet-proof skin and vastly increased strength, which he uses to set up as a hero for hire. The ill-judged background aside, Archie Goodwin and George Tuska provide an acceptable origin story over two issues, but the remainder of the run under lesser hands is laughable. Consistent use of 1970s street slang and fashion make this read like a poor blaxploitation movie. The title changed to *Power Man* with 17.~FP

HERO HANGOUT: Bolt and the Multibolts/J-Squad

ACG: *One-shot 1998*

Flip comic spinning off from *Femforce* with Bolt, an astronaut who can manifest four mischievous energy duplicates who would rather play with his daughter than do good deeds, and J (for Justice) Squad, an inept team of superheroes who set up in new secret quarters only to have it stolen by enemy agents. Enthusiastic superheroics with a comedic bent from Bill Black, R. Lee Brown and Brad Gorby.~WW

HERO HOTLINE

DC: *6 issue miniseries 1989*

After their critical if, sadly, not commercial, success with *'Mazing Man*, writer/artist team Bob Rozakis and Stephen

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* Available in a collected edition

DeStefano placed this project squarely in the working class of the DC Universe. Hero Hotline is an agency of freelance superheroes available on a work-for-hire basis to do the jobs the big names don't have time or inclination for. Each character is well-rounded, with their own reasons for not wanting to live "The Life" full-time. Microwavabelle is a widowed mother of three, and needs flexible work hours; Hotshot's works to get his nagging mother off his back; Diamondette's only doing the gig to pay her way through medical school, and their interaction is appealingly portrayed. Kind of a superheroic NYPD Blue, only with more overt comedy. It's Rosakis' best writing to date, and DeStefano's pencils, ably backstopped by veteran inker Kurt Schaffenberger, make inventive use of page layout, particularly in sequences dealing with the elderly and irascible elastic hero Stretch, who's over-extended himself so many times over the years that he never quite snaps back into shape! Charming, funny, clever, and sadly ignored; a 'prequel' serial (actually prepared after 1 was completed) ran in *Action Comics* (when weekly) 637-640, and should be sought out for the full picture.~HS

Recommended: 1-6

HERO SANDWICH

Slave Labor: *9 issues 1988-1991**

The Hero Sandwich detective agency is a collection of oddballs. There's an elastic man named Richard, an ordinary human who bears the weird name of Silver Scorpion, a gentleman named Lee with a head that is a dark circle, a crazed female commando named Allison, and Rachel, who runs the agency. The origins of the group's appearances, powers and psychoses remain unrevealed, as we join them bang in the middle of the first story, and things never slow down enough for explanations. In 1-4, the agency is hired by a vampire to track down a murderous vampire wannabe who is, allegedly, giving the species a bad name. Dan Vado's script is skilful and witty, and Chuck Austen's art fluid and appealing. The second story, in which the team has to confront ghosts from their pasts, is less interesting, though sequences of character interaction are still well presented.~HS

HERO ZERO

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1995*

This is a rather pointless comic, starring as it does another size-changing superhero but offering no new insights into anything at all. The artwork's not bad, crisp and sharp in style, but overall the book lacks its own personality.~NF

HEROBEAR AND THE KID

Astonish: *5 issues + 2000 to date*

Mike Kunkel's pencil drawings, reproduced with working lines showing, are of a clever boy and his toy bear which comes to life to fight an evil robot. It's a little close to *Calvin and Hobbes*, really, but very charming and accomplished, although the awkward page layouts suggest an animation artist's unfamiliarity with comics storytelling. This strip would benefit from neatly finished art, colour on more than just the bear's red cape, musical effects and funny voices.~GK

HEROES

Blackbird: *6 issues 1986-1988*

Sadly overlooked mutant team title. On the writing side John Nordland II has some intriguing ideas, not the least of which is personalised narrators who also interact with the cast, and artist John Nordland's grey tones work extremely well, looking like nothing seen in comics before or since. The characters take precedence, and the intriguing foreshadowing and the scenarios set up make the premature demise a shame, but that shouldn't discourage sampling of what was published. 1-3 were magazine format*.~FP

HEROES

Milestone: *6 issue miniseries 1996*

Following the dissolution of the covert Shadow Cabinet, six of its members – Iota, Payback, Donner and Blitzen, Starlight, and the part-timer Static – decide to go public as the first high-visibility superhero group of the Milestone Universe. Establishing a headquarters in New York's Chrysler Building, they set off adventuring, but find that the path to international celebrity doesn't run smoothly. Their 900 number 'Hero Hotline' keeps getting tied up with crank calls, discarded spouses turn up as Lords of the Innerverse (don't you just hate it when that happens?), and the public doesn't take kindly to Donner's cheery media acknowledgement of her and Blitzen's lesbian relationship. A cheerful, high-spirited miniseries by Matt Wayne and illustrator ChrisCross.~HS

HEROES AGAINST HUNGER

DC: *One-shot 1986*

Of course, if he really wanted to stamp out world hunger, Superman could just perform that coal-into-diamonds trick of his and turn the world's poor into millionaires overnight. Back in the real world, sadly, the Ethiopean famine had no such omnipotent saviours; hence this fundraiser from DC and a cast of thousands. Disappointingly, the Jim Starlin story involves Superman and Batman beating the stuffing out of a big, green alien, and the starving seem no better off at the end than they were at the beginning. On the plus side, all manner of the great and good are present and correct (Jack Kirby, Berni Wrightson, Curt Swan, Dave Gibbons, Gray Morrow et al) and for what it's worth Joe Kubert's pages are especially nice. The contents were never the comic's main selling point, though, and one hopes lots of money was raised.~DAR

HEROES & LEGENDS

Marvel: *One-shot 1997*

Odd, tongue-in-cheek look at the changeover between the original Avengers line-up and the second team. Includes pencils by Steve Ditko, Gil Kane and other old guard talent.~DB

HEROES FOR HIRE

Marvel: *19 issues, 1 Annual 1997-1999*

In 1997 the majority of Marvel heroes are drawn into another universe and presumed dead, so the surviving metahumans take up the slack. One of the groups striving to do so is this commercial venture organised by Iron Fist with backing from Oracle, Inc., the company owned by Prince Namor, the Sub-Mariner. Since Namor is among the missing, his colleague Jim Hammond, formerly the Human Torch, is appointed chief of operations at H4H (as the team becomes known). Iron Fist is field leader of a rotating coalition of super-beings, core members including the Black Knight, Hercules, and the White Tiger, a female martial artist with an enigmatic past. Writer John Ostrander appears to be attempting to recreate the critical success he enjoyed with the 1980's incarnation of Suicide Squad. Many of the same elements are present: suspect motives, conspiracies, hidden agendas, and that character interaction is generally the strongest point. Also, Ostrander's determination to display underused characters is in full throttle; She-Hulk, Luke Cage, Ant-Man, Sersi and Thena of the Eternals, Shang-Chi and Jessica Drew (the detective formerly known as Spider-Woman) all pass through, in addition to more commercial guest-stars such the Punisher, Deadpool and the inevitable Wolverine.

For all the ingenuity of the plotting, the series never really comes to life. The stories are too crowded, and while a nice sense of burgeoning friendship between some of the cast is present, too many others remain 'hero X, whose power is Y', and nothing more. Pascual Ferry's art remains pedestrian.~HS

HEROES INC presents CANNON

Armed Forces Dist: *1 issue 1969*

CPL Gang: *1 issue 1976*

Although containing broadly the same strips, these two comics had quite different origins. The first was a regular-sized colour comic created for the armed forces, while the second was a black and white magazine aimed at the comic fan market. Both featured editor Wally Wood's 'Misfits' strips and the hard-boiled spy Cannon, pencilled in each issue by Steve Ditko. Wood's art is terrific throughout, but the stories rather let things down. Rounding out each issue were another Wood strip, the humorous 'Dragonella', and Mike Vosburg's humdrum superheroine The Black Angel in 2.~DAR

Will Eisner's HEROES OF SPORTS

A-List Comics: *1 issue 1999*

Intended as a miniseries, only the first of this shoddy series was published. As usual with A-List comics there is no editorial material or credits, but it contains short text pieces on sportsmen and women (including Kitty Rawls, Joe Louis, Babe Ruth and Cliff Montgomery) accompanied by loose sketches of them in action or as portraits. The only clearly discernible signature is that of 'Erwin', but what this has to do with Will Eisner is left a mystery.~NF

HEROES REBORN

Marvel: *One-shot, ('Special Collectors Issue') 1996, 4 issue miniseries ('The Return') 1997, 7 one-shots ('Doomsday', 'Ashema', 'Masters of Evil', 'Rebel', 'Remnants', 'Young Allies', 'Doom') 1999-2000*

The Heroes Reborn project saw four major Marvel properties transplanted into an alternate reality for a year to be reinvented by hip Image creators whose split from Marvel five years before had resulted in the company sinking into a creative quagmire. Whether Marvel needed a breath of fresh air or simply a chance to rethink its strategy, in general, the experiment was a success and quality improved immeasurably afterwards. The miniseries by Peter David and Salvador Larocca (with virtually every Marvel regular taking co-credit for the concept), merges two realities as Franklin Richards breaks through to the world to which he inadvertently banished his parents, thus making them aware of the false nature of the reality in which they're living. As the Heroes Reborn Earth is about to be destroyed by their version of Galactus, the heroes decide that all things considered, it's time to go home, but Dr. Doom pontificates that he may have a better thing going where he is... This leads to a revisiting of the Heroes Reborn universe in a series of one-shots, tail-ended by the 'Doomsday' and 'Doom' issues, which deal with Doom's return to the alternate reality, which has been left a devastated wasteland ripe for the conquering. As Doom takes control, the intermediate issues focus on the individual experiences of the heroes who have been trying to hold things together in the meantime. 'Ashema', featuring the Celestial who chose to give up her godhood to remain with her mortal friends is the pick of the bunch, not least because, like the Doom issues, it's written by Chris Claremont, and along with them forms a nice continuity of its own. Repercussions from the series are further dealt with in *Fantastic Four* 25 (series three), also by Claremont, while Mark Bagley revisits themes from 'Young Allies' in *Thunderbolts*. Starting in 51 of that title, the alternate world becomes a regular feature. The 'Special Collector's Issue' is a taster-cum-intro to the characters and concepts for new readers.~JC

HERU Son of Ausar

Afrocentric/Ania: *1 issue 1993*

Pitifully inept account of ancient Egyptian deities in the form of horny bodybuilders with X-Men-like superpowers and with psychedelic colouring. It's further inappropriately given to slight misquotations from Shakespeare and the Gospel of Saint Matthew. Nice card insert by Erik 'Savage Dragon' Larsen!~GK

HEX

DC: *18 issues 1985-1987*

In the year 2050, five years after a world-ravaging nuclear holocaust, Reinhold Borsten provides entertainment for high-ranking members of the Conglomerate that controls the life-saving soames (used to purify irradiated water). Using a time-machine, he brings specimens of warriors from different eras and keeps them drugged before staging private battles. For a Western gunfight he collects Jonah Hex and so unleashes a one-man army on this future world. Hex quickly adapts to the new technology and succeeds in destroying the time-machine and Borsten's operation. Teaming up with Borsten's daughter, Hex sets out to investigate the new era, while looking for a way back to his own time.

Michael Fleisher claims that low sales on *Jonah Hex* weren't the primary reason for creating this series, that he'd always wanted to do something "about a bleak, war-torn world where civilised moral values were dead", something without superheroes. It didn't take long before they began to appear, though. A future Batman popped up in 11 and there's The Dogs of War in 13. With 15 Keith Giffen took over as artist and the story involved Hex in an alien invasion. Giffen's impressionistic artwork was entirely inappropriate for the hard-hitting action. Having Hex meet his own stuffed and mounted corpse at the end of 18 was a sad end to Fleisher's vision for one of DC's great Western characters.~NF

HEY MISTER

Insomnia Comics: *2 issues 1997*
Top Shelf: *6 issues +, 1 Special 1998 to date*

There's nothing very much wrong with *Hey Mister*, but neither is there anything very compelling about it either; it exudes a feeling of being a bit second-hand and slightly second-rate. Writer/artist Pete Sickman-Garner specialises in depressing, semi-realistic comedy strips involving a core trio of cynical losers. Mister, Young Tim and Aunt Mary live lives of quiet desperation, watch porn a lot, swear a lot, take drugs a lot, live in poverty, work awful Mcjobs, despise hippies and straights, bemoan the impossibility of finding happiness in a consumer society etc. etc. Unhampered by any great commitment to rigid continuity or realism, Sickman-Garner manages to work a fair amount of mileage and variety out of this basic set-up. Nevertheless, *Hey Mister* is, in its way, as much a prisoner of pre-established generic slacker conventions – laid down by Peter Bagge a decade or more ago in his seminal *Hate* – as any piece of formulaic superhero pap. Wouldn't it be great to read an 'alternative' comic about HAPPY people just once in a while? Sickman-Garner doesn't noticeably improve as an artist either, and even the later issues of the comic are rendered in a rather basic, regulation alt style. The 'Afterschool Special' collects minicomics produced by Garner before the regular series, although you wouldn't know, while the other issues are available in two further collections.~AL

HI HORSE

Bishakh Som: *4 issues + 2001 to date*

Regular contributors, Howard John Arey, Andrice Arp, Bishakh Som and Joan Reilly, offer an intellectual approach to comics in this anthology, preferring comment rather than stories per se. Visually interesting, each creator uses a different stylistic approach, depending on the material. This is usually offbeat, like Som's 'A Turnip's Progress' (2-4), Arey's Robert Crumb-influenced 'Night of the Bully, or a Reilly character's love and fear relationship with the telephone (4).~NF

HIEROGLYPH

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1999-2000*

Creator Ricardo Delgado has relied on his Moebius-influenced images to do most of the storytelling in this science-fantasy involving astronaut Francisco Chavez's exploration of a desert planet by hover disc. Pyramids, waterfalls and superbly weird dinosaur camels are just a few of the year 2209's visual treats. Unfortunately Delgado's great flair for conveying texture and scale is not complimented by much writing or plotting ability. Chavez's sudden discoveries are gigantic and would be visible for miles and the episodic nature of the story is not helped by the limp pacing. Nice looking but desiccated.~SW

HIGH ADVENTURE

Kitchen Sink: *1 issue 1973*

A very odd comic to have come from Kitchen Sink at the time. While the remainder of their titles featured the best and worst of the counterculture, this, nudity apart, could have been stories from Warren or Marvel's contemporary black and white magazines. There's some early art from the team of Steve Leialoha and John Pound, Mike Royer proving he can pencil as well as ink, and two stories from Mark Evanier, who would certainly progress to better things. Only now of interest as a curiosity.~FP

Amazing HIGH ADVENTURE

Marvel: *5 issues 1984-1986*

It's shameful that there's only been one mainstream historical adventure title in the past thirty years. This is an obvious attempt to emulate the later issues of *Two-Fisted Tales*, with four stories to each issue, and the art from the likes of John Bolton (4), Mike Mignola (3) and EC veteran John Severin (1, 3, 4) is largely excellent. Sadly, the writing doesn't generally reach the standards of the artwork. The best all-round issue is 3, but there's at least one excellent story every issue. Standouts include Steve Englehart and Severin's tale of Cromwell (1) and Mike Baron and John Ridgway's 'Skyhook' (5).~WJ

Recommended: 3

HIGH CALIBER

Caliber: *4 issues 1997**

Another anthology title from Caliber, this time starting in flip-comic format, before piggybacking other titles. 'Ghost Sonata' runs through all four issues, encompassing passion, greed, revenge and a man with an unusual gift, although it's a rather pointless set-up for a final segment revelation. This would appear to be Gary Reed's attempt at a 19th century Russian novel, with its tormented, guilty and reclusive cast, and although a tad ponderous in places it's a good effort, well drawn by Andy Bennett in a scratchy, angular style. Artist Mike Perkins also holds his end up on an impenetrable script in 1-2, as does Jim Schumaker on 'Stained', backing up 3. That's a very awkwardly told story with little logical rationale, but Schumaker was obviously destined for better things. 4 doubles as *Raven Chronicles* 15.~WJ

HIGH ROADS

Cliffhanger: *6 issue miniseries 2002**

America's naivest farm boy turned soldier, Hitler's unknown mistress, a midget actor and a failed kamikaze unite at the tail end of World War II. Their purpose is to liberate a pendant of incalculable wealth from Hitler. Except it's not quite as easy as that. Scott Lobdell writes a professional and fast-paced comedy adventure, and while some plot twists are telegraphed, many still surprise. It's stunningly pencilled by Leinil Francis Yu for a more than diverting read.~FP

HIGH SHINING BRASS

Apple: *4 issue miniseries 1991*

Vietnam specialist Don Lomax relates the story of Robert Durand, who's part of a team co-ordinating raids, ambushes and agitation from within North Vietnamese territory, and covertly into neighbouring countries. He gradually becomes aware that he's surplus to requirements and that his superior officer has ordered him and his squad to be disposed of. It's the likely interference in the war and manipulation of Durand by the CIA that's the central point of his story, and this really only comes to the fore in the final issue. 1-3, while decent war comics, could be three issues of any of Lomax's other titles. The sometimes heavy-handed inking of Rose Lomax renders this a little less desirable, though.~WJ

HIGH STAKES ADVENTURE

Antarctic: *1 issue 1998*

This anthology hosts three features. 'The Big Game' has a Texas Ranger teaming up with a thousand year old oriental sharing his demon fighting adventures and his immortality. 'Giant Fighters has the exploits of a team of interplanetary troubleshooters, and 'S.E.A. Force is thrills and spills with the crew of the Submersible Exploration Ark. Produced by Shannon Denton's Meteor City studio, the art style is an accomplished clearline animation one. The clunky scripts are credited to Kurt Hathaway who clearly hath not. A glorified portfolio low on entertainment value, although 'The Big Game' shows old-style potential.~SW

HIGHWATER BOOKS Graphic Novels

The factor uniting almost all the Highwater Books graphic novels is a childish quality, whether in the presentation, the art, successfully pulling the reader back to the wonder of childhood, or subverting the traditions. It's Greg Cook's *Catch As Catch Can* that achieves the latter most successfully, combining the manic inspiration of a *Ren & Stimpy* cartoon with childhood familiars such as the wolf and the gingerbread man. In this blue and cream book, the gingerbread man has to go on the lam after the police spot him buying cigarettes for the kids. On his journey he survives several perilous encounters. It's funny, silly and drawn in a gloriously amorphous style.

In Geoffrey Willan's brilliantly written comedies of British public school life there's a character called Fotherington-Thomas, caustically referred to by his schoolmates as "uterly wet", who runs about shouting "Hullo birds, hullo sky, hullo trees". He now turns out comics as James Kochalka, whose work is so feckless and insubstantial you fear it will blow away with the page turning. In *Kissers* he obsesses on minor disagreements with his girlfriend (of the sort that couples have every day and forget five minutes later) and provides obvious counterparts to how he views their relationship in a bird and a cat. Most insecure cartoonists could cover that in a few pages, but Kochalka fills 168. The only very moderately more interesting *Tiny Bubbles* covers much the same ground at similar length, with Kochalka this time likening himself to a self-doubting robot. *Kissers* also includes a CD of Kochalka's music (very Jonathan Richman) which suggests his entire artistic output might incorporate a form of obscure irony. To label it complete crap does no service to the accomplished cartooning, but it's wasted effort. The art of Brian Ralph shares many points with Kochalka, but his work is far stronger. His *Climbing Out* is the story of a strange monkey man working in mines with cavemen and homunculi. One day he discovers the means to escape his world. It's a very quick read, but a charming one. So is Ralph's *Cave-In*, the story of another man in a cave looking for a way out. It's a thick, small square book, and the experiment of printing the story in white and single colours other than black works, as the man's journey pries open the imagination. Be warned, though, it leads nowhere.

A wonderful Seth cover of the 1960s X-Men adorns 1997's *Coober Skeber*, a strangely titled anthology of small press creators either appropriating Marvel characters for their own use or producing pin-ups. By and large it proves a lack of imagination wasn't just an affliction unique to Marvel in 1997, exceptions being Pete Cardin's funny Devil Dinosaur piece, while Ron Rege Jr's examination of high school problems via Spider-Man is quite poignant. It's for *Skibber Bee-Bye* that Rege is most acclaimed, and which is Highwater's highest profile volume. It defies a brief description. The apparently disconnected chapters involve recognisable humans, albeit with strange afflictions, interacting with flying elves and a silent blue elephant. They react to stimuli, and descend into grotesque rituals, and in the middle there are a few pages concerning phrases about the California Gold Rush. It is very much about a mood rather than a narrative, although over 256 pages a narrative eventually emerges. There's a childish simplicity to the art and design, but it's detailed and also disturbs. Although not artistically similar, people who admire the work of Jim Woodring and Gary Panter should definitely investigate further. Others will either connect or not.

The one exception to the childish quality is Matt Madden's *Odds Off*, which, to the casual glancer, is likely to have the most widespread appeal, being the most traditional book. Shirin is working hard to enter medical school, and a casualty is her drifting relationship with Morgan, who's becoming obsessed with watching a woman on a TV programme teaching French. He's also the object of lust for Lance, a frustrated writer. Surreal and forced slips into symbolism apart, it's the classic structure for drama, and the art concentrates on people above all else. While in an expressive cartoon style, it does beg considering if this wouldn't have worked better as a novel.~FP

HIGHWAY 13

Slave Labor: *8 issues 1999-2002*

Cool dude Rick and his werewolf pal, Garth, are road-tripping their way across the spooky side of the USA, looking for the weird side of life and having adventures with goblins, ghosties, witches molemen, spacefreaks and other assorted fright night alumni. Cartoonist Les McClaine blends Jack Kerouac with Scooby-Doo in hit-or-miss outings that should appeal to most kids of all ages.~WW

HILLY ROSE

Astro: *9 issues 1995-1997**

Hilly Rose was B.C. Boyer's return to comics seven years after the cancellation of *The Masked Man*. It's science-fiction adventure with a strong humour element used to undercut an otherwise hard-boiled tale. Hilly is a reporter who owes her job to her father's influence. He's a rich crimelord who's been humouring her and is therefore surprised and horrified when she's offered a higher-profile off-world job. As Hilly's investigations into a series of bombings lead her inexorably towards her father, he employs increasingly vicious methods to put her off. *Hilly Rose* is interesting and funny in places, but lacks a coherent voice. The serious side is sometimes lost among the pastiche elements and jokes, and is stopped mid-story.~NF

HIP HOP HEAVEN

Boomtown Productions: *1 issue 1992*

Strange attempt to produce a comic about then contemporary black culture in the watered-down *Keenan and Kel* mode. Rex Perry is a cartoonist with a good fluid style, but it's the odd chuckle rather than laughs on offer here.~FP

HISTORY OF THE DC UNIVERSE

DC: *2 issue microseries 1986**

George Pérez beautifully renders Marv Wolfman's tale, in text form, of DC's Universe, from the beginning of time to the far-flung future. The entirety demonstrates what a splendid heritage DC has in terms of characters and scenarios. We see the birth of the Guardians of the Universe, and progress through encounters with, just to name a few, the cave boy Anthro, the Amazons of Paradise Island, the Viking Prince, the Wild West with Jonah Hex, Enemy Ace in World War I, the Justice Society of America and Sgt Rock during World War II, Superman, the New Gods, Teen Titans, and into the future with Star Hawkins and the Legion of Super-Heroes, before ending with the Time Trapper. Pérez had always been noted for a good sense of design, and, freed from the tight restrictions of having to tell a story, he really pulls out the stops in providing impressive collages and frescos. Later continuity adjustments made some of the events in this series redundant, but DC buffs will nevertheless find it a useful reference guide.~HY

Recommended: 1-2

A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

Paradox: *Graphic Novel 1997*

Tom McKenna appears to be a normal, small-town family man, until he becomes a media celebrity after stopping thieves at his diner, at which point some vicious killers decide he's a man they've been hunting for twenty years. John Wagner's story is eloquently told, yet brutally honest in its depiction of both how easy and how hard violence can be. Despite some elements of implausibility, he still manages to spring some surprises as well. Vince Locke's scratchy, impressionistic artwork (much like that of Guy Davis), seems designed to soften the impact of some of Wagner's scenes, and may not be to everyone's taste, but is effective in service to the script.~NF

HITCH HIKER'S GUIDE to the GALAXY

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1993*

Prestige-format comic-book version of the first four radio fits or first book, inevitably abridged. It is thus consistent with the myriad other *Hitch-Hiker* adaptations in so far as they are all completely inconsistent with each other. DC had one supremely important decision to make for this series and got it right. They chose a British writer, John Carnell, to create this transcription. The metaphysical imagery of Steve Leialoha's whimsical pencils, particularly on the out-of-phase *Guide* narrations, is really particularly effective. Continues in Restaurant at the End of the Universe.~APS

HITMAN

DC: *61 issues (1-60, 1,000,000) 1 Annual 1996-2001*

Introduced in *Demon Annual* 2, Tommy Monaghan is a professional killer with a few differences. He's got X-ray vision. He can read minds. He only kills people who deserve it. Most important, though is that his creators don't let almighty continuity get in the way of a good story. Hitman is initially modelled on the Hong Kong action movie. Plots are minimal, men are men and the bullets never run dry. Garth Ennis and John McCrea play silly buggers with the DC universe in a procession of blackly funny tales that deal with fatherhood, getting laid and true friendship amidst an absolute welter of blood, guts and booze. The series starts with Tommy and fellow hitmen just chilling out in Noonan's Sleazy Bar, a hangout for contract killers, swapping stories as demonic forces plan his doom and Tommy takes on a contract to kill the Joker. As the series progresses the bar, run by the closest thing to a father that Tommy will ever know grows to be one of the most evocative "characters" in the series, as well as the generator of a good deal of the action and comedy by-play. In short order Tommy gets on the bad side of local and Federal Government, especially when he refuses a gig to assassinate superheroes for a covert agency that distrusts freelance law-enforcement. He will take on corrupt superheroes, mad scientists, an insane flotilla of weird gangsters and goombahs, and a regular parade of super guest-stars turn up for him to embarrass. He pukes on Batman in 1, gets Green Lantern drunk in 10, and remember X-ray vision? Catwoman guests in 'Ace of Killers' (15-20*).

Ennis alternates between straight action comedy such as when Tommy and best friend Nat the Hat go on retainer for the local research lab, clearing up any potentially embarrassing problems that might affect their grant status (such as the lab assistant with a doorway to a hell-dimension up his bottom in 51-52) or the dinosaur incident that nearly devastates Gotham City(44-46) – and genuinely moving insights into the true nature of his profession such as when the SAS come after Tommy and Nat for their accidental killing of serving British soldiers during operation Desert Storm (23-27*) or the 'Closing Time' story arc that ends the series (53-60). It's always entertaining storytelling that owes as much to Sam Peckinpah and Buster Keaton as to Jack Kirby and Alan Moore. The annual, part of the 'Pulp Heroes' event is an impressive tribute to the westerns of Sergio Leone and is drawn by Ennis' long-time co-conspirators Carlos Ezquerra and Steve Pugh.~WW

Recommended: 13-14, 23-27, 53-60

HITMAN / LOBO: That Stupid Bastich

DC: *one-shot 2000*

This is a very funny comic by Garth Ennis and Doug Mahnke, completely disrespectful of Lobo. After shooting Lobo's eyes out, Hitman, Tommy Monaghan, spends most of the issue running away (though still managing to trick

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* Available in a collected edition

Lobo into fighting his way through a few of Tommy's enemies) before Sixpack's team turn up to help him out. Mahnke's artwork is tightly, but coarsely inked, matching the action and setting.~NF
Recommended

HITOMI And Her Girl Commandoes

Antarctic: *4 issue miniseries ('Shadow Hunter') 1992, 10 issues (Hitomi II) 1993-1997*

In this *Ninja High School* spin-off, the team of Hitomi, Mikki, Nemuri, Fujiko and Asashi try to retrieve a device stolen by the Amerasia Guild ('Shadow Hunter') and then the hunt is on for six crystals linked to the off world Geohammer. Through their friend, Isaac, the series explores issues of racism, but characterisation is otherwise left to humorous episodes during breaks in the action. Creator, Dave Wilson, has an excellent manga style, but the series is let down by near incoherent storytelling.~NF

J.R.R. Tolkein THE HOBBIT

Eclipse: *3 issue miniseries 1989-1990**

Hampered by restrictions, the comic adaptation is never quite able to convey the entire book. This begins well, though. For his part artist David Wenzel refrains from cuteness. His dwarves are careworn weatherbeaten creatures, his Gandalf suitably noble, his Gollum suitably deranged and his vistas beautiful. Only with the hairy feet of Bilbo Baggins does he lack the necessary touch. Three issues permit breathing space, but by 3 writer Chuck Dixon is incorporating large chunks of captioned text and requires massive word balloons for the voluminous amount of dialogue, resulting in cramped illustrations. For this amount of text one might as well read the book. Fans of *The Hobbit* may enjoy a new view of an old friend, but for all the fine illustration this is another compromised adaptation.~FP

HOKUM AND HEX

Marvel/Razorline: *9 issues 1993-1994*

Mediocre offering from the desk of Clive Barker as interpreted by writer Frank Lovece and Anthony Williams. Trip Monroe is a bad stand-up comedian given the power and role of Earth's defender without his knowledge and against his will. Now he must reluctantly defend the world from invading extra-dimensional monsters. Derivative tosh.~WW

HOLIDAY OUT

Renegade: *4 issues 1987*

Feeble local-newspaper humour strips accompany feeble humour-comic strips. Avoid.~WJ

Walt Disney's HOLIDAY PARADE

Disney: *2 issues 1990-1991*

Drawing the material largely from *Dell Giants* and *Christmas Parade* comics, the Carl Barks contributions to each issue apart, these seasonal reprints hadn't been seen for at least a generation. Under charming wraparound covers all the Disney characters famous in the 1940s and 1950s are present, with Talespin additionally represented in 1. A rare reprinted Tony Strobl Uncle Scrooge story features in 1, but otherwise the material is charming and professional without ever being anything more.~WJ

HOLLIDAY

Saddle Tramp Press: *2 issues 2001-2002*

While there's no doubting the enthusiasm of the creators, it's unclear who this was intended to appeal to. The liberties taken with Doc Holliday's life by the inclusion of incongruous supernatural encounters will put off those interested in the historical legend, while others will wonder about the unexplained bouts of coughing, for instance. And for a comic about a gunfighter there sure are a lot of talking heads.~FP

THE HOLLOW GROUNDS

Humanoids Publishing: *3 volumes 2000-2001*

The earliest volume originally, 'Carapaces' contains short science fiction tales on a theme of shells. Amidst the ruins of a civilisation, a couple remove their metal sheathes to have sex. A bio-robot, powering the world, reaches up from its isolation underground to try to touch humanity. The Fog Cutter is constantly interrupted from his obsessive sculpting of the beautiful Ursuline. In 'Zara', we learn that *The Hollow Grounds* is a system of seven planets, of which Zara is the fifth. It has two concentric layers that are independent and support separate civilisations, one horizontal, but constantly migrating so that they're always at the lowest level, the other operating vertically on the inner core. The adventurous Olive travels from the outer to the inner layer, where she meets the all-female inhabitants, including Nelle, but they're all threatened by a band of male pillagers, who think that the women will be an easy target.

'Nogegon' is the story of Nelle's search for Olive on the planet of the same name, the second in The Hollow Grounds. There, Nelle retraces Olive's relationship with a sculptracer, Natan, while trying to adjust to Nogegon laws, which are based on symmetry.

Luc and Francois Schuiten's beautifully drawn and complex worlds are fascinating, as much for the attention to making them believable as for the adventures that takes place on them. 'Carapaces' seems less accomplished overall, but only in so far as the artwork has more flourishes and is less architectural than the later volumes, which are more detailed and designed. All three volumes have previously appeared in *Heavy Metal*.~NF
Recommended: 'Zara', 'Nogegon'

HOLLYWOOD SUPERSTARS

Marvel/Epic: *5 issue miniseries 1990-1991*

Mark Evanier brings his screenwriting background to a series about a down-at-heel private-detective agency. The series is well written and well drawn, by Dan Spiegle, but the anecdotes incorporated into the stories are far more interesting than the stories themselves or the cast. The real highlights, though, are Evanier's rambling end-of-issue text pages, mixing gossip, jokes and a constant incredulity at the stupidity of Hollywood.~WJ

The HOLO BROTHERS

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1989, 10 issue limited series 1991-1992*

Jim Rohn's anarchic comedy adventure graduates from *Threat* into a special expanding on their background whilst setting the scene for the epic story of a cosmic coup d'etat in the follow-up series. When their good buddy Danny, the Emperor of the Galaxy is nearly assassinated, the Brothers use their individual skills, strategy, technology and excessive force, to save the Empire. Well-made and fun, but a little dated by contemporary standards.~WW

My Name Is HOLOCAUST

Milestone: *5 issue miniseries 1995*

Introduced in *Blood Syndicate*, Holocaust is a dreadlocked pyrotechnic who decides the time has come for him to have a larger slice of the underworld action in Dakota. This becomes awkward for the top-ranking suited criminals, who manoeuvre the legitimate law-enforcement agencies against him. Hot-tempered and often brutal, Holocaust has to learn the art of compromise in the face of insurmountable odds. The meshing of power and politics in a well constructed and conceived plot from Ivan Velez is combined with a decent supporting cast and acceptable art from Tommy Lee Edwards, and at the end of the series Holocaust is a different man.~FP

HOLY AVENGER

Slave Labor: *One-shot 1996*

There's a decent plot concealed in this mess about a priest discovering a mysterious relic and using it to scare off local hoodlums thereby escalating the situation. The problem is the execution, literally in both meanings of the word. The writing is sluggish and cliché-ridden, and the cast don't act in a rational manner.~WJ

HOLY CROSS

Fantagraphics: *3 issues 1994-1995*

Malachy Coney's stories are set in Northern Ireland, where the constant background of distrust and fear affects everyone. By turns poignant, poetic and amusing, the most readily accessible issue is 3, in which a child retreats from parental abuse into comic fantasies. Don't be deterred by the wildly different art styles of Davy Francis, Chris Hogg and Paul Holden, as each conveys the necessary emotion. Anyone enjoying these should also check out Coney and Holden's graphic novel *The Moon Looked Down and Laughed*.~FP

Recommended: 1-3

The HOLY TERROR

Image: *4 issue miniseries 2002-2003*

In advance of the return of the Silent One, masked wrestler Garcia defeats a bear, but loses his mask. Twenty years later, wrestler Max Maximum is given the mask to change his unpopular image and becomes the Holy Terror, only to start having nightmares about confronting his masked self. Gun-toting Father Mando Navarro and his armoured female assistant look to be the most interesting characters, but the wrestling setting is off-putting and at least in the first issue makes no sense. Phil Hester's artwork can by stylish, but there's too much grotesque flesh on show here.~NF

HOMEGROWN FUNNIES

Kitchen Sink: *One-shot 1971*

This is one of the key titles in underground legend Robert Crumb's canon as home to the notorious 'Whiteman Meets Bigfoot'. Whiteman, a typical middle-aged middle class American is captured by a bigfoot while out camping. This being Crumb, he falls for a female bigfoot and all sorts of sexual shenanigans ensue before his hirsute paramour is captured and dragged off to captivity. The strip encapsulates many of Crumb's preoccupations. There's the moral bankruptcy of middle America, the obsession with powerful women, and, as Whiteman and Bigfoot ultimately escape back to the forest, a rejection of modern society. The comic is rounded out with a rather dubious Angelfood McSpade strips that treads on the dangerous ground of ethnic stereotyping and does Crumb few favours. The comic remains one of Crumb's key works both artistically and thematically, but the sexual content will continue to divide audiences.~DAR

Recommended

HOMICIDE

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1990*

Before *The Mask* the team of John Arcudi and Doug Mahnke were turning out good stories about hard-boiled police detective Ford. This one-shot special is a grim tale of religious superstition and human sacrifice. Further stories can be found in *Dark Horse Presents* 25-27, 48-49 and 53-55.~WJ

THE HONEYMOONERS

Lodestone: *One-shot 1986*
Triad: *12 issues 1987-1988*

The famous kitchen sink sitcom of the 1950s starred Jackie Gleason as chubby bus driver Ralph Kramden. His blowhard schemes and antics invariably involve his spindley neighbour Ed Norton and their respective wives Alice and Trixie. Comic fans might enjoy 6's comic theme with guest appearances by The Lone Ranger, The Spirit and a caped crusader who calls himself Bruce, but otherwise every issue is much of a muchness for anyone not a devoted fan of the show. The writer on the one-shot and then 1-4 is Robert Loren Fleming whose dialogue-heavy scripts are still funny. Publisher Norman Abramoff then collaborates with writer Thomas Edward West on all the lumbering efforts that remain. Artist Vince Masucchia relinquishes the pencilling to Win Mortimer from 4, continuing to ink most issues. Mortimer is drawing all but the facials by 8. The pages are coloured with markers, initially by Musacchia, and have a cheap, pastelly, greetings card look to them. Pure cheese – and not the kind one savours.~SW

HONG ON THE RANGE

Image/Flypaper Press: *3 issue miniseries 1997-1998*

The first issue's introduction suggests this is a 'director's cut', as William F. Wu adapts his own novel. In condensing the novel, though, there appears to be a lot of detail missing rather than restored. After an ecological disaster, bionics and solar energy give mankind a second chance but the world's a harsher place and the 'Wild West' has been reborn. Louie Hong is a control-natural, someone whose body can't accept cybernetic implants. This tells his journey westwards as he accidentally becomes a wanted man, falling deeper into trouble the more he follows the real outlaws to clear his name. Jeff Lafferty's artwork is very distinctive, not at all realistic but suited to the many strange mechanics that Wu invents. As a comedy science-fiction western, it has its moments.~NF

HONK!

Fantagraphics: *5 issues 1987-1988*

Generally well-compiled offbeat humour anthology title combining the best material from British and American cartoonists then self-publishing. Every issue has work by Eddie Campbell, Phil Elliott, David Miller and J.R. Williams. Bob Boze Bell, John Callahan and Glenn Dakin are in most, and there's plenty of other good material, including Marc Hempel's forerunner to Gregory in 2, Dan Clowes in 1 and rare translated Gotlib in 4 and 5. Each issue also contains informative interviews, and Alan Moore text pieces from Knockabout are reprinted in 2 and 4.~FP

Recommended: 2, 3, 5

HONKYTONK SUE

Bob Boze Bell: *4 issues 1979-1980*

Apparently collected from a regional newspaper strip and published by the cartoonist himself, the adventures of the "Queen of Country Swing" are bizarre, but hugely enjoyable. Sue is a goddess of the American Mid-West, mistress of every situation. Whether she's dancing the crap out of Mr Disco, getting abducted by aliens and teaching them to line-dance, road-testing all comers to find the world's Most Mediocre Lover, or reuniting the Beatles and converting them to country swing (hey, they were all alive then, okay?), Sue takes charge and kicks ass, backstopped by her loyal, if insecure, nutritionally unchallenged buddy Donna-Jean. Closest in spirit to the 'street-level' comics of the mid-1970s, more mature than the mainstream but not as gross as most undergrounds, these stories are only dated by the odd contemporary reference. Being in a setting totally alien to most comics readers anyway, the freshness of the character remains unimpaired. In the late 1980s, there were rumours of a new *Honkytonk Sue* graphic novel, 'The Man Canyon', but sadly nothing has surfaced.~HS

Recommended: 1-4

THE HOOD

Max: *6 issue miniseries 2002**

A small-time hoodlum chances on a pair of boots that let him walk on air, and a cloak that turns him invisible provided he holds his breath. Seeing these as his ticket to the big score, he and his accomplice plan to rob a big league gangster. In the best tradition of such stories, it goes wrong. Brian Vaughan populates his cinematic script with well-drawn characters, throws in some good jokes and ensures the plot doesn't follow the predictable path. Kyle Hotz's Wrightsonesque flourishes might not be the most appropriate art style for a story set in a gritty real world New York, but he conveys everything necessary. It's not as dialogue driven, but anyone who likes the work of Brian Michael Bendis ought to enjoy this.~FP

Recommended: 1-6

HOOK

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1991**

Adaptation that transcends an average film script by virtue of excellent artwork from the likes of Craig Hamilton, Gray Morrow, John Ridgway, Dennis Rodier and Charles Vess (who also adapted the film script).~WJ

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* Available in a collected edition

THE HOON

Eenieweenie: *6 issues 1995-1996*
Tapestry: *2 issues 1996*

Simple, amiable and obese, the Hoon is a peripatetic smalltown superhero, although he never manifests unusual abilities despite his costume. This is a very well drawn and mildly charming title, by Robb Bihun with the back cover illustrations excellent, but it lacks the compelling hook to make it a compulsory purchase. All issues stand alone, but the best sampler is the first Tapestry comic, giving all the necessary background in a sometimes poignant alien probing of our hero. He later returns in the pages of *Comic Library International*.~WJ

HOPELESS SAVAGES

Oni Press: *4 issue miniseries 2001*, 4 issue miniseries ('Ground Zero') 2002*

The Hopeless Savages are Rat, Arsenal, Twitch and Zero, the children of Dirk Hopeless and Nikki Savage, formerly punk rockers, now peacefully domesticated. In the first series, however, with their parents kidnapped by a former manager of Dirk's, who wants the rights to an old song, the kids must first find Rat, who left home ten years previously. 'Ground Zero', concentrates more on Zero, trying to be a member of her own band and dealing with documentary film makers, re-mastering her mother's music and a first romance. With the first series, Jen Van Meter has written a finely tuned comedy, full of attitude, wit and fist fights (none of the family are shy of defending themselves). Christine Norrie's artwork is like a more jagged, less manga-influenced, Chynna Clugston-Major, who contributes a colour strip to the collection and also a flashback sequence to 'Ground Zero' (as do Andi Watson and Norrie). The second series is less successful, partly because Bryan O'Malley's artwork isn't as sharp as Norrie's, but also because the humour of the family's interactions with themselves and others is diminished.~NF

Recommended: Miniseries one 1-4

HOPPY The Marvel Bunny

Fawcett: *15 issues 1945-1947*

Originally appearing in Fawcett's Funny Animals (from 1), as a clone of Captain Marvel, Hoppy says "Shazam!" to become Captain Marvel Bunny, but must keep his identity a secret, even from girlfriend, Millie, or lose his powers. Each issue contains several Hoppy stories as well as back-ups featuring Sherlock the Monk (who teams up with Hoppy in a story in 5), Benny Beaver, Willie the Worm and Chippy the Chipmunk (in later issues). Not all stories required the powers of Captain Marvel, as Hoppy finds when his cold helps him replace Bing Bunny in 5, but most stories are based on Hoppy's need to rescue someone from villains like Dr Frog, Ignatz Inventor or the powerful perfume of Bubbles LaBunny (9). Other stories are based on literary recreations such as the Taming of Millie in 7, which involves a play featuring most of the series' funny animals. Chad Grothkopf, who created all of the Fawcett funny animals, including Hoppy provided the story ideas and concepts, as well as most of the distinctive artwork, with scripts by various Fawcett writers, and this is a fun, engaging, and undemanding series.~NF

HOPSTER'S TRACKS

Bongo: *2 issues 1998-2000*

Created by Stephanie Gladden, Hopster's Tracks is a fine funny-animal comic in the Barks' tradition, managing to present humour and slapstick without losing sight of character and emotion. Jake builds a fire-breathing dinosaur over a gas station (much to Terry, the owner's horror) in 1 and 2 features a feud over a used-car and insurance headaches for Terry's girlfriend, Melba. Stories featuring these characters first appeared in *Action Girl* 9 and 10.~NF

HORNY BIKER SLUT

Last Gasp: *13 issues 1990-1998*

Few sexual indulgences are left uncatered for within the pages of *Horny Biker Slut*, all with a jism count porn features can only dream of. The prime mover is John Howard, sadly not the Australian Prime Minister, whose violent and insatiable women are so removed from reality as to render their graphic and repeated penetration light years away from sex as we know it.

Equally unsavoury sex is rendered in more appealing fashion by Randy Clark (2, 3), Spain appears in 5, and James Buchett's art starts well (most issues from 3), but deteriorates issue after issue. The comic is very silly and not meant to be taken seriously, but many will be offended, so tread warily.~FP

HOROBI

Viz: *Series one 8 issues 1990, series two 7 issues 1990-1991*

Shuichi and Zen, two friends with the same birthday, find themselves and their mutual friends in the middle of a mystery as students are murdered in horrific ways. To make matters worse, Zen has been dreaming of the murders before they happen and begins to hear voices in the dreams. A series of huge monsters start to appear, causing a great deal of damage before just disappearing, leaving the authorities with no clue to their creation. As the tale unfolds we discover that the deaths and monsters foretell the coming of Horobi, god of destruction, and that the two friends' families (as part of rival political and financial organisations) have been secretly grooming them, one to represent God, the other the Devil, in a final epic battle that will decide the fate of the world. As the friends try to understand the reasons for the events that are happening around them, they find themselves struggling to cope with the demands of their separate romantic and familial relationships. Yoshihisa Tagami's complex storytelling and stylised artwork make this an absorbing read, which slowly builds to a devastating finale. The philosophical observations that underlie the climactic battle are unconvincing but the series is well worth investigation.~NF

HORROR IN THE DARK

Fantagor: *4 issues 1991*

Richard Corben's reputation rests on his artwork, generally enhanced by his unique gloomy colouring style. Seeing his horror stories here in toned black and white then is already disappointing, and further despondency ensues regarding the computer art process, which instead of enhancing muddies the art altogether. More's the pity since from what can be made out this is prime Corben, and surely he can't have been happy with the final reproduction. The stories are the standard horror stuff Corben has drawn over the years for Warren and *Heavy Metal*, fleshed out with the ill-advised inclusion of stories from other Corbenesque artists. Completists may well want this, but for the casual fan there are far better examples of Corben on form.~FP

THE HORROR OF COLLIER COUNTY

Dark Horse Maverick: *5 issue miniseries 1999-2000*

Richard Tommaso's indie comics stew: Take about a pound and a half of the Hernandezes, a cup of Daniel Clowes and a pinch of Charles Burns; Serve on a bed of George Romero zombie film. Nourishing, if not nutritious. Bonus marks for all pages, including front, back and inside covers, being story pages.~GK

HORROR SHOW

Caliber: *1 issue 1991*

Behind a wildly inappropriate Richard Sala cover, this is a collection of Mark Burbey's gory horror and science fiction strips from *Dr.Wirtham's Comix and Stories* and the fanzine *RBCC*. With a range of artists, from Rich Larson, Gene Day and Marc Hempel to several lesser lights, this is inevitably a mixed bag, but there is far worse out there.~DAR

THE HORRORIST

DC/Vertigo: *2 issue microseries 1995*

The Horrorist is a delicately-painted, meandering John Constantine special, in which Constantine, burnt out by all the horrors he's seen, tracks down a young woman who causes catastrophe wherever she goes, from famine to crashes to suicides. The highly symbolic Jamie Delano story comes over as a little pompous, although the dry humour he brings to Constantine is appealing. David Lloyd provides bleak-coloured, loose artwork, full of subtle lines, particularly impressive for its use of underdrawing and coloured linework. Worth a look for the art alone.~FJ

HORSEMAN

Kevlar: *3 issues (0-2) 1996-1997*

It's a shame this comic about a wandering knight in 16th century Korea required more sympathetic art, as the simple stories, at least in 0-1, have an appeal. 2, for some reason, updates the action to present day Japan, and that there was never a 3 says it all.~WJ

Totally HORSES!

Painted Pony Press: *5 issues 1997-1998*

Presumably aimed at younger readers, this magazine anthology contains a strange mix of new, old and translated material. The lead strips are by the clean-lined, Lena Furberg, themed on the love and care for horses. Black Fury strips by Charles Nicholas and Vince Alascia are reprinted in 1-3 and 5 (first published by Charlton). The other material consists of pinups and gag strips, 'Chomper' (again by Furberg) and 'Fred Horse'. 5 was published with a dedication to the U.S. Equestrian Team, a story about trying to make the team, and a proportion of the profits going to them. An oddity, to be sure, though Furberg's artwork is pleasing (even on the more elaborately inked, cartoony 'Chomper').~NF

HOT CRACKERS

Last Gasp: *1 issue 1972*

The casual misogyny of much "underground" material passed off as humour is distressing, and accentuated by the passage of time. There's much of it in *Hot Crackers*, Peter D. Clapp's contribution to Last Gasp's *All-New Underground Comix* series. If you've ever wanted to witness sex between Mickey Mouse and Little Lulu you're advised to seek help, but this is the place to see it.~FP

HOT LIPS

Eros: *2 issue microseries 1993*

Reprint of Benarides and Tobalina's uneasy graphic novel about sexual freedom. Elisa, leaving her partner of 10 years because of her boredom and his unfaithfulness, flies out to a new exciting life in Seville. Whereupon, this being a sex comic, she's immediately set up on by three sexy young toughs who rape her repeatedly. She doesn't enjoy it, but the reader is clearly intended to, just as he/she is intended to cheer as, with the help of her best friend Shelley, a sex counsellor, and her new lover, a therapist, she beats up some other thugs in a psychodrama. Thus she reclaims her femininity, allowing her to screw the therapist without problems. A lot. Tobalinas draws the story in a more detailed, restrained style than some of his later work, with lighter use of blacks and narrower linework, perhaps in an attempt to appeal to a wide audience, which somehow adds to the sense of moral uneasiness and lack of panache about the story.~FJ

HOT STUF'

SQP: *8 issues 1974-1978*

One of several comics serving as a kind of halfway house between the underground and the mainstream scenes, *Hot Stuf'* was a black and white anthology that never quite established a distinctive personality. Typically, many of the strips were science-fiction or fantasy-oriented, by far the best being by Richard Corben (1-3, 5) and Gray Morrow reviving his 'Orion' strip in 2 and 4, and of particular note was a lovely 1930s detective strip from the great Alex Toth in 4. The comic's most interesting artist, however, was Bill Maher, whose work ran the gamut from bigfoot cartoons and slick dystopian science fiction to rough-hewn autobiography and manga pastiches. Most issues contained his work, with 7 and 8 being his best. Peculiarly, he doesn't appear to have cropped up in any other publications and that's very much our loss.~DAR

Recommended: 4, 7, 8

HOT WHEELS

DC: *6 issues 1970-1971*

A tie-in with a line of racing car toys, and aimed at boys of about twelve. Jack Wheeler is the son of a retired racing driver, and he and his friends are the 'good', law-abiding teen drivers in town. Dexter Carter is the son of a millionaire, and he and his henchboys, Dexter's Demons, are giving teen drivers a bad name. With lots of whizzing around race-tracks, attempts at sabotage, and virtue winning through, it's perfectly likeable, helped by artwork by Alex Toth. Worth reading for the shining transparency of the pre-adolescent fantasy – such as the story in which the Chief of Police allows Jack and his friends to soup up four police cars and run their own stakeout on a gang of armed bank-robbers. Ah, innocent times.~FC

Recommended: 3, 4

HOTEL HARBOR VIEW

Viz: *1 volume 1990*

Two terse and extremely disturbing stories by Natsuo Sekikawa and artist Jiroh Taniguchi. The reader is shown in intimate detail the events leading up to two assassinations. The assassins are both women. The book has a distinctly dark, misogynist feel, but to be fair, this is hardly an unusual quality in the hard-boiled detective fiction and film noir that inspired these pieces. The identification of sex with death and of the female as an agent of betrayal could offend. Manga's tendency to give the impression of slow-motion action sequences is unexpectedly magnified to good effect here. The moment of death is spread over several pages where the victims seem to be watching the fatal bullets glide toward them. The slightly stilted art is drawn in a realistic style that nevertheless conveys both stories' sense of place perfectly.~SW

Recommended

HOTSPUR

Eclipse: *3 issue miniseries 1987*

Swashbuckling fantasy as a stage-fight choreographer is transported to another dimension where he's able to live the life he idealises for real instead of vicariously, adopting the alias Hotspur. Rather more successful than DC's role-playing game titles, there's still a feeling of them as Hotspur encounters demons, trolls and the like. He's actually been summoned for A Higher Purpose, but by the third issue you don't really care anymore.~WJ

HOURMAN

DC: *25 issues 1999-2001*

After the *DC One Million* series, the android Hourman from the future tries to come to terms with humanity and being a superhero. He decides Snapper Carr is a good link between the two and goes to live with him. Hourman's naivety then sets up battles with villains like Amazo and the Lord of Time while allowing for appearances by Tomorrow Woman and an ongoing subplot concerning the original Hourman and his son. Hourman and Snapper's ex-wife, Bethany, become romantically involved, leading to complications later during a storyline involving more than one Hourman. A couple of supporting characters are added in the demon Torcher, during the *Day of Judgement* crossover in 8 and original Hourman villain Dr Togg after his attempt to transform Bethany into a Gombezi in 10. The issue of Snapper betraying the JLA is covered in 16; other guest stars include Justice Legion A in 11-13 and the JSA in 18-19. If you enjoy time travel stories, Tom Peyer delivers some clever variations and a consistently entertaining supporting cast whilst the artwork by Rags Morales is sharp without being too flashy.~NF

HOUSE OF HAMMER

Top Sellers/Quality: *30 issues 1976-1978 (1-23), 1982-1984 (24-30)*

This magazine was a strange amalgam of horror reviews and strip adaptations of Hammer films. Despite the format's inevitable shortcomings, it featured some good work from the cream of British comics talent. Writer Steve Moore (among others) performed miracles condensing full-length film scripts into twenty pages (or less), but inevitably it was the art that provided the principal interest. British talents like Paul Neary (1, 5), Brian Bolland (13 with Trev Goring, 17) and David Lloyd (23) acquitted themselves well, as did the magazine's big discovery John Bolton (6, 10, 14). His first adaptation, of *Dracula, Prince of Darkness* spawned the spin-off strip 'Father Shandor', again by Moore and Bolton, in 8, 16 and 22, which far surpassed its source and eventually led to a lengthier run in *Warrior*. Another semi-original strip predated Shandor: 'Kronos, Vampire Hunter' by Moore and Ian Gibson in 1-3, later to be drawn by Steve Parkhouse. The EC-esque back-up 'Van Helsing's Terror Tales' boasted some fine art by Bolton (4), Dave Gibbons (7, 15, 23), Jim Baikie (9) and Pat Wright (16, 20). The comic's highpoint, however, was consistently provided by the veteran Brian Lewis. Whether painting covers (most issues), adapting films (4, 8, 9, 19), or drawing 'Terror Tales' (2, 6, 11, 13), he produced gloriously vibrant, vital strips that deserve to reach a wider audience. The revived magazine was *Halls of Horror*, a title used since 17, and was almost exclusively text-based, its sole strip being a *Monster Club* adaptation by editor Dez Skinn and artists Bolton and Lloyd in 25 and 26 (reprinting a promo booklet drawn a few years earlier), Lewis' final strip was intended for the original, never printed, version of 24 and finally appeared in 29.~DAR

HOUSE OF JAVA

NBM: *1 volume 1998, 4 issues 2000-2001**

Yet again an artist, in this case Mark Murphy, wastes his talent writing his own strips. They're vignettes of contemporary coffee-shop conversation, something like debased Jules Feiffer, and sometimes fun, but there are only a couple in each issue. Otherwise there are rambling tales about the dubious personal growth of young people who work in bars or coffee shops or comic shops. The influence of J. D. Salinger is made explicit in one story. The initial one-off's centrepiece, about a shy girl who comes from small town Texas to Seattle to have allegedly hip fun in bookshops with Australian travellers, is absolutely interminable. No wonder Kurt Cobain shot himself.~GK

HOUSE OF MYSTERY

DC: *321 issues 1951-1983*

DC/Vertigo: *One-shot 1999*

Conceived by editor Jack Schiff as a mystery anthology, the title went through a brief superhero phase in the 1960s before returning to its horror roots for a final fifteen years. The 1950s market was dominated by horror titles, and DC cashed in on the craze, though, typical of the company, its stories were hopelessly compromised by their own timidity. These competent, though uninspired, tales were at least well served artistically by the likes of Mort Meskin, Ruben Moreira and Nick Cardy. Jack Kirby surfaced briefly in the late 1950s, but the era's real gems were provided by Alex Toth in 109, 120 and 149.

With 143 the comic changed direction abruptly as the Martian Manhunter transferred from back-up status in Detective, but Jack Miller's scripts and Joe Certa's art never manages to rise above mediocre. More fondly remembered was a second superhero strip, 'Robby Reed – Dial H For Hero', by Dave Wood and Jim Mooney, with Robby's ever-changing super-alter ego. Neither strip had much staying power, and when Joe Orlando became editor with 174 he wasted no time in booting the pair out.

Orlando redesigned the comics in the mould of EC's infamous horror line, to which he'd contributed, complete with its own 'horror host', Cain. By 178 he had dispensed with reprints and began to feature work by the best writers and artists in the field, cleverly mixing old and new writers. The likes of Robert Kanigher and Jack Oleck were combined with neophyte scripters Gerry Conway, Len Wein and Marv Wolfman, but it was artistically that the comic really shone. Of particular note are strips by Neal Adams (178, 179, 186, 228), Wally Wood (180, 183, 184, 199), Berni Wrightson (179-181,183, 186, 188, 191, 195, 201, 204, 221) and Alex Toth (182, 184, 187, 190, 194). Indeed, it was a Toth strip written by Kanigher that was the highlight of this period, 187's anti-hunting shocker 'Mask of the Red Fox'. Other talented artists such as Gil Kane, Ralph Reese, Gray Morrow and Al Williamson crop up with regularity in 180-200, the latter containing a particularly nice Mike Kaluta job.

Filipino artists like Tony DeZuniga had been introduced as early as 190, and as the comic passed 200 they came to dominate it. With artists of the quality of Alfredo Alcala and Alex Niño (204, 212, 213, 220, 224, 225, 245, 250) this was no bad thing, and consequently any issue between 210 and 230 is worth a look. By far the most technically accomplished Filipino artist was Nestor Redondo and he was on particularly fine form on this title, so any of his strips are worth a look (194, 195, 197, 202, 203, 211, 214, 217, 219, 226, 227, 229, 235, 241). One non-Filipino highlight was the criminally overlooked Canadian artist Bill Payne, who drew two outstanding strips in 206 and 207. 224-229 were hundred-page spectaculars featuring a nice mix of old and new material. Of particular interest was 'Nightmare Castle' in 229, a thirty-six-page Gothic epic by Kanigher and Redondo that climaxes with the heroine giving birth to Satan!

While the title was artistically impeccable, the writers on *House of Mystery* were rarely as inspired, with the notable exception of Michael Fleisher, whose stories always had a bit more bite. Probably his peak was the controversial killer-clown story 'Pingo' (221), drawn with gusto by Frank Thorne. Fleisher aside, 230-250 fell into a curious rut, with only the Oleck / Paul Kirchner and Neal Adams story 'Deep Sleep' in 236 worthy of mention. It took a change of format to bring the comic to life again.

251-259 were dollar comics boasting a full eighty pages of new material, which ensured that each issue had at least a few gems. In addition to the likes of Wood (251), Morrow (255) and Marshall Rogers (254), almost every issue has an Alex Niño masterpiece and 253 featured an all-too-rare Sandy Plunkett art job. 259 and 260 carried gorgeous art by Noly Panaligan, but the last few years of the comic saw new American talent supplant the regular Filipinos, occasionally to the title's detriment. Early discoveries were Arthur Suydam (256, 257, 261) and Michael Golden (257, 259), though it was new writer J.M. DeMatteis who was to have the biggest impact here. His best stories were 'Hellpark', with Rogers, and the ultimate fan-boy exposé 'Collector' (270), beautifully drawn by Jim Sherman and Joe Rubinstein. He also created *House of Mystery*'s last continuing strip, 'I Vampire' (with art from Tom Sutton), which mixed Gothic ambience with his trademark intelligence. It ran from 291-319, and two issues later the comic, and effectively DC's entire horror line, ended, leaving a rich heritage for the discerning reader to discover.

The one-shot is an intelligently crafted compilation of the comic's horror years, with an emphasis on Berni Wrightson's output, and a new framing sequence from Neil Gaiman and Sergio Aragonés. It is as good a place as any for the curious newcomer to start.~DAR

Recommended: 109, 120, 149, 178-195, 200, 204, 206, 207, 219, 221, 224-229, 251-261, 270, 274

HOUSE OF SECRETS

DC: *154 issues 1956-1966 (1-80), 1969-1978 (81-154)*

Like its sister title *House of Mystery* this comic went through an early period of short twist-in-the-tail stories followed by a flirtation with superheroes and finally an EC-styled horror anthology. Following a largely uneventful first few years, *House of Secrets* 23 presented the first regular feature: Mark Merlin, 'sleuth of the supernatural'. These proved to be universally banal adventures, not helped by some very tired

Mort Meskin artwork. Far better was Eclipso, from 61, by Bob Haney and Lee Elias. Whenever top scientist Bruce Gordon is exposed to an eclipse he turns into... Eclipso, the twist being that Eclipso was a villain. The first few stories, particularly those drawn by Alex Toth (63-67) were quite inventive, but the idea wore thin, not helped by some lamentable Jack Sparling art. With 73 Mark Merlin became Prince Ra-Man and 80 saw Eclipso pitted against Prince Ra-Man in mortal combat. Not surprisingly, cancellation beckoned.

House of Secrets was revived as an addition to DC's growing horror line with the portly Abel, Cain's brother, as host. Though patchier than House of Mystery it had its share of top artists like Toth (83), Morrow (89, 90), Wood (91) and Adams (82, 90) and the same mixture of old and new writers. Particularly notable strips were a Gil Kane/Neal Adams sword-and-sorcery epic in 85, a Mike Kaluta insect-fest in 98 and, probably Jack Oleck's best story, the poignant Monster, drawn in the finest EC style by Wally Wood in 96. More importantly, 92 introduced Len Wein and Berni Wrightson's Swamp Thing in a story that remains affecting and well worth searching out in DC's classic reprint series. Despite this, there's too much Jack Sparling and Bill Draut artwork for comfort, and consequently the issues dominated by Filipino artists (99-130) provide the comic's most consistently entertaining period.

Amongst the typically high-quality artwork by Alfredo Alcala and Gerry Talaoc and Co. it's an intricately etched vampire strip by Jess Jodloman in 108 that stands out. Alex Niño provided a number of hallucinogenically compelling masterpieces (101, 103, 106, 115, 117, 126, 128, 131, 147, 153), with 109 demanding a place in any serious collection. It was Nestor Redondo, though, who proved the most compelling draughtsman: his strips in 95, 113 and 134 stand comparison with any of the era's more lauded artists. The best stories of the period were generally written by Steve Skeates, though he never quite reached the inventive heights of Michael Fleisher's 'A Connecticut Ice Cream Salesman In King Arthur's Court', drawn by Alex Toth in 123.

Issues after 130 were a mixed bag, with highpoints being a number of strips by Leo Duranoña, a short medieval strip by José Luis Garcia-Lopez (154) and 140's strip featuring the Patchwork Man by Gerry Conway and Nestor Redondo. Arthur Suydam's unique and disturbing art had cropped up in 119 and 131, but found its best expression in the Cary Burkett-scripted 'Love Me... Love My Demon' in 151. That issue also features a lovely Michael Golden strip so it's well worth searching out, though generally later issues are for completists only. For readers wanting a taste of earlier material 93-98 are all fifty-two pages and reprint a fair number of 1950s stories, many by the ubiquitous Toth.~DAR

Recommended: 63-67, 83, 85, 92, 95, 96, 98, 99, 108, 109, 113, 123, 134, 151.

HOUSE OF SECRETS

DC/Vertigo: *25 issues 1996-1998, 2 issue microseries ('Façade') 2000*

The story of a forthright runaway who is also a habitual liar. Against her wishes Irene "Rain" Harper becomes Witness for The Juris, a ghostly tribunal who occupy the old, cursed house she's squatting in. There Clius, Digol, Ni An, Ruby and corpulent disciplinarian Pfaultz are overseen by the disembodied spirit Plyck as they pass judgement on those whose sins of omission cause real or emotional injustices. Along the way Rain meets Traci another, considerably less mature, runaway and Ben a would-be rock musician. Rain soon establishes herself as the rock group's lyricist, unaware that sleazy private eye Nick Calderone is on her trail along with ex-prostitute Gigi. The opening, introductory sequence in 1-5* sees Traci raped by Rain's boyfriend; a secret not kept for long. A couple of stand-alone issues follow, including 7's recounting of the house's origins. The story continues in arcs: 'The Road To You: Getting There' (8-10) shows how Nick operates, and in 11-16 we learn a lot more about The Juris one by one in 'The Book of Law' whilst 'The Road To You: Being There' continues as a three-page back-up in 11-15. 'The Road To You: Leaving There' (17-19) sees Nick and Gigi finally tracking Rain to Seattle, while in 'The Basement' (21-23) Rain deals with some hellish self-deceptions in preparation for 'The Attic' (24-25). In 'Façade' Rain returns home with Traci and Ben to face more adolescent secrets, but why are The Juris there too?

The narration by Rain, articulated in Steven Seagle's suitably informal dialogue, has subtlety, wit and the impact of modern foul-mouthed vernacular. The striking look of the story is thanks to Teddy Kristiansen who works on the majority of issues with fellow Danes Bjarne Hansen, a really distinctive colourist, and Christian Hojgaard, who provides layouts in 8-10, 15 and 21-25. Guest artists include Duncan Fegredo in 6, Dean Ormston in 11, Guy Davis in 12 and D'Israeli in 16. Kristiansen paints the covers and all of Facade's expressionistic bookend to the series. The use of adult subject matter is always tempered by Seagle's root-concept of secrets being destructive.~SW

Recommended: 1-5, 17-23

HOUSE OF YANG

Charlton: *6 issues 1975-1976*
ACG: *1 issue 1998*
Modern Comics: *12 issues 2000*

Not so much a spin-off of Charlton's other martial arts book, *Yang, House of Yang* is most accurately described as a companion title. Sun Yang is Yang's cousin and, while Yang moved to America, Sun Yang remained in a 19th century feudal China, just coming into contact with the outside world. With typically solid if unspectacular Joe Gill scripts and dynamic, evocative drawings by Korean artist Sanho Kim, this is an unusual and enjoyable, if undemanding, title that is worth the price of admission for its beautiful painted covers alone. The ACG and Modern Comics issues reprint earlier stories.~DAR

HOW TO PICK UP GIRLS IF YOU'RE A COMIC BOOK GEEK

3 Finger Prints: *One-shot 1997*

Although Rich Koslowski draws in a pleasing, broad style, his 'omnipotent narrator tells comic book geek how to get it on with the opposite sex' story is pretty predictable. There are the mandatory jokes about washing, and not wearing your underpants on the outside, but throughout the tone is of a weak in-joke that rests a trifle uneasily but allows readers to think "Gee, well, I'm not as bad as all that then (I hope)." Pretty, but shallow.~FJ

HOWARD THE DUCK

Marvel: *Series one 33 issues, 1 Annual, 1 Treasury 1976-1979 (1-31*), 1986 (32-33), series two 10 issues 1979-1981, one-shot ('Holiday Special') 1996*
Max: *6 issue miniseries 2002**

Howard the Duck was, to begin with, a throwaway joke character that turned up in *Fear* 19, devoted to the adventures of a swamp monster, Man-Thing. The unexpected popularity of writer Steve Gerber and artist Val Mayerik's irascible talking fowl, a more cynical and 'grown-up' variant on Disney's Donald, brought Howard back for two short back-up strips in *Giant-Size Man-Thing* (fnarr fnarr) 4 and 5, both written by Gerber and drawn by the then-fashionable Frank Brunner. The stories chronicled Howard's arrival on Earth from another dimension, and quickly established an enduring theme –the duck's utter fear of, and loathing for, this barbaric new world of 'hairless apes' (or, "trapped in a world he never made", as the cover tagline put it.) All these early stories are reprinted in the handsome Marvel Treasury Edition, which also includes an all-new and very funny Howard story by Gerber and Sal Buscema.

Howard the Duck 1 featured the first appearance of Beverly Switzler, the duck's long-term significant other. This issue proved to be so collectible that Marvel had to go back for a second printing, an extremely unusual occurrence in those days. 2 gave us the first glimpse of the Kidney Lady, Howard's arch-nemesis and the utter personification of corrupt bourgeois morality. The departure of Brunner marked a turning point, with the transitional 3, drawn by John Buscema. It chiefly satirised the macho appeal of martial arts movies and comics, but ended on an highly emotional gracenote that indicated the increasing complexity of Gerber's mature writing style. Joined by definitive Howard art team of Gene Colan and Steve Leialoha from 4 on, Gerber stopped using the comic simply as a vehicle for genre parody and started writing a form of venomous, but hilarious social satire that has rarely been equalled, let alone bettered, in American comics. Howard started to function as a mouthpiece through which Gerber could express all of his own feelings of anger, frustration and disgust at the modern world. As a beautifully warped form of personal expression, *Howard the Duck* therefore had much more in common with seventies American Underground Comix than with standard mainstream fare.

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* Available in a collected edition

4 to 14 are all virtually flawless, and utterly essential, with 5 the most perfect issue in the entire run, the one where Gerber best sustains the tricky balance between humour, pathos and scorn. In 5, Howard desperately tries to raise some money by taking on a number of highly unsuitable jobs such as repossessing television sets, appearing on a kids TV show, becoming a professional wrestler. This not only cements the duck's status as one of life's losers, but also grounds the comic in an economic reality that's never normally acknowledged in mainstream 'funny books'. The story of Howard's nervous breakdown and demonic possession (10-14) found Gerber straining at the limits of conventional narrative sense, and represented the apex of his experiments with form and style. 16 was given over entirely to a long, indulgent, breathtakingly pessimistic fill-in text piece by Gerber and various illustrators that deconstructed comics, creativity, and the author himself. Elements prompted Gerber's later *Nevada* series. For a while after that the comic lost its way a little, with Gerber getting bogged down in the rather flabby Dr. Bong storyline and seemingly trying just a little too hard to find new targets for his satiric angst and ire. The low point came with lame *Star Wars* parodies in 22-23 that featured the return of artist Val Mayerik, who unfortunately didn't come close to matching Colan's mastery of light, shade and human expression.

Happily, Colan was teamed with the excellent inker Klaus Janson for 25-27, a three part storyline involving old Marvel villain the Ringmaster and his rather faded Circus of Crime. At first sight this represented a nervous retreat from the topical and the surreal on Gerber's part, but in fact his bittersweet celebration of chronic failure and broken dreams marked a welcome and much-needed change of tone and emphasis. Sadly this new stylistic turn wasn't given time to develop, as an escalating dispute with Marvel over creator's rights, as Howard briefly also became a newspaper strip, caused Gerber to abandon the company, and his most famous creation, in mid-story. The series limped on for another four issues, all of them by inferior writers utterly clueless as to the secret of Howard's success. 32 and 33 appeared some seven years later, but were as worthless as the ten issues of the black and white magazine or the one-off Holiday Special issued in 1996. Happily all Gerber stories have been reissued in the cheap format *Essential Howard the Duck.*

Gerber's legal battle with Marvel over ownership of Howard was resolved just prior to the release of the *Howard the Duck* movie in 1986. This notorious cinematic turkey not only trampled all over Gerber's visionary genius, it also effectively killed the character's commercial appeal stone dead for at least the next decade, although Howard still put in a torpid appearances in the likes of *Daydreamers* and *Generation X*. In 2002, however, Gerber finally got the chance to write more *Howard the Duck*, this time illustrated by Phil Winslade and Glenn Fabry, wherein Howard is mutated into a mouse. There were just enough flashes of wit and invention to suggest that Gerber hadn't entirely lost the plot, but the old snap and spark was largely missing. Sad to say, *Howard the Duck* now feels dangerously like a bygone relic of the 1970s, a character best left frozen in time, or in the fond memories of a generation of thirty-something fans. As Howard himself learnt over the course of his comic, you can never go home again.~AL

Recommended: 3-14, 16, 24- 27

HUGO

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1983, 3 issues 1984-1985**

Subtitled "Fairy Tales For Adults" and infused with the sensibilities of 1930s cartoons, Hugo is a rare funny-animal book that's actually funny. Milton Knight's Hugo is the spirited and confident court jester hopelessly in love with the glamorous and selfish Princess Trish, daughter of the downhome King Adolph the Eleventeenth. Hugo vies for the affections of the Princess with the vain and egotistical Sir Loin De Beef, and all regulars take a turn in the spotlight. The one-shot is magazine-sized. Years after publication Aeon produced a collection.~WJ

Recommended: One-shot, 1-3

Incredible HULK

Marvel: *Series one 6 issues 1962-1963*, series two 374 issues (-1, 102-474), 25 Annuals, 1 Giant-Size 1968-1999, series three 46 issues 1999 to date*

The Stan Lee/Jack Kirby first series is now quite rightly revered for its nostalgic, pioneering, collectible status. But by any detached, critical assessment it has dated badly. Artless plots are riddled with non sequiturs and a ridiculous array of villains. Of most interest is the Hulk's formative relationship with Rick Jones. Modern progress has not provided all the answers, though. The Hulk's origin is encapsulated in the first few pages of 1. Nowadays, a plough through the first hundred issues of a new title would unearth a mere handful of circumstantial clues to the protagonist's origin. For those who don't know, scientist Bruce Banner is caught in a gamma bomb blast, and thereafter becomes the enormously powerful Hulk when enraged (although the transformation was originally during the more traditional hours of darkness).

Second-series numbering and publication continues from *Tales to Astonish*. The underlying thread running throughout this comic involves the military's attempts to cure or kill the Incredible Hulk, and therein lies the predicament. Were they ever to succeed, cancellation would surely follow. This dilemma, alongside the Hulk's normal state of mind, which limits his vocabulary to "Hulk smash", makes this a very difficult title to write successfully. Most writers have proved the point with long sequences of desperately dull scripts. Efforts to relieve the tedium usually revolve around changes in his condition (green Hulks, grey Hulks, intelligent Hulks) but this cycle has now been exhausted repeatedly.

The title provided a vehicle for two of Marvel's stalwart pencillers to exercise extended runs. Herb Trimpe pencilled almost every issue numbered one hundred and something and Sal Buscema did likewise in the two hundreds. Early writers Gary Friedrich and Stan Lee to 120, Roy Thomas (121-147) and Archie Goodwin (148-157) churned out routine tales cementing Hulk's stable of villains, rather too many of whom were aliens. Military attempts were personified by General 'Thunderbolt' Ross, whose zeal gradually developed into an obsessive, personal vendetta against a tragic, misunderstood figure searching for peace yet forever hounded by mankind. 102-117 are collected in the paperback *Essential Hulk* vol 2. Steve Englehart finally showed a little flair in 159-171 with a sub-plot describing Major Glenn Talbot's abduction by Commies and replacement by an impostor. Running alongside, Ross' daughter Betty suffered one of many nervous breakdowns and transformed into the Harpy. Len Wein's stint in 179-222 follows the normal modest standards – a glowing exception is the touching 182, a story sadly submerged by that issue's notability for an early Wolverine cameo. 189 maintains a similar heart-warming theme. Wolverine's first cameo (180) and first full appearance (181) are reprinted in the 1986 one-shot *Incredible Hulk and Wolverine.*

Roger Stern's run (223-242) coincided with the prominence of the *Hulk* TV series and, in sympathy with these episodes, Stern's scripts contrived a minimal use of supervillains. A very tame product resulted. Bill Mantlo sustained mind-numbing mediocrity from 245-313. Of marginal interest is the Hulk's spell of full intelligence from 271-296. In 278-281 he is granted a full Presidential Pardon for the billions of dollars of property damage his havoc has wrought. The story goes way over the top as at least six spoons of sugar are loaded into the coffee. Shortly thereafter, the alien Bereet from *Rampaging Hulk* emerges to controversially declare that all the stories in that black and white magazine run are fictional within the Marvel Universe, being the result of her film-making exploits on the planet Krylor. Hulk's intellect goes full circle in 297 as Nightmare turns him completely mindless and inarticulate. In an effort to restrain property-insurance premiums below astronomical levels, Doctor Strange exiles Hulk off Earth in 300 and he embarks on a dire sequence of stories under the 'Crossroads' banner until finally re-emerging on Earth in 313. Mantlo's penultimate issue, 312, is his finest, as we are treated to the history of Bruce Banner's birth, childhood and adolescence. John Byrne kickstarts the title's rehabilitation in 314-319 as Hulk and Bruce Banner are split into separate entities and Bruce and Betty Ross finally wed in 319, some 195 issues after their first attempt was aborted at the altar. Al Milgrom preserves respectability (320-330), initiating new variations on a theme: a Rick Jones Hulk and a grey Banner Hulk, the latter not seen since 1. Milgrom deals the next scripter-elect a favour by allegedly disposing of the tiresome General Ross, now well past his shelf life, in his last issue.

From 1987-1998, Peter David commanded the scripting helm, writing every issue regularly from 331-467, bar two fill-ins (360, 389). He has achieved what many thought impossible on the *Hulk*: a well written comic book infused with sardonic humour and avoidance of the cliché traps of the past. David crafts the finest Leader story ever in 342-346*, strongly enhanced by the patient subplot building to it during preceding issues. The follow-up Leader stories in 364-367 and 397-400 are also of high quality. David has been blessed by many fine pencillers during his run: Todd McFarlane 330-346, Jeff Purves 347-366, Dale Keown 367-398 and Gary Frank 403-425 (bar fill-ins). He joined McFarlane during one of his best, if somewhat warty, artistic periods, prior to attainment of mega-stardom, and their final story in 340-346 is available as a collection.

One of the secrets of David's success is his serious shake-up of locales, supporting characters and plot elements before staleness sets in. In 347 the Hulk goes into hiding, adopts the pseudonym Mr Fixit, and is employed as a bouncer in a Las Vegas casino. He even gets a girl. Marlo Chandler is one of the best comic-book supporting characters introduced in modern times. As her flatmate puts it in 348, "...every guy you meet is intimidated by you, just 'cause you're over six foot and built. Now you finally get lucky..." She has proved a marvellous foil for other characters to play off, not to mention for David's sly wit. Later she dates Rick Jones and eventually becomes Mrs Rick Jones in 418. The underrated Jeff Purves has been unfortunate to live in McFarlane's shadow. His expressive pencils are never better exemplified than in Marlo's reaction to 'a good time' last night with Mr Fixit in 347 and Bruce Banner's realisation that he has lost three months of his life (spent in alter ego form) in 353.

David continued in hot form. 354's vignette of a gambling frenzy on the outcome of an impromptu fist fight involving Mr Fixit is outstandingly funny. Hulk joins the Pantheon from 382-425, a centuries-old *Thunderbirds* style outfit stuffed full with a crew of new superheroes all ripe for the couch. Rick/Marlo's bachelor/hen nights cause rolling in the aisles in 417, yet David shows his versatility with the sobering, sensitive AIDS issue (420). Toward the end of his run, high-class issues are sparser as David strained for inventiveness and the artistic stints of Liam Sharp, Angel Medina and Mike Deodato Jr delivered much flash but little thunder. Storylines spiralled slowly downwards as a surplus of head trips and alternate-reality-future-lines took a stranglehold. Adam Kubert's pencils (454-467, albeit blighted by fill-ins) brought artistic relief, particularly with his talent for altering the mood of the art to match the script. David unleashed a powerful, controlled burst for his finale, surrounding the death (allegedly?) of Betty Ross. Three fine yet highly contrasting issues portray excellent humour (465), drama (466) and pathos (467). The final seven issues resolve the identity of Betty's murderer amongst much padding as time is killed before the relaunch. Writer Joe Casey tries too hard to be too slick and Javier Pulido and Ed McGuinness's pencils are simply odd. Never before has Hulk looked like Tony Blackburn (474, page 9, panel 5).

Following directly, the third series heralds the arrival of Byrne and Ron Garney although the former lasts a mere seven issues. They concentrate on the human touch as the Hulk arrives in a small mid-west town and makes a big impression. Their run is characterised by overlong recaps, primary colours, an overuse of oversize panels plus minimal text without the excellent storytelling that this technique demands. Routine fill-ins tie up Byrne's loose ends leaving Paul Jenkins a clean slate from 12. His multi-part 'The Dogs of War' storyline in 14-20* heralds a vast improvement over everything seen since Peter David's departure as the psychopathic villain General Ryker is introduced and much needed subtlety and intrigue is nurtured. Double sized 25 is a Hulk/Abomination slugfest but with much more under the skin. John Romita Jr's awesomely powerful pencils give it the nod. Bruce Jones takes over writing from 34 with Lee Weeks on pencils from 40 and they play mind games with Banner who is kept constantly on the run from unknown forces whilst the Hulk remains firmly in the background. The entertainment is enhanced by Kaare Andrews' highly striking covers. The Jones issues to 43, a surprise success, are available in two collections.~APS

Recommended: Series two 163-170, 176-178, 182, 312, 319, 330-334, 336-348, 353-354, 361-362, 372-377, 397-400, 406, 417-418, 420, 465-467, Annual 7, series three 25

HULK miniseries and one-shots

Marvel: *One-shot ('versus Quasimodo') 1983, one-shot (Incredible Hulk and Wolverine) 1986, graphic novel (The Incredible Hulk and the Thing) 1987, 2 issue microseries ('Future Imperfect') 1992-1993*, one-shot ('vs Venom') 1994, one-shot ('The Savage..') 1996, one-shot ('Hercules Unleashed') 1996, one-shot (Hulk/Pitt) 1996, one-shot (Hulk Megazine) 1996, one-shot (Hulk vs Superman) 1999, one-shot (Hulk Versus Thing) 1999, 2 issue microseries (Hulk Smash) 2001, 4 issue miniseries (Banner) 2001, one-shot ('The End') 2002*

The Hulk has rarely been well served outside his regular run, exemplified by the bronze medal winner among his one-shots being the all-reprint *Megazine*. There's art by Jack Kirby, Todd McFarlane and the team of Jim Starlin and Alfredo Alcala among others in a well-selected sampler reprinting stories from Hulk 3, 187, 222, 262, 333 and the first Abomination story from *Tales to Astonish* 90-91, by Stan Lee and Gil Kane. Equal best by the length of a gamma propelled leap is the two part 'Future Imperfect', in which the 1990s intelligent Hulk visits his possible future counterpart and doesn't like what he's become. A Peter David script successfully masks a minimal plot with witty references, pithy dialogue, and a well considered finish, but the obsessively detailed art of George Pérez steals the show. David is reunited with former Hulk artist Dale Keown for an average one-shot teaming the Hulk with Keown's creation Pitt, and 'The End', concerning the Hulk at the end of his days. It's adapted from David's novel, and that shows, failing to exploit the possibilities of a different medium. Keown holds his end up, but it's hardly an essential purchase. David also writes the very poor Hercules Unleashed, seemingly dashed off by Mike Deodato while waiting at the supermarket checkout, and contributes framing sequences to *The Savage Hulk*. Here the Hulk's trial is interrupted by depictions of past battles, drawn by the likes of Dave Gibbons, Matt Wagner and Humberto Ramos. Again, it's very ordinary, as is 2001's *Hulk Smash*, two issues where Klaus Janson inks swamp John McCrea's pencils for a slim Garth Ennis plot. The 1987 graphic novel is supposed to be funny. The primary joke, though, is on anyone paying premium prices to see the Hulk with squid on his head and the Thing with a tomato on his, Berni Wrightson drawing a more muscular version of Herb Trimpe's Hulk, and a few set pieces padded beyond belief. *Hulk vs Superman* is gorgeously drawn by Steve Rude, justifying the purchase alone, but Roger Stern also turns in a decent story about Clark Kent and Lois Lane investigating the early Hulk. *The Incredible Hulk vs Wolverine* (later repackaged as *Wolverine Battles the Incredible Hulk*) reprints *Hulk* 181 and the relevant sections of 180 and 182 comprising Wolverine's debut, while *Hulk versus The Thing* reprints battles between the two including FF 25-26 and 112. 1983's Hulk Versus Quasimodo is dreadful, although as it adapts the first episode of the *Hulk* animated series apportioning the blame is difficult. *Banner* is drawn by Richard Corben, who doesn't disappoint, and Brian Azzarello's script is notable for a smarmy, manipulative take on Doc Samson and answering the question "Why doesn't Bruce Banner just kill himself?" As Hulk stories go, it's nearer the top end of the scale.~WJ

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* Available in a collected edition

Rampaging HULK

Marvel: 27 issues 1977-1981, series two 6 issues 1998-1999

The first series was a magazine sized anthology with three distinct phases. 1-9 were black and white, with a continuing Hulk story written by Doug Moench, with artists including Alfredo Alcala and Walt Simonson. The plot involved alien invaders and giant robots set in the early days of the Hulk's career and while affording him chance to meet the original X-Men (2), was well-nigh unreadable and later wisely written off as a dream. 1-8 also have a back-up story involving the tedious 10,000-year-old Bloodstone, with a respite in 7 for a bizarre Man-Thing tale.

10-23 correspond with the screening of the *Hulk* TV series, and from 10 the title became *The Hulk!*, all strips graduated to colour, and the storylines (still mostly by Moench) changed in line with the budget of the TV series. Out went the alien invaders, and centre stage was occupied instead by Bruce Banner's plight as an outcast and troubled soul. The result was a much better read, with something of merit in almost every issue and some entertainingly outrageous displays of the Hulk's strength – such as uprooting an entire island and towing it ashore! Highlights are the plane crash (13), the desert island idyll (18), Roy Thomas' mirage story (19), the Ditko homage (20), and the controversial story in which Banner is the subject of an attempted rape (23). The first back-up strip during this period was 'Moon-Knight' (10-18, 20), a caped-hero story written by Doug Moench, with art by Bill Sienkiewicz from 12 on, which improved steadily. The second back-up strip was the gangster story 'Dominic Fortune' (21-25): never mind the plot, just drink in the Howard Chaykin art.

The Hulk story returned to black and white in 24-27 (while Fortune remained in colour) and the main writer for these last issues was Lora Byrne, who produced some satisfying, well-rounded stories, particularly in 26. There's nothing here that counts as a masterpiece, but for an hour's entertainment, you could do a lot worse.

The same could not be said of the second series, which finds some interesting ideas, and then buries them as quickly as possible. It starts with a scientist who wants to become Hulk-like himself, and lies to his old friend Bruce Banner in order to take the necessary samples and measurements – it could have been a real story, but it's over by 3, and thereafter he's on the run through a different pointless 'crisis' each issue.~FC

Recommended: Series one 13, 15, 18, 19, 23, 26

HULK 2099

Marvel: *10 issues 1994-1995*

Making his début in *2099 Unlimited*, the Hulk of the future is John Eisenhart, accidental recipient of the gamma rays designed by the descendants of Bruce Banner to create another Hulk. He's big, he's green, he's scary, he retains his intelligence and he's got a long, wobbly, protruding red tongue. The art and technobabble serve to obfuscate dull stories, most of which concern the Hulk's attempts to protect the film studio he and colleagues run.~FP

The HUMAN FLY

Marvel: *19 issues 1977-1979*

Considering trying this series about a real-life costumed stuntman? Why? Your oven needs cleaning, doesn't it? And that collapsed bookshelf needs fixing. Haven't you been meaning to write to the council about the dog shit on the pavement? What about the pile of ironing, calling your granny, or oiling that squeaky door? Any one of these activities will make you feel you've achieved something. I've read these so you don't have to. And you should see the dust under my microwave, the mud on my football boots and the state of my garden.~FP

The HUMAN TARGET

DC: *1 Special 1991*

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1999*, Graphic Novel ('Final Cut') 2002*

Originating as a back-up strip in *Action Comics* in the 1970s, Christopher Chance is a bodyguard who protects his clients by impersonating them and effectively becoming them for as long as the danger exists. In the Special, released in advance of a TV series, Chance takes the place of a federal agent, due to testify against a drugs baron, who has more than one reason for wanting to kill the agent. Written by Mark Verheiden and drawn by Rick Burchett, this is a competent, but uninspiring outing for the character, expanding the supporting cast and adding to the technical details of Chance's impersonations. Without invalidating any of the character's history and yet with a completely different tone, Peter Milligan concentrates on the effect these impersonations have on the sanity of Chance and one of his assistants. Asked to impersonate Chance after female assassin Emerald has almost succeeded in her mission to kill him, Tom is convinced that he's the real Chance, abandoning his wife and family whilst trying to protect a preacher threatened by local street gangs. Milligan writes these, and the supporting characters, as complex people, each struggling to find their real identity. With artwork by Edvin Biukovic, the miniseries is a terrific tale. Picking up where the miniseries left off, in the hardcover, 'Final Cut', Chance is still dispirited and reluctant to take on new jobs. When he appears to have killed an extortionist who's been preying on Hollywood actors, however, he's convinced to become the dead man in order to save the kidnapped son of one of his victims. Written again by Milligan, and drawn by Javier Pulido in a similar style to Biukovic's, this is another fine exploration of the loss of identity, both Chance's and Hollywood's.~NF

Recommended: miniseries 1-4, 'Final Cut'

HUMAN TORCH

Marvel: *8 issues 1974-1975*

If you're desperate to sample the light fluff that was the Human Torch strip in *Strange Tales*, or short back-ups featuring the 1940s character, this is the place for you.~WJ

HUMAN TORCH COMICS

Timely: *37 issues (2-38) 1940-1949 (2-35), 1954 (36-38)*

Of Marvel's big three superheroes of the 1940s it's the Human Torch who never seems to have had the breaks. His creator, Carl Burgos, was simply nowhere near as gifted as *Captain America*'s Simon and Kirby or *Sub-Mariner*'s Bill Everett, and his origin was ludicrous even by comic standards. Created as an android servant, he spontaneously combusts when exposed to oxygen, and later acquires a kid sidekick when proximity to a circus fire-eater causes the latter to also burst into flame! And while the concept of a man made of fire would seem to beg for exciting and dramatic visuals, few of the original run of artists provided them, with the styles usually employed being either staid or cartoony. Still, the Torch and his little pal Toro plodded on with the occasional burst of imagination, the clashes with Sub-Mariner in 8 and 10 being notable.

In 1948 the Torch, like all of Timely's headlines, responded to certain allegations being made by anti-comics crusader Dr Fredric Wertham: in his case he jettisoned his kid sidekick and adopted a female one. Toro's replacement by Sun Girl assured readers and parents of the Torch's 'normality', but she did little other than shine her 'Sun Ray' (a fancied-up wrist torch) on HT's activities. Right, a man made out of fire really needs a spotlight.

He was the first of the Timely stars to wane; a brief and unimaginative revival failed to catch fire in 1954 and he faded out completely. His name was later borrowed by the Fantastic Four's junior member, but the original returned in *Fantastic Four Annual* 4 and, decades later, in *West Coast Avengers*.~HS

HUMANOIDS Graphic Novels

Many of the albums that Humanoids publishes are part of a series, rather than being standalone. This entry lists those that haven't yet reached three volumes, as well as those that won't. In Ante Genesem 1: 'The Prophet', Jack Stanton is the sole survivor of a disastrous expedition from which he brings proof that an advanced, but evil, civilization walked the Earth before mankind. Preparing to reveal all in a book, he becomes stranded in another dimension that could be Hell. Well presented and told by Xavier Dorison and Mathieu Lauffray, its lasting appeal will depend on future volumes. *The Book of Jack* has another Jack trying to pass a gang initiation test, for which he steals a book from an old mansion, only to find that it tells his own life story as it's happening. When gang leader Stan sees that Sam, a girl who hangs around with them, is attracted to Jack, he finds someone to write in the book that Jack turns into a monster. As Jack's transformation begins, he and Sam must find the book and try to break the spell. Denis-Pierre Filippi's plot is relatively straightforward, but expertly crafted and characterised, with artwork from Olivier G. Boiscommun, who adds an edge of urban decay to the fantasy.

Bouncer 1: 'Cain's Eye' is set at the end of the American Civil War. Diehard rebel Captain Ralton kills his brother and his brother's wife searching for a diamond, but his nephew escapes to find their third brother, the one-armed Bouncer. He relates the family's history and promises to prepare him for Ralton's return. Alexandro Jodorowsky's story has the themes and violence of an Italian, Spaghetti Western, underpinned by his own preoccupations with family and religion, while Francois Boucq's realistic artwork, and grand vistas are contrasted with the dissipation evident on every face. Artistically, *Deicide* 1: 'Rage Against The Gods', drawn by Das Pastoras, owes much to traditional fantasy and Richard Corben, but Carlos Portella's angry satire on the gullibility of religious beliefs, whatever their 'reality', makes this much more interesting. Agon seeks to destroy the god, Madorak, in order to win back the soul of his sacrificed girlfriend. Befriending an annoying, lion-headed, Beluch, the two attempt to breach Madorak's Hell.

Three FBI agents investigate four deaths on one night in the rural Salem, but find the Sheriff and its townspeople uncooperative, though the dull-witted, Tom, seems happy to have some new friends. Richard Marazano's script for *Dusk*: 'Poor Tom' reads much like an episode of the *X-Files*, trying hard to distinguish the agents' characters, but Christian deMetter's painted artwork is unconvincing. *The Fourth Power* has scientists using women's brains to build a super weapon, with which to end a war. Juan Gimenez' artwork is exciting, but his storytelling could be clearer, and there's not much by way of characterisation to make the readers care one way or another what happens. Gimenez also provides *Leo Roa*. He's a young journalist caught up in the mystery of the space-pirate Captain Drake, whose associate, Crapula's sexual desires make thing hot for Leo and his aspiring musician cousin, Meke. In 2, while Leo is sent back in time, Meke is kidnapped to be used as the saviour of an ancient civilisation. Both stories (previously seen in *Heavy Metal*) deliver visually, but the semi-comic tone is annoying rather than amusing. Better science fiction is delivered in *Morgana*:'Heaven's Gate'. Warrior Morgana was rescued as a child by the android, Merlin, and is now part of Merlin's quest to reunite the Arcanes and attain the Purpose. She's opposed by the sorcerer, Voortt in this high calibre fantasy adventure from artist, Mario Alberti, and writer, Luca Enoch.

Eva Stern, at the end of the 20th Century, is reminded of her past by anonymous e-mails containing a photographic history she believes may have been fashioned by her brother. He deserted from the Austro-Hungarian army in 1916, and became a founder of a revolutionary newspaper, joining Lenin in Russia, before falling from favour. Two of three volumes of *From Cloud 99*: 'Memories' have appeared so far, by Yslaire, using mixed media to tell the various tales of Eva, her brother and the various people that crossed their paths through the years. Though the effects can be confusing, this is a powerful examination of history and memory. During the depression, orphan Nola leaves a convent school and after a chance success begins a career as assassin for hire. She convinces pimp Slim to be her partner, and the pair soon develop a strong friendship, helping each other out, as they start to gain a reputation in the profession. Collecting four volumes together, Miss: 'Better Living Through Crime', is a terrifically realised depiction of period New York, full of character and conviction. Philippe Thirault's script is tough, Marc Riou and Mark Vigouroux' artwork is perfectly complementary in a style that shows touches of Corben and Guy Davis.

Unlike the other multi-volume series, *Sanctum* ends on a cliffhanger, as the U.S.S. Nebraska, en route to Syria, discovers the sunken remains of a mysterious Russian submarine outside the entrance to the ancient city of Ugarit. The health and sanity of the crew is strangely affected by proximity to the city, bringing the ship close to disaster. This is a promising horror thriller, from Dorison and Christophe Bec, but the features of the characters are too unevenly portrayed and their similarity to Hollywood actors is also more grating than pleasurable. Fortress Torinth, designed to study the secrets of the human brain is now home to madmen and outcasts. Esiath, its chief architect, has lost control to a monster she created to do her bidding. A stranger arrives in search of his lost love and must survive Torinth long enough to face the monster in Nicolas Fructus' interesting and unusual fantasy Torinth 1: 'The Fool With No Name'.

Humanoids have published new editions of the works of Enki Bilal, previously available from Catalan. *The Nikopol Trilogy* includes *The Carnival of Immortals*, *The Woman Trap*, and a third volume, *Equator Cold*, which Catalan missed. Others are his collaborations with Pierre Christin (*The Black Order Brigade*, *Hunting Party* and *The Town That Didn't Exist*) and with Jean-Pierre Dionnet (*'Exterminator 17'*). They have also published several previously un-translated volumes. *Ship of Stone* and *The Cruise of Lost Souls* are both parts of the Modern Legends series by Bilal with Christin, concerned respectively with the effects on a fishing village of plans to develop a resort, and another village's sudden uprooting from the ground (the result of military experiments), and being blown out to sea. *The Dormant Beast* is a fabulous tale in which Nike, orphan of Sarajevo, uses his extraordinary memory to remember the moment of his birth, whilst trying to find two other orphans, Amir and Leyla, whom he remembers from day eighteen, and being pursued by forces that want to use his memory to rewrite history. *Memories From Outer Space* is a smart collection of eight short science fiction strips from 1974-1977, demonstrating the development of Bilal's style.~NF

Recommended: *Bouncer, The Dormant Beast, From Cloud 99, Miss, Morgana*

HUMBUG

Humbug: *11 issues 1957-1958*

After creating *Mad* for EC and the stillborn *Trump* for Hugh Heffner, Harvey Kurtzman decided to effectively self-publish his next humour magazine. Like the early magazine issues of Mad, it was a mixture of spoof ads, TV lampoons and re-done versions of classic literature, half strips, half illustrated text pieces, but low production values were responsible for *Humbug* being a bit smaller than typical comics of the day. Artists Will Elder, Arnold Roth, Al Jaffee, Jack Davis and Russ Heath produced consistently stunning art in obsessively detailed pen and ink or slickly painted halftones. Unfortunately, while there's no doubting the intention or cultural significance of Kurtzman's writing, from a contemporary perspective it's simply not particularly funny, and the appeal today is an opportunity to see a lot of pretty pictures. A collection represents assorted strips from early issues.~DAR

HUMMINGBIRD

Slave Labor: *One-shot 1996*

There's much to admire in this decidedly odd story of a tempestuous few days in a young girl's life. When her mother starts eating the cat, you know it's not an ordinary comic, and Gregory Benton's cartooning has touches of Ted McKeever about it. Unfortunately his writing isn't as polished. Whimsical detours and *Hummingbird*'s oddly ineffective passivity through an appalling series of events disengage the reader.~FP

HUMP CRAZY

Eros: *2 issues 1995-1996*

Awesomely unerotic porno from 'alternative' cartoonist Jeremy Eaton. *Hump Crazy* is set in an uncensored fantasy land where nympho fairies screw perpetually horny ugly dwarves and speak cutsie-pie filth littered with lousy puns before initiating endless orgies. Angela Carter famously suggested that folk tales are often driven by seething erotic subtexts. Perhaps Eaton, in his sledgehammer way, is making the same point. Or perhaps he just wanted to draw a lot of fucking.~AL

HUMPHREY OSMOND PSYCHEDELIC PIONEER and the Doors of Perception

Drawn and Quarterly: *One-shot 1998*

Prompted to find the origin of the word 'psychedelic' David Lasky researches the life of the person who coined the phrase. British medical doctor Humphrey Osmond was a pioneer in many respects, emigrating to Canada and offering enlightened treatment to the mentally disturbed. His story is preceded by writer/artist David Lasky's experience of Ecstasy, and cut through with Lasky's responses to Osmond. It's a well-considered piece about a little known innovator.~WJ

HUMUNGOUS MAN

Alternative Press: *3 issues 1997-1998*

This may have been the start of something very interesting. Someone who would be considered a superhero by most definitions awakens amnesiac in a multi-levelled city, different sectors of which are seemingly influenced by different periods of human history. It is suggested, though, that this might all be the fantasy of a laboratory creation. These issues intrigue, but the story remains far from complete. Jim Harrison and Dan Stepp combine on art and plot, with both having the work of Dave Sim and the Belgian creators Schuiten and Peeters as major influences. A back-up strip in 2-3, 'Johnny Behind' is a pastiche of the technobabble and angst of later Jack Kirby *Fantastic Four*. Very satisfactory, and still worth looking out today.~WJ

HUNDREDS OF FEET BELOW DAYLIGHT

Drawn & Quarterly: *One-shot 1998*

The second of three pieces depicting the social development and history of the United States. Set in a doomed mining town, the reader is treated to generous helpings of human nature at its worst including racial prejudice, mob violence, greed, sexual inequality and superstition. Author James Sturm's deliberately crude, dark drawings convey the misery of the community's existence perfectly giving the feel of a coarse woodcut. The writing and characterisation are terse and subtle respectively but this makes for very rewarding reading.~SW

HUNTER:The Age of Magic

DC/Vertigo: *18 issues + 2001 to date*

Dylan Horrocks and Richard Case continue from *The Names of Magic* miniseries. Tim Hunter returns to the magical academy The White School just in time to rescue Kalesh, a refugee from the extra-dimensional Gemworld. She quickly becomes a sort of protégé to the rapidly maturing young wizard, and as they grow closer he becomes embroiled in the war ravaging her mystical homeworld and earns the enmity of the enigmatic Red Man and his Sardonyx Warriors. In 7, illustrated by Chris McLoughlin, Hunter graduates into a world, both physical and spiritual, that wants him dead before he becomes too powerful, and in 8, Hunter meets Dr Fabien, a scientist who claims to have discovered the genetic cause of evil. He tempts Tim with the answer, once and for all, to the question of whether he will benefit or endanger the world, but his agenda is as dark as any that Tim fears himself capable of.

As Tim tries to adjust to an independent life, working at the not-what-it-seems Excalibur bookshop, Molly, his first love reappears in 13 as part of a story to 15 that radically alters the tone of the series and winnows out the supporting cast. Portions are illustrated by McLoughlin and David Roach, highlighting just how poorly suited Richard Case is to this type of comic. After the dust settles, Tim seems destined for a much more traditional career, dueling a necromancer in 16, and in mystic contention against old associates The Lotus and Iolanthe. There are rare moments of pure joy in this better than average fantasy hero series, as Horrocks strives for something a little different, yet the rigidly uninspired, misproportioned and stiff Case artwork is an oppressive turn-off. Good stuff shouldn't be this hard on the eyes. 1-5 are now collected.~WW

Recommended: 7

HUNTER'S HEART

Paradox Press *3 issue miniseries 1995*

Chilling Police Procedural/Crime Noir thriller written and drawn by Randy DuBurke wherein misanthropic cop and hunting enthusiast Pete Lindstrom discovers that the serial killer he's after is the son of a ganglord who controls the city and the police. Before he can act he's framed for the murders of his investigating team and finds himself the subject of a manhunt. Plot twists abound and even the hoary old 'amnesia' cliché gets a new spin. Stylish and gripping.~WW

Recommended: 1-3

HUNTRESS

DC: *19 issues 1989-1990, 4 issue miniseries 1994*

The Huntress was introduced in *All-Star Comics* in the 1970s as the daughter of the Batman and Catwoman of a parallel world. When DC expunged all its parallel worlds in 1985, they were left with a popular character whose history had been declared 'never happened'. Thus, Helena Wayne became Helena Bertinelli, daughter of a criminal family, who, after sundry childhood traumas, turned to fighting crime under the mantle of the Huntress. Much underestimated, the first series featured hard-hitting street-crime stories, Joey Cavalieri presenting Helena as an admirable, though screwed-up, character, and an oddball change of style and tone by artist Joe Staton that suited the series well. It was also different in that the new Huntress wasn't a stereotypical comic babe. She was attractive, but looked wiry and tough, with a lean face and a comparatively sensible costume. Dangling plot threads from the first series were wound up in *Justice League International Special* 2. In the mid-1990s, concerted attempts were made to tie in the Huntress with the Batman supporting cast, with numerous guest appearances, resulting in a makeover for the character. Her hair got fuller, her bustline bigger, and her costume developed mysterious cleavage-revealing gaps. This 'bad girl' version was tried out in a miniseries that owed one huge debt to Frank Miller's work, but what was intended to be gritty and noirish ended up merely confusing and ugly.~HS

HUP

Last Gasp: *4 issues 1987-1992*

Let there be no doubt that Robert Crumb is an incredibly accomplished artist. His writing, however, should perhaps come under closer scrutiny. He's at his best when adapting, delivering tirades or with his cringingly open autobiographical pieces. When it comes to turning his hand to fiction, though, the result is deeply unsatisfying and often little more than an embarrassing rendition of sexual fantasy. That's fine and dandy for those sharing the dream of

dominating big-assed women but bores everyone else. *Hup* is all Crumb and every work of genius – like 1's 'My Troubles With Women Part II' (part one was in *Zap* 10) – is balanced by misogynistic fantasy. The return of Mr Natural and Flakey Foont explores this territory to tedious extreme in 2-4. The better strips, however, are so good as to make some issues an essential purchase. Everyone should see the great Crumb, but to do so here you also have to endure the banal.~FP
Recommended: 1, 3, 4

Hiroshi Yakumo's HURRICANE GIRLS

Antarctic: *7 issues 1995-1996*

A peculiar title for a rag-bag of Yakumo's stories, spanning quite some time if the changes in art style are any indication. The theme of women against demons occupies most issues, varying in tone from 5's wrestling mayhem to the longest work, a relatively grim teaming of a private investigator and demon killer in 2-4. An exception is 5's short story of fraternal competition. Overall, though, this is slim material indeed.~WJ

HUSTLER COMIX

Hustler: *Series one 5 issues 1997, series two 5 issues 1998*

As *Penthouse* derived some success with a sex comics line *Hustler* jumped on the bandwagon. The stories were equally silly, but where *Penthouse* offered well-known comics creators, *Hustler* used illustrators unused to telling stories with pictures, and amateurs. Overall the quality level was several notches lower, although fans of Gray Morrow's work might want to check 4-5 of the second series.~WJ

HUTCH OWEN'S WORKING HARD

New Hat: *One-shot 1994*

An anti-capitaliist mini-comic style story by Tom Hart. The fifty-one page scope was made possible by Peter Laird's Xeric Foundation grants. Hutch Owen is an anarchist tramp bent on reminding the world of the evils of consumerism. Other people beg for spare change, Hutch sits by a sign that reads "Will rant for food". The story revolves around Hutch, a young acolyte named Willie and fatcat businessman Dennis T, usually referred to as 'Sir'. Ultra simple artwork but with a heck of a payload storywise.~SW
Recommended

Caliber Presents HYBRID Stories

Caliber: *1 issue 1992*

The largely capricious and vacuous content is superficially redeemed by the variety of drawing styles assumed by Dominic Bugatto. It remains, though, in essence a collection of exercises.~FP

HYBRIDS

Continuity: *Series one 5 issues 1992-1993, series two 4 issues (0-3) 1993, one-shot 1994*

One of the most confusing (in both content and publishing history) of Continuity's titles. The first few issues of *Hybrids* were actually titled *Revengers Special*, and in fact half of the first issue was reprinted from *Revengers* 6. The second series was chapters of the 'Deathwatch 2000' crossover, and the one-shot a chapter of the 'Rise of Magic' crossover. The Hybrids themselves were an extraordinarily unprepossessing bunch of genetically altered people (don't ask) who revelled in confusing fights with a confusing array of dragons, demons and such-like. Artistically it rarely reached the heights of other Continuity comics, exceptions being the zero issue and the 'Rise of Magic' one-shot, both drawn by Mike Deodato before his descent into Image-inspired hackdom.~DAR

HYDE25

Harris: *1 issue (0) 1995*

The first *Vampirella* story is coupled with a chapter from Bruce Bezaire's Jackass series that ran in *Eerie*. It was a moody work that dwelled on the transformation induced by a drug named Hyde-25 in Victorian times. Neither reprint is served well by added colour, but they shine in comparison with the single new story reviving the Hyde-25 drug in the 1990s. The planned series never materialised.~FP

HYDROGEN BOMB Funnies

Rip-Off: *1 issue 1970*

While the strips in this underground anthology title only occasionally deal with the bomb, it nonetheless contains some excellent material. Of the anti-war strips Greg Irons' brutal 'Raw War Comics' is the standout, though Fred Schrier and Foolbert Sturgeon acquit themselves with honour. Other highpoints include a beautifully drawn Dadaist piece by Robert Williams, and a typically imaginative strip by Kim Deitch. The bulk of the comic, however, is given over to Gilbert Shelton, who weighs in with a couple of Freak Brothers strips as well as the lengthy 'Wonder Warthog and the Pigs From Uranus'. Contributions from Robert Crumb, S. Clay Wilson and Dave Sheridan round out a terrific package.~DAR
Recommended

HYENA

Tundra: *3 issues 1992-1993*

In *Hyena*'s brief existence it managed to offend practically every sensibility known to man, and it did so with style. Each issue of the magazine was packed with talented alternative cartoonists. Regular artists included Roy Tompkins ('Harvey the Hillbilly Bastard' in 1 and 2), Jim Woodring (1, 2), Mac White (1, 3) and Hunt Emerson (1, 3). The first issue was the most consistently good, and highlights were unquestionably the indescribable 'Pee Dog' (by Jocko 'Levant' Brainiac 5 and Eddie Nukes) and 'Jeff and Monty', the rudest funny-animal strip of all time, by Jeff Holcombe. The other issues were patchier, but notable strips included 'Woodfield', a strip about planks of wood by Art Baxter, and some lovely art from 'Pic' in 2 and 3.~DAR
Recommended: 1-3

HYPER DOLLS

Ironcat: *6 issue miniseries ('Volume 1') 1998-1999*, 6 issue miniseries ('Volume 2') 1999*, 6 issue miniseries ('Volume 3') 1999-2000*, 6 issue miniseries ('Volume 4') 2000*, 6 issue miniseries ('Volume 5') 2000-2001*

Maika Minazuki and Miyu Fumizuki are the names that the alien Hyper Dolls take when they enrol at school after being sent to Earth by the Central Galaxy to protect it from alien invaders. Humorous situations abound as the girls try to adjust to humanity and emotions and bicker over which of them is fighting the various monsters (giant spiders, centipedes and apes amongst them) in the correct manner. It doesn't help that school friend Akai discovers their identities, their commander's hologram materialises out of a pizza box to give them orders, and official investigator, Ms Ogure, figures out who they are and tries to recruit them against industrialist, Dr Zaikrit. Ironcat have published what material there is, but the strip ended mid-story in Japan. The frenetic comedy only becoms comfortable with its characters towards the end, making for an unsatisfying experience, and doesn't have the greatest visual appeal, though it's enjoyable enough in its own way.~NF

HYPERKIND

Marvel/Razorline: *9 issues, 1 Special 1993-1994*

Clive Barker-created superhero team that survives a dull origin in 1 and 2, to develop some interesting ideas. Best issue is 5, which gives some background to the series, with the team captured by a man who's managed to rewrite history.~FP

HYPERSONIC

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1997-1998*

During the six years this was shuffled from one company to another the once borderline themes it envelops became pumped into the mainstream via *X-Files* and its ilk. The delay transformed what might have been groundbreaking comics into just another piece of conspiracy and alien infiltration material. It's all professionally produced with nice Gary Erskine art, but lacks the compelling factor to raise it above the parapet.~FP

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*Available in a collected edition

I AM LEGEND

Eclipse: *4 issue miniseries 1991*

Prestige-format adaptation of the Richard Matheson story about the last man alive trying to survive in a world of vampires. Adequate if perhaps a bit over-reverent.~HS

I BEFORE E

Fantagraphics: *2 issues 1991-1992*

I Before E collects Sam Kieth's strips from places as diverse as *Critters, Stig's Inferno* and *Death Rattle*. Lovingly put together with a few previously unpublished short stories and portfolio material, this is a fine introduction to the work of an artist probably better known for Sandman, Wolverine or *The Maxx*. Kieth's style, with lots of Wrightson and Suydam influences, quickly became distinctive and individual and though many of the stories here are slight there's plenty to enjoy.~NF

I DREAM OF JEANNIE

Airwave Comics: *One-shot 2001, one-shot 2001*

Why anyone would want to publish comics about this thirty-year old TV sitcom is puzzling. Before his days as J.R. Ewing, Larry Hagman starred as astronaut Tony Nelson, who finds a bottle. When he opens it a cute genie pops out, ready to grant his every wish and provoke all sorts of misunderstandings. Unlike, say, *Sgt Bilko*, the show hasn't stood the test of time, and while the comic provides decent enough variations on a very tired and outdated theme there must be better ways to throw away money.~FP

I FEEL SICK, A BOOK ABOUT A GIRL

Slave Labor: *2 issue microseries 2000-2001*

Spin-off from *Johnny the Homicidal Maniac* wherein Devi, an artist, seems to be going slowly bonkers as she struggles to meet a publisher's deadline. As she works she engages in increasingly impassioned arguments with Sickness, a doll she has painted, mostly about the conflict between social and creative independence. Part black comedy, part surreal tragedy and unarguably a treatise on the role and integrity of art, artists and the creative process. Jhonen Vasquez and Rosearik Rikki Simons produce an odd blend of hilarity, pathos and just plain weirdness. Not everyone will like it, but it should be read by any thinking fan of the medium.~WW

I ♥ N.Y.

Linsner.com: *One-shot 2002*

Joseph Michael Linsner records his feelings and experiences concerning the events in New York on September 11th 2001, and in the process probably produces a comic quicker than he's ever done previously. It's nicely drawn, but Linsner has no unique perspective, and therefore there's unlikely to be an appeal beyond his fan base.~WJ

I, LUSIPHUR

Mulehide Graphics: *7 issues 1991-1992**

A hard-drinking elf immune to poison, as indeed are all elves in this canon, Lusiphur is almost crushed by blocks of text on several occasions. This is half-baked and poorly illustrated fantasy, although much in demand as the earliest incarnation of the popular *Poison Elves*, to which the title changed with 8. Enthusiasm propels creator Drew Hayes through, but he's still distinctly feeling his way with these magazine-sized issues. The collection includes text précis only of 1 and 2, Hayes feeling they weren't of the standard he later attained. He was right, although later relented and reprinted them as *Poison Elves Archive Editions* 1 and 2.~WJ

I SAW IT

Educomics: *One-shot 1982*

As a young child, creator Keiji Nakazawa survived the world's first atomic bomb explosion in Hiroshima. This recollection is harrowing, and features many disturbing images. Instead of the overtly cartoon style having a distancing effect, the horrors of Hiroshima are all the more acute for intruding into a familiar and comforting environment. The autobiographical elements extend beyond 1945 to the present day, with the explosion a permanent reminder to Nakazawa of the futility of war. He later expanded on his life in Hiroshima before and after the bombing as *Barefoot Gen*.~FP

Recommended

I WANNA BE YOUR DOG

Eros: *5 issue miniseries 1990-1991*

Lengthy, dense, erotic thriller that exudes seediness, more a slice of sado-masochistic life than a piece of titillation. Writer/artist Ho Che Anderson is full of interesting observations on power in relationships, sexual or otherwise, once you get past his highly stylised artwork. At times, though, it can be hard to work out what's going on as his everyday people fight and fuck.~FJ

Isaac Asimov's I-BOTS

Tekno: *7 issues 1995-1996*

Big Entertainment: *9 issues 1996-1997*

A team of robotic beings engineered to benefit mankind must confront those who seek to corrupt and subvert the technology that created them. Life in the public eye as superheroes protects them from WorldTech, a sinister multi-national corporation controlled by one Annabelle Donahoe, granddaughter of a mobster and daughter of a president, an almost pantomime Dynasty Power Bitch. Asimov's name on the project is intentionally misleading. Tekno/Big's habit was to append random celebrities' names to their titles, regardless of the fact that they contributed nothing more than a concept paragraph, or, as in the case of Mr. Asimov, were not actually alive at the time 'their' series were launched. Howard Chaykin was involved in character development for this series, but jumped ship before the book premiered. His replacement as artist, George Perez, went through the motions, but his heart clearly wasn't in it, and he abandoned the project before the follow-up series, leaving writer Steven Grant stuck with Pat Broderick as illustrator of the second run. Still, he didn't have to churn out this slurry of econo-politico-criminal clichés for long, as readers rapidly wised up. Don't let the star names suck you into reading this third-rate comic.~HS

ICARUS

Aircel: *6 issues 1986-1987*

Very early art from later offbeat creator Dave Cooper is the only reason to look out this interstellar adventure title. Enthusiasm outweighs talent, although the improvement in John Le's back-up strip art between 4 and 5 displayed a growing gift.~FP

ICEMAN

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1984-1985, 4 issue miniseries 2001-2002*

It took almost twenty years for the youngest member of the original X-Men to get his own miniseries, and he was with the Defenders at the time. It's unremarkable in every respect as Iceman visits his family, but has to become involved in intergalactic plots and trips through time to appreciate them. The more recent series is set in Hong Kong, where Iceman's ex-girlfriend has a little surprise for him. Aided by an interesting local hero, Foe-Dog, Iceman thwarts the plan of yet another evil corporation hell-bent on doing horrible things to mutants. Karl Kerschl's art is quite messy at times, but the manga style works well for the mood of the story. X-fans obviously shouldn't give it the cold shoulder, but is it a cool comic? Nah, just lukewarm.~HY

ICON

DC/Milestone: *51 issues 1993-1997*

An alien exile to Earth takes the form of the first human he meets in the year 1839. Since the first person he meets is black, that causes him some problems in years to come. Immortal, he lives unchanged through wars and revolution, taking no active part in the world despite his vast power, until a chance encounter with fifteen-year-old Racquel Ervin. She's one of a gang of youths who attempt to burgle his mansion in 1993, and goads him out of his complacency. She persuades 'Augustus Freeman IV', against his better judgement, to become a hero to the desperately needy city of Dakota, and manages to haggle a sidekick's gig for herself into the bargain. As Icon and Rocket, they set out to right wrongs, but things don't quite go as planned, with the police officers on their first case assuming they're the criminals! Just as their rocky relationship with the law is being sorted out, Racquel gets another surprise. Her jerkwater boy-friend, Noble, is responsible for more than trying to lure her into a life of crime. She's pregnant, and even with the powers Icon's alien technology can give her, she risks her life, and the baby's, by adventuring.

Although Icon is the nominal star of the comic, Racquel/Rocket is the emotional lynchpin for the readers. Smart, lively and gutsy, she sets the fires under everybody else's butts to get the action going, but she's not so tough that you don't empathise with her when she faces agonising decisions, such as whether to keep her baby, and, she fears, abandon her dreams of a life of her own. But she proves more resourceful than she suspects. During the latter stages of her pregnancy, she finds a substitute for Rocket in the shape of her pal Darnice, and enlists 'Buck Wild, Mercenary Man' (introduced in 13 as a hilarious parody of *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire*, who nevertheless is invested with a dignity of his own) as a replacement Icon when in the 'Mothership Connection'(17-21) he finds a way back to his homeworld. Ultimately, both the replacements, though well-intentioned, prove inadequate, and the originals are forced to step in. Perhaps the strangest issue is 30, in which a memorial service is conducted for a cast member. Poignant, yet achingly funny, it's quite a skilful piece of storytelling. After Rocket travels to Icon's home, the Collective, and saves Earth (31-36), things seem a bit anticlimactic, but writer Dwayne McDuffie and artist Mark Bright continue to deliver sound and entertaining work to the conclusion. 1-8 are collected as 'A Hero's Welcome'.~HS

Recommended: 1-8, 13, 22-25, 30-36

ICON DEVIL

Spider Optix: *2 issues 1989*

Set in a dystopian future of rat-race days and lawless nights of crime and affordable debauchery, this intriguing story is a spiral descent into the end of the world, as civilisation debates whether to commit total global suicide or abandon the planet en masse. Good stuff, but never completed, which is a shame.~WW

Golden Warrior ICZER-ONE

Antarctic: *4 issues 1994*

Iczer-One falls to ground on the planet Ishua, which the Kthulhu have conquered and where the Seven Generals protect two Princesses. This is a prequel to an anime series, shaping up as another epic fantasy with superpowers and giant robots, but the end of the story was never published.~NF

IDIOTLAND

Fantagraphics: *7 issues 1993-1994*

Quickfire surrealistic nihilism from Doug Allen and Gary Lieb with a dozen strips or more to most issues. One sample might raise a few grins if you're drunk, but no further exploration is necessary.~WJ

IDOL

Marvel/Epic: *3 issue miniseries 1992*

A B-movie being filmed in an almost deserted undersea military base is plagued by power surges and mysterious disappearances. And the base was once used for secret research. Oh oh, could be trouble ahoy. Actually far more entertaining than the formulaic plot would suggest.~FP

IGNORING BINKY

Checkmate Press: *1 volume 2001*

A remorselessly earnest project intending to document the evils of company chairmen, as represented here by one Victor Evertor, whose conscience, the oddly designed Binky, is conveniently repressed. This is simplistic stuff making little attempt to delve into any rationale, and as such is rather biblical in its hectoring. Republicans should give it to young kids on the premise that a whole new generation of plutocrats will evolve rebelling against it.~FP

IGRAT

Verotik: *2 issues 1995-1996*

Wretched stuff indeed about a demoness in fetish gear working for Satan. Minimal plot, and the art's so bad even the hairy palmed purchaser will be disappointed.~WJ

THE ILIAD

Amaze Ink: *2 issues 1997-1998*

Home to two ongoing series, 'Ikaris' by Darren Brady, and 'Toad' by Alex Ogle, neither of which has any direct connection with Homer's poem, but both appear to have had tones added to the artwork by computer, most effectively on 'Toad'. 'Ikarus' is a post-apocalyptic fantasy using elements from Greek mythology alongside Biblical names, which gives some clues as to the amateurish quality of the writing. The artwork suffers from its obvious debt to Conan and other 1970s fantasy/horror fare but is easy on the eye. The huge word balloons conveying vast portions of plot that the artist has chosen not to draw make this a very poor read. 'Toad' is a fantasy strip about a silent, samurai-style female wanderer who rides on the back of a giant Toad. Drawn in big-eyed manga mode, any attempts at establishing location or character have been side-stepped in favour of clichéd dialogue and action. The artwork is as accomplished as the writing is annoyingly pretentious.~SW

ILLUMINATOR

Marvel: *2 issues 1993*

Illuminator is Andy Prentiss, high-school student and Christian superhero. It's moderately entertaining, with more respect for the act of storytelling than you find in most comics with an overt religious mission. There's always a sermon, but it's tacked on at the end and can easily be ignored.~FC

ILLUMINATUS!

Eye 'n' Apple Productions: *One-shot 1987, 3 issue miniseries 1989-1991*

Anarchic underground adaptation of early books in Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea's *Illuminatus!* sequence. Issue 1 (second series) reprints the original issue 1 with retouched artwork. The Illuminati is a secret society bent on world conquest by assassination, intrigue and abduction. Any discussion of them is, of course, extremely dangerous because...~APS

Ray Bradbury's THE ILLUSTRATED MAN

Topps: *One-shot 1993*

Ray Bradbury's haunting concept of people seeing their fates in the tattoos of The Illustrated Man is well illustrated by Guy Davis. His segments sandwich what appears to be an EC reprint, drawn by Jack Kamen, and a story beautifully drawn and coloured by P. Craig Russell titled 'The Visitor'. It's decent science fiction, well produced.~FP

IMAGE GRAPHIC NOVELS

As a company, Image is best known for churning out oodles of hyperkinetic superhero comics, but the few graphic novels of original material that they've published largely steer clear of the genre. It's true that *Bluntman and Chronic* (2001) is yet another superhero parody, this time drawn from the 'universe' of cult film director Kevin Smith and cutely illustrated by Michael Avon Oeming. The ripe language, sexual frankness and stoner humour means it has just as much in common with the underground comix of the 1960s. If *Bluntman and Chronic* is a success on its own, rather limited, terms, then Scott McCloud's more ambitious The *New Adventures of Abraham Lincoln* (1998) is an unqualified disaster on every level. This plodding tale has dear dead Abe returning aghast to the 20th Century, but fails as both political satire and humorous fable, and features some extremely ugly computer-generated artwork that already looks dated and tacky. By contrast, the beautiful line drawing and imaginative design in C. S. Morse's "graphic novella" *Visitations* (1997) helps to elevate this rather delicate religious parable into something slightly more substantial and rewarding. Morse's animation-like cartooning draws inspiration from, among other things, Japanese manga, and this stylistic influence is even more apparent in the black and white, pocket-sized graphic novel *Clockwork Angels* (1999), written and drawn by Lea Hernandez. In a gushing introduction, Warren Ellis calls this a "scientific romance" and "a comic for girls", but more accurately it's a faithful exercise in generic pastiche that will no doubt mainly appeal to readers (of either gender) already familiar with fantasy conventions, archetypes and clichés. Finally, there's *Delicate Creatures* (2002), a twee and facile fairy tale from *Babylon 5* creator J. Michael Straczynski. Despite the deluxe hardcover packaging and distinctly average pictures from artist Michael Zulli, this isn't a graphic novel at all, but an illustrated text story, and so thankfully requires no further comment.~AL

IMAGE INTRODUCES

Image: *5 issues 2001-2002*

Tryouts for potential new features, none of which proved popular enough to graduate to their own titles. The best is *Cryptopia*, with a Lara Croft like cryptozoologist, but it's hardly compelling, and is more a taster, with events left unexplained. *The Believer* is a muddled murder story, *Isis* and *Primate* are variations on *The Mummy* and *King Kong* respectively, and *Dog Soldiers* is poorly told war fantasy.~DB

IMAGE TWO-IN-ONE Featuring HERCULIAN and DUNCAN

Image: *One-shot 2001*

This terrific item is the result of Erik Larsen and Chris Eliopoulos responding to Scott McCloud's website dare to single-handedly create twenty-four page comics from start to finish in twenty-four hours non-stop. Both responded superbly. Larsen's 'Guy Talk' is a clever juxtaposition of a downbeat conversation between two brothers in a diner about male/female relationships It's punctuated by ignored, absurd super-violence between Herculian and Punchin' Judy, has a good twist ending and is one of the best things he's ever done. Eliopoulos's 'The Present' mixes art techniques in a hilarious story, about a geeky boy, snubbed at his birthday party, who takes revenge on the world by creating monsters and aliens using a magical crayon.~GK

Recommended

IMAGINE

Star*Reach: *6 issues 1978-1979, 1 Special 1987*

Spin-off from *Star*Reach*, featuring many of the same contributors but offering a broader selection of material than *Star*Reach*'s science-fiction/fantasy remit. With creators like Dave Sim (1,4), Marshall Rogers (1), Gene Day (2) and Michael T. Gilbert (2-5) there ought to be something of interest in every issue, but much of the material is early and unpolished. Much better is P. Craig Russell's beautiful colour artwork in 2 and 3 and Lee Marrs' homage to Moebius (3), or Steve Ditko's illustration of Paul Levitz' 'The Summoning'.~NF

IMMORAL ANGEL

CPM: *12 issues 2000**

A18 Corporation/Manga 18: *6 issues (13-18) 2001**

Lemming Apostle, Dr Kyuso, kidnaps, rapes and enslaves Reimi to bear his child in preparation for a demonic apocalypse. Her boyfriend, Yugo, tries to save her, and ends up battling monsters, before, eventually, the child appears to challenge her father. The hardcore sex of the first part of Koh Kawarajima's would-be epic, gives way to fantasy conflicts (albeit still with lots of nudity), but this confusing and absurd tale is unsatisfying in all respects.~NF

IMMORTAL TWO

Image: *5 Issues 1997*

As comics go this is neither particularly good nor particularly bad, although suffused with writer/artist Mike S. Miller's born-again Christianity, it can be a little hard to take. The back of the comic is filled with letters and articles about Miller's attitude to the comic market, readers and detractors but at least it's not all one-sided. The Immortal Two are sword-wielding babes (but not 'Bad Girls') and the artwork's very much in the Image style of distorted limbs and large panels. Although further issues were scheduled none have yet appeared.~NF

IMMORTALIS

Marvel UK/Frontier: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

Mortigan Goth, the Immortal Man, becomes involved with an old family friend, Jacqueline Falsworth, formerly Spitfire of the Invaders, and a powerless Dr Strange, as they struggle to free her cousin from a vampiric curse. Flashbacks to Goth's origin, and a side trip to Mephisto's Hell, provide the opportunity for rather more theological discussion than is customary in a Marvel comic, but writer Nick Vince makes it all palatable, and Mark Buckingham's illustrations are appealing.~HS

IMPACT

EC: *5 issues 1955**

Gemstone: *5 issues 1999-2000**

The stated policy of *Impact* was to present twist-ending stories, as if they weren't well enough represented in the remainder of the EC line. A rather substandard first issue storywise (despite Reed Crandall, George Evans and Graham Ingels art) is elevated to greatness by possibly the single best-known EC story. 'Master Race' is unrelenting horror, definitely not for the squeamish, and an adult story in the best sense of the term years before its time. Artist Bernie Krigstein takes Al Feldstein's already powerful script about an escaped Nazi haunted by his past and a fear of retribution, and doesn't hold back with the truth. Packed with memorable images and excellent storytelling, it's deservedly known as a masterpiece. Krigstein returns in 5 with a less noteworthy, but nonetheless very good, tale of envy. Given the limiting factor of the twist ending and its high predictability ratio in the horror and science-fiction titles, it's pleasant to note some genuine surprises in *Impact*. Beyond the ending, the stories are able to range over the full breadth of imagination, spanning the likes of the Ingels-drawn, overtly sentimental story of a young girl selling lemonade in front of a crusty shop-owner's premises in 3 to 4's overwritten but well-meaning polemic hitting out against attitudes towards Jews, still unenlightened in the 1950s USA. Generally a decent read, and occasionally excellent, but beware some howlers. 2 has all-too-simple solutions to the threat of a divorce – its parent/child relations grate – and 3's story about an ugly woman's inability to form a relationship is hampered by Jack Kamen's seeming inability to illustrate a plain woman. The Gemstone issues are facsimiles, and collected in one paperback for those unable to afford the slipcased black and white collection.~WJ

Recommended: 1, 3, 5

IMPERIAL GUARD

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries, 1997*

Based on DC's *Legion of Super-Heroes*, the Imperial Guard usually appear in *X-Men* as guardians for the Shi'Ar empire.

Shifting them from their galactic setting to New York proves to be a disappointing affair. The humour of having the aliens survive in New York misses the mark, and it's not helped by the over-cartoony art style of artist Chuck Wojtkiewicz. Stick in the old plot of an organisation trying to turn society against super-powered beings, and you have an absolute mess. Still, by not having to battle the X-Men the Imperial Guard come out on top for once!~HY

The IMPOSSIBLE MAN Summer Vacation Special

Marvel: *2 issues 1990-1991*

Impossible Man is an alien who can turn into anything, and who possesses the lowest boredom threshold in the cosmos. After his initial appearance in *Fantastic Four* 11 (first series) he popped up in stories ranging from the hilarious (*Spider-Woman* 45, *New Mutants Annual* 3) to the tedious (most of the others) in his relentless pursuit of fun. By the time of these holiday specials he'd become painfully dull and not even half a dozen creators plus practically every Marvel hero could make these worth a glance or a giggle.~WW

IMPULSE

DC: *90 issues (0-89), 2 Annuals, one-shot (Impulse + Grossout), 3 one-shots 1995-2002*

Initially written by Mark Waid, and drawn primarily by Humberto Ramos, this hyperkinetic, inattentive teenager with zero attention span and super-speed was mostly a roaring comedy. Bart Allen, grandson of the famous Barry (a.k.a. Flash), is the poster child for the judgement impaired. Born with a disastrous metabolic condition that caused him to age super fast, his grandmother sent him back from the 30th Century to the 20th, where he could learn to control his metabolism, and his other speed powers, before they kill him. Trouble is, because Bart was brought up in a virtual reality world the conventional one is slow motion to him, and he hasn't yet caught on that real life dangers don't have a 'reset' button that gives you another turn! Now, living in Manchester, Alabama with Max Mercury, the "zen master of speed", he's being forced to approximate a normal life and fit in with other people. The edgy Impulse (Bart's code name) and the phlegmatic Max Mercury work against each other in... well, the closest parallel to the relationship is that of Calvin & Hobbes! Skilfully, however, Waid avoids total comedy, and intersects moments of horror and pathos, contrasting admirably with the strips' lighter tone. Particularly notable in a fine run are 6, a shocking but non-clichéd look at child abuse, and 16, where ghosts of Max's past are brought to light. By contrast, Zatanna's guest appearance in 17 is full throttle comedy, but a classic issue. Ramos' kinetic bigfoot artwork, a sort of more frenzied Mike McMahon, is the perfect vehicle for these stories, and the occasional fill-in, most notably Nick Gnazzo in 7, keeps up the high artistic standard. 8 is an *Underworld Unleashed* crossover that can nevertheless be read and enjoyed separately. 9-11 team Bart with his future cousin Jenni (XS of the Legion of Super-Heroes), in a multi part crossover with the Flash's 'Dead Heat' story.

William Messner-Loebs took over the writing and Craig Rousseau the art, from 29 and 28 respectively. They continued to mine the same successful themes, resulting in a high-level comedy-drama, although oddly it's fill-in writer Tom Peyer, in 28, whom we have to thank for the invention of Arrowette, a second-generation super-heroine who was to become a major player, and Bart's team-mate, in Young Justice. She reappears in 41 and 59. Todd Dezago and Carlo Barbieri are the final creative team, and maintain the high standard, as Bart faces loss and challenges in 62-66, in which the existence of his mentor is threatened, and the final story arc, (86-89) in which he gains omnipotent power, but has to face up to responsibility and maturity. Throughout the series, there was never a dramatic falling off in quality, despite the changing creative teams; it seems, rather, that too large a proportion of readers got tired of what Impulse had to offer, which is a great pity. Oh yes, the one-shots. *Impulse* + co-stars Grossout of Scare Tactics, a supernatural rock group who briefly had their own comic title. Grossout collides with Impulse, and temporarily steals his powers, giving both, allegedly, a whole new view of life. Feebly sentimental. *Impulse Double Shot* co-stars the Atom, then a teenager due to the events of *Zero Hour*, in a forgettable clash of personalities with the hyperkinetic Impulse abrading the stodgy and middle-aged Ray Palmer. It's negligible filler, and in the equally unremarkable 'Bart Saves the Universe' Bart goes back in time to team with the Justice Society of America. The collection 'Reckless Youth' reprints early issues.~HS

Recommended: 1-13, 16, 17, 19, 28, 62-66, 86-89

IN THE DAYS OF THE MOB

DC: *1 issue 1971*

In a companion magazine to *Spirit World*, Jack Kirby adapts violent tales of America's gangsters during the 1930s in his usual unsubtle style. Is there no end to the man's versatility? Ma Barker and Al Capone are among those to receive the full Kirby treatment, and even Vince Colletta's inks suited this wonderful period piece. The true crime, of course, was that this only lasted one issue. An advert for the unseen second issue promised "The colorful, beautiful, pragmatic, inscrutable Ladies of the Gang!" We were definitely robbed! A story intended for 2 turned up in the first issue of DC's house magazine *Amazing World of DC*.~HY

Recommended

IN THIN AIR

Tome: *One-shot 1991*

Famed female pilot Amelia Earhart disappeared in mid-flight somewhere over the Pacific Ocean in 1937. No-one knows for certain what happened, although there have been several postulations. For rather more improbable versions in comics see *Dino Island* and *Lost Planet*. Basic art and a basic run-through of Earhart's career accompany a transcript of her final radio transmissions. Tome Press issued two versions of the comic, each offering a different solution to her disappearance.~FP

THE INCAL

Epic/Titan: *3 volumes 1988*

Subtitled 'The Adventures of John DiFool', the *Incal* series of graphic novels, with visionary scripts by film-maker Jodorowsky and art by Moebius, are among the most perplexing but haunting comics to come out of Europe. Jodorowsky's scripts have the discipline that many Moebius stories lack, without losing the psychedelic qualities of most of his best writing. John DiFool is an 'R' Class Investigator who thinks he won't amount to much. Possessed by the Incal, a kind of cosmic force which occasionally helps him out of difficulties, he sets out on a quest across a strange world ruled by dilettantes, by the end of which he will have been accidentally caught up in a rebellion led by a dog-headed man, met the androgynous son he never knew he had, and attained something akin to a state of grace. His purpose, indeed his life's purpose although he doesn't know it, is to unite his Incal with its dark counterpart, held by Anime, the rat Princess who lives under a lake of acid in a world of garbage. See, it's visionary and complicated. Unfortunately it's also unfinished. The good news is you can enjoy it without the aid of illicit substances. Moebius' art is clean, wonderfully open, with occasional points of detail contrasting with the narrow-lined landscapes. He creates a series of amazing settings to flesh out Jodorowsky's elaborate fantasy. Inspired stuff.~FJ

Recommended: 1-3

The INCAL

Humanoids: *12 issues 2001-2002*

The story of orphan, John DiFool, who, during his detective training, chooses to investigate the mystery of his birth to a Red Ring prostitute. Aided by ex-Cybo-cop, Kolbo-5, concrete seagull, Deepo and the robotic, Eyecop, he's opposed by the planet's rulers, the SupraComputer, the TechnoPope and the Prez. Prime Minister's daughter, Luz De Garra, initially betrays John before he convinces her to help him expose the scandal of how Aristos such as herself come to be born. This inventive action-adventure is written by Alexandro

Jodorowsky and drawn by Zoran Janjekov. The artwork, though more tightly inked, is inspired by Moebius, whose original work with Jodorowsky on the characters was due to be reprinted from 13, but will now be continued in a series of graphic novels.~NF

INCREDIBLE SCIENCE FICTION

EC: *4 issues (30-33) 1955-1956**
Gemstone: *4 issues (8-11) 1994-1995**

After the establishment of The Comics Code, EC was forced to change the title of *Weird Science Fantasy*, and *Incredible Science Fiction* was the result. Title changes aside, the comic featured the same intelligent Al Feldstein writing and high-quality artwork from Wally Wood, Joe Orlando and Bernie Krigstein as its previous incarnation, though perhaps without the same level of inspiration. New boy Jack Davis added some welcome vigour with his energetic covers and strips (30, 31, and 33), but the comic's highpoint was undoubtedly Al Williamson and Roy Krenkel's beautiful 'Food For Thought' in 32. It's worth the price of admission for the stunning splash page alone. The Gemstone issues are facsimiles, the different numbering stemming from their decision to dispense with the complex EC numbering resulting from title changes. The final Gemstone issue restores an Angelo Torres illustrated story deemed unsuitable by the Comics Code Authority, and replaced by a reprint in the original.~DAR
Recommended: 32

The Further Adventures Of INDIANA JONES

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries (Raiders of the Lost Ark) 1981, 34 issues 1983-1986, 3 issue miniseries (Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom) 1984, 4 issue miniseries (Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade) 1989*

Back in the days before Dark Horse had a monopoly of film franchises, it used to be Marvel's job to take movie heroes beyond their cinema incarnations. With Spielberg and Lucas's 1930s archaeologist/adventurer Indiana Jones, they managed to cover all three films and thirty-four issues of *Further Adventures* with original stories. The creative teams on the latter included John Byrne and Terry Austin on the first two issues, as well as Chaykin, Simonson and Ditko (so heavily inked he's hardly recognisable) on later ones. David Michelinie and Herb Trimpe were the most regular creative team, however, and, as you might expect, the majority of issues were nothing special, aspiring to the high-adventure feel of the movies but always falling quite a way short.~JC

INDIANA JONES

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries ('Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis') 1991*, 6 issue miniseries ('Thunder in the Orient') 1993-1994, 4 issue miniseries ('The Arms of Gold') 1994, 2 issue microseries ('The Golden Fleece') 1994, One-shot ('The Shrine of the Sea Devil') 1994, 4 issue miniseries ('The Iron Phoenix') 1994-1995, 4 issue miniseries ('The Spear of Destiny') 1995, 4 issue miniseries ('The Sargasso Pirates') 1995-1996*

Dark Horse's efforts at presenting original Indiana Jones material are slightly better than Marvel's. Presented as self-contained series, some are adapted from the Indiana Jones books, some from role-playing games, others are original. The short miniseries approach seems to suit the subject-matter better, allowing a feel of the films to creep back into the narrative, but even so it's unlikely the comics will appeal much to anyone but the most ardent Indiana Jones fan. Do yourself a favour and hire out the videos instead.~JC

INDUSTRIAL GOTHIC

DC/Vertigo: *5 issue miniseries 1995-1996*

In a mystery city in a strange and broken-down world, the ugly and imperfect are imprisoned in a huge house. Pencil has been there throughout the thirty-five years of his life, the child of unacceptable parents. Nickel, his lover, who has no arms or legs, once passed for normal with artificial limbs. The two escape from their prison only to find that getting out is much easier than living with freedom. In search of a semi-mythical tower where rebels are welcomed, they meet all sorts of characters on the road, including violent rednecks and a gang of marauding women, as their relationship is reshaped by their new life. *Industrial Gothic* is one of McKeever's most straightforward stories, a comic road movie in which the various events are secondary to the development of the two lead characters, providing action and moving the story along. What makes the story especially good is the complete lack of moralising or explanation. McKeever's art is dense and textural, deep and dull colours overlaying each other. A feast: action-packed, weighty without being pretentious, endlessly intriguing.~FJ
Recommended: 1-5

INFERIOR FIVE

DC: *12 issues 1967-1968 (1-10), 1972 (11-12)*

Inferior in name, but certainly not in content, DC's humorous superhero group débuted in *Showcase* 62, 63 and 65. The five seemed to parody the 1960s Teen Titans, sidekicks to DC's longer-serving heroes. The membership comprised Merryman, the brains of the gang, though a bit of a wimp; White Feather, a cowardly archer who always missed (unless it was a coincidence); Dumb Bunny, whose image was based on the Playboy bunny, the ultimate bimbo with no brains but plenty of brawn (and, ahem...breasts); The Blimp, an overweight character who could float slowly; and Awkwardman, a clumsy oaf with superstrength and aquatic powers. The characters, with their little quirks, were expertly handled by scripter E. Nelson Bridwell and exaggerated by artist Joe Orlando. Bridwell wrote some first-class stories lampooning the likes of The Justice League of America, Tarzan, *Man From U.N.C.L.E.* and, naturally, various Marvel superheroes. While the humour waned near the end of the run, the earlier issues (and the *Showcase* stories, two of which were reprinted in 11-12 when the title was briefly revived in 1972) should definitely amuse you. Unless of course you're a boring old fart.~HY
Recommended: 1-6

INFERNO

Caliber: *5 issues 1995-1997*

Intriguing title, written by Mike Carey, with unusual, scratchy art by Michael Gaydos, who uses a lot of lines without making the pages look overwrought or busy, although his figure work is sometimes stiff. A man is killed in a mugging and finds himself in a strange "historic" land of the undead, where he's hailed as a familiar figure, attacked, hunted, aided. Except that he knows nothing about what's going on, why he's there, or even where he is. Carey builds character quickly, including a rich cast of sorcerers and immortals, and for a long time it's hard to work out who the good guys are. Fans of Neil Gaiman will probably enjoy taking a look at this.~FJ

INFERNO

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1997*

Surly pyrotechnic bint from *The Legion of Super-Heroes* goes away to find herself during the team's exile in the 20th century, and winds up having visionary experiences in a shopping mall. Less fun than it sounds. Lovely art by Stuart Immonen, and very clever and eye-catching cover designs, do not compensate for the pretentious, leaden story, also Immonen's fault.~HS

INFERNO: HELLBOUND

Image/Top Cow: *3 issues 2002-2003*

Marc Silvestri and a cast of dozens took a very long time to produce three issues of this Dirty Dozen in Hell story. When a demon gate is opened a former marine who killed his wife's murderer is assigned to lead a team of other convicts into hell to stop the demons destroying Earth. There's nothing here that anyone over the age of sixteen hasn't already seen a few times. Having trouble maintaining a schedule, Silvestri cancelled the comic and promises the conclusion in a paperback collecting 1-3. Don't hold your breath.~WJ

Thanos: INFINITY ABYSS

Marvel: *6 issue miniseries 2002**

Given expectations engendered by its poor predecessors, this starts in surprisingly intriguing fashion, with a host of

Thanoses, and a cosy feeling of the old gang getting back together as Gamora, Moondragon, Pip and Warlock all become involved. So do Captain Marvel, Dr Strange and Spider-Man when "blocks of nothingness" start appearing. Jim Starlin writes off less than successful uses by others of the Thanos character he created, while having the enthusiasm to draw the story himself, inked by Al Milgrom as in the good old days. Theirs is a powerful style encompassing quirkily satisfying renditions of planes beyond mortal knowledge. Once the revelations start with 3 the series downgrades slightly, but it's still the best comic Starlin has been involved in for fifteen years.~FP

INFINITY CRUSADE

Marvel: *6 issue miniseries 1993*

Third of the Jim Starlin/Ron Lim *Infinity* sagas, this differs from its predecessors in having an actual concept behind it. A tasteless and grotesque concept, to be sure, but at least they're trying. Adam Warlock's good side, inexplicably incarnated as a woman – The Goddess – recruits the more devout of Earth's heroes to enforce order and bliss upon the cosmos. And it's heathens to the rescue as the remainder go into that "There is no freedom in Utopia" riff, resulting in many crossovers replete with two-fisted action and theological debate, not a serendipitous combination. Oh, and the Universe is destroyed and recreated. Again. Time was when heroes just had to fight to save individual lives, or their city, or very occasionally their country. Now, everybody has to save Everything There Is all the bleeding time, and this overkill numbs the reader. Still, at least this series is equal-opportunity offensive. Both devout and irreligious people will find something to heartily despise within its pages.~HS

INFINITY GAUNTLET

Marvel: *6 issue miniseries 1991**

This multi-crossover series was dubbed Secret Wars III at the time of its release by most critics, but Marvel clearly hoped that Jim Starlin's script and George Pérez's art would give it some credibility. Nice try. Thanos acquires the Infinity Gauntlet, most powerful weapon in existence, and tries to impress his main squeeze, Mistress Death, by wiping out 50% of All That Is. Worlds live, worlds die, nothing will ever be the same again... you know, the usual. This calls for all Marvel's heroes to band together, in this title and in carefully signposted issues of their own titles, to overcome the menace. Pérez's dexterity with cosmic flash and glitter almost fools you into thinking there's something to this, but when over-commitment (he was making a double turkey sandwich, working on this and *War of the Gods* at the same time!) forces him off the comic, to be replaced by Ron Lim, the scales fall off our eyes and you realise what a load of tat it is.~HS

INFINITY INC

DC: *53 issues, 2 Annuals, 1 Special, 1983-1988*

Infinity Inc was another of Roy Thomas's love affairs with the 1940s superheroes. The first issue (drawn by Thomas's co-creators Jerry Ordway and Mike Machlan) saw a number of young heroes, most of whom were children of older members, attempting to join the Justice Society of America. When rejected, they decide to form a team of their own, and are joined by some of the younger JSAers. By 10, Ordway and Machlan's last, they've saved the world from the evil schemes of the Ultrahumanite and have proved their worth to their elders. Following a series of fill-in artists, Todd McFarlane takes over with issue 14, producing some of his earliest professional work between then and 37. Unfortunately, the stories during this period are not as tightly crafted as 1-10, introducing a series of dull villains, including Chroma and the genetic freaks called the Helix, who become the team's main enemies for the rest of the run. One of their members, Mr Bones, eventually joins the good guys. Tie-ins with *Crisis on Infinite Earths* dog the title during issues 19-24, following which many of the stories are (by necessity) taken up with retelling characters' origins in line with revised continuity – if you don't know what *Crisis* is, find out before attempting these issues, as they'll make very little sense if you don't. 27, which tells the first of several flashback stories to when many of the members knew each other as children, is good fun. Most of the new continuity problems have been worked through by issue 31, following which the group embark on an adventure with the Global Guardians, another set of ill-conceived and boring characters. After McFarlane's departure, there's little to recommend in the final issues. Vince Argondezzi takes over the art from 41, in one of the series' most character-driven plots as the team search for missing member the Silver Scarab. The later issues, however, remain largely unremarkable. 45 guest-stars the Teen Titans in a crossover continuing from *Teen Titans* 38, while the final four issues of the series are drawn by Michael Bair.~JC

INFINITY WAR

Marvel: *6 issue miniseries 1992*

Thanos is now on the side of the good guys following *Infinity Gauntlet*, and thus is one of the first to warn the assembled Marvel superheroes of the plan by the Magus (the evil side of Warlock) to replace them all with evil duplicates. One of the most tired and cynical efforts seen even in the money-grubbing crossover stakes. An ideal marketing opportunity for everyone to fight their evil counterpart in their own titles – sometimes for several issues, during which very little else happens. Yawn.~HS

THE INHUMANS

Marvel: *12 issues 1975-1977, one-shot ('The Untold Saga') 1990, Graphic Novel 1991, one-shot 1995, 12 issue limited series 1998-1999*, 4 issue miniseries 2000*

Always popular guest stars, the hidden race of genetically altered beings were perennially dismal when given solo outings, despite art by Neal Adams in their *Amazing Adventures* series and George Pérez and Gil Kane in their first comic. The problem is plot repetition. Ruler Black Bolt is possessed of a voice able to shatter mountains, and must therefore remain mute, but his half-brother Maximus has designs on Black Bolt's throne, and you can bet your copies of Fantastic Four 44-48 (in which the Inhumans débuted) that he's behind any devilry. Would you trust someone known to his face as Maximus the Mad? The Inhumans do time and again, and always pay. Their origin is divulged in another title familiar with repetition of plot, *Thor* 146-152. 'Dismal' adequately sums up all offerings until the 1990s limited series.

A vast improvement is initiated by the simple expediencies of a consistent creative team and the application of thought extending beyond superheroes fighting, although a conflict with humanity spurs the plot. Jae Lee's shadow-led, angular art conveys an incompatibility with the world at large, and Paul Jenkins emphasises the personalities of the hereditary ruling class of core characters to a greater degree than previously. The curious exception is Medusa, very much the blank slate, but the formerly dull Maximus is particularly well handled in manipulative isolation. Occasionally florid scripting, notably in the first issue, can distract, but approaching the series as a social study of an alien community pays off, as does a leisurely pace. In the succeeding miniseries the Inhumans are abducted by their Kree forebears to fight for Kree liberation, learning some truths along the way. Joe Ladronn's art is a bleak synthesis of Moebius and Kirby, while Carlos Pacheco's plot packs some surprises, but overall fails to engage.~FP

Recommended: Limited series 2, 3, 7

INITIAL D

Tokyopop: *4 volumes + 2002 to date*

The teenage Tak makes deliveries for his father's tofu business, driving down a stretch of road used by the local racers, unaware he's better than any of them. When a rival race gang challenge the locals, they win easily, but their best racer then encounters Tak on his morning delivery run and loses, but Tak is more concerned in becoming reacquainted with once time close friend Natalie. Over succeeding volumes he gradually becomes more involved in the racing. For adults it'll play out largely predictably, but this is intended as a boys comic, and as such there's action, thrills and romance, all well plotted and drawn by Shuichi Shigeno, who certainly loves his cars. This is published in the traditional Japanese format, meaning you start at the back and read forwards, scanning the page from right to left.~FP

INKBLOT

Aeon: *1 issue 1994*

Ward Sutton's cartoons are OK, but his subject matter is totally lame: feeling out of place in high school; feeling awkward with racial minorities; having Republican parents; wondering how a dead friend is getting on; and a Monkees reunion show. Hopeless.~GK

INKPUNKS QUARTERLY

Funk-O-Tron: *3 issues 2001-2002*

Spirited anthology title with four manga-influenced adventure features. The best of them is 'Pitchbright', with a decent enough story about a man whose consciousness is downloaded into an android body he constructed as a safeguard. The wonder, though, is in the art of E.J. Su, who starts with a good manga style, and progresses to excellent greytoned pencil work by the third chapter. As his work improved that much from a decent start in such a short time he could well be a talent to reckon with.~WJ

INNER CITY ROMANCE

Last Gasp: *5 issues 1972-1978*

Eccentric and powerful occasional series from artist Guy Colwell dealing with issues of crime, race, sex, poverty and injustice in a highly stylised "real" world. In 1 we follow three convicts in the days immediately following their release from prison in a stark portrayal of the aspirations and limitations of violent men. 2 follows the tragic events of a rock concert broken up by excessive police force, and 3 examines the dreams of men in maximum security prison. 'Ramps' in 4, explores, by allegory, the true story of third world tenants evicted by armed police from their San Francisco dwellings so that the landlords could complete a real estate coup. 5 provides a selection of short tales that highlight the insanity and irony of urban living. Violent, sexually explicit and emotionally challenging throughout. Worth reading.~WW

Recommended: 1, 4

INNOCENT BYSTANDER

OllieOllie! Oxen Free Press: *6 issues 1997-1998*

Captivating blend of traditional comics storytelling and a more expressive, intimate illustrative style from commercial designer Gary Sassman. It features autobiographical tales of growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, hanging out and watching TV in a small town in the USA, interspersed with notional vignettes on any subject that the author feels like. The hook is that rather than keeping a single narrative viewpoint throughout there is a deliberate attempt to take the reader to other perspectives. 1 deals with Christmas, movies, drive-ins, Atlantic City, cat stuff and Hollywood hair, 2 features 'I Don't Want To Grow Up', Buster Keaton, why *Friends* is lame, owning a Munsters lunchbox and more cat stuff, whilst 3 concentrates on Groucho Marx. 4 has stories lovingly crafted around Sassman's two cats, and is followed by a full length (and painfully honest) exploration of first love in 5. A selection of 'Random Thoughts' comprises 6. These are the thoroughly enjoyable explorations of a life-long comics fan who knows just how much more there is to life. Practically compulsory reading for the jaded reader. Beyond this, Sassman ran strips in *Geeksville*.~WW

Recommended: 1, 2, 4

INSANE

Dark Horse: *2 issues 1988*

With the title tipping the hat to *Mad*, *Insane* lives up to the parody tradition. The first issue is better, with Hilary Barta's *Grimjack* pastiche packed with inspired lunacy, and the *Godzilla* story good as well. Sadly, it's the poor *X-Men* story that's cover-featured. 2 is only slightly worse, with *Lone Wolf and Cub* and *Concrete* as targets.~WJ

INSANE CLOWN POSSE

Chaos!: *3 issue miniseries 1999*, 12 issue limited series ('The Pendulum') 2000-2001*, one-shot ('Hallowicked') 2001*

Based on the antics and material of "Recording Artists" Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope, the pair lend their brand appeal to the usual Chaos! blend of exploitative violence and glossy pyrotechnics. The Clownz are lovable psychopaths who just want to live their lives their way (which is apparently without benefit of a dictionary), but fate always has other plans for them. They can't complain however since they have the ability to summon the creatures and powers of a mystic resource they call The Dark Carnival, which can handle any problem that might be beyond their own destructive capabilities. 'The Pendulum' attempts to move beyond the plotless mayhem, by introducing Killnor and his various minions, hell-bent on remaking the world in his/its/their own image, and teaming our fun-loving guys with a faith-healer called Father Jesus, but it's still just mindless fights and gross-outs. The Halloween special is even more of the same. Absolutely pitiful fodder for the mindless.~WW

INSECT FEAR

Print Mint: *3 issues 1970-1972*

One of a number of underground horror comics, *Insect Fear* was an uneven collection of strips, and is best remembered for its inspired name. The first two issues contained work by Justin Green, Kim Deitch, Rory Hayes and Jim Osbourne, but at this early date they were far from their best. By 3 Deitch in particular was experienced enough to come up with the inspired 'Born Again', in which a criminal is reincarnated as a potato, and 3 has an unusually focused and powerful S. Clay Wilson strip as well as some very gory material from Roger Brand and Charles Dallas. The comic's most consistent artist was Spain Rodriguez, whose strip in 3 was beautifully drawn, as were all his covers.~DAR

Recommended: 3

INSOMNIA

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1994*

This follows Mr Smeltling on his journey to find a cure for his insomnia; something he hopes to find at a special clinic. There are moments of surrealism along the way, and the introduction of some very sketchy supporting characters, but ultimately, one is left asking "so what?".~DB

INSTANT PIANO

Dark Horse: *4 issues 1994-1995*

An excellent humour anthology featuring the work of Mark Badger, Kyle Baker, Robbie Busch, Stephen DeStefano and Evan Dorkin. There are few people able to match the observational dissections of Baker or Dorkin's manic intensity, and *Instant Piano* has the best of both: Baker with chapters of a work in progress, and Dorkin with a very funny selection of three-panel throwaways and knowing satires about the obsessions of collectors. Mark Badger's strip about relationships loses out to Baker's hilarious and more concise musings on the same topic, but he's far better with other material, and Robbie Busch seems out of place, the little brother you've got to take with you. Stephen DeStefano is an enigma, with a fine adaptable art style that varies from Don Martin to 1930s cartoon strips: on top form he's every bit as good as Baker and Dorkin. Better with Sunday-lunch-table recollections than with Marx Brothers-style lunacy, he's the quiet heart of the book reflecting the rest. Also great is each cartoonist's page of things that make life worth living.~FP

Recommended: 1-4

INTENSE

Pure Imagination: *2 issues 1993*

A black and white collection of Basil Wolverton's inspired and inventive 1940s and 1950s comic strips. These draw mostly on his humour material, such as Powerhouse Pepper, Bing Bang Buster, and Mystic Moot and his Magic Snoot, and their manic alliterations and rhyming still stand up today. Add in a stirring Spacehawk strip in 1 and you have a wonderful package that deserves a place in the discriminating collector's life.~DAR

Recommended: 1-2

INTERFACE

Marvel/Epic: *8 issues 1989-1991*

This continues the tale of the characters introduced in Eclipse's *Espers* series. Like *Espers*, James Hudnall provides a well-plotted thriller concentrating on people not powers, but unlike *Espers* it's bogged down by detail. The necessary précis of its precursor occupies much of the first issue, but the cast, so well introduced originally, is thereafter largely reduced to bit players as all sorts of secondary characters are focused on at their expense until the fourth issue. Also detracting from the premise is the revelation of many others with superhuman abilities. This isn't a bad series, but disappoints in comparison with what had gone before. 1-6*, well painted by Paul Johnson, form a self-contained story, and are far better than 7's shoddy story-telling from Bill Koeb and 8's early Dan Brereton. The characters reappear in 1996, once again titled Espers.~FP

THE INTERMAN

Octopus: *1 volume 2003*

Jeff Parker has staked out his intention to resurrect the American adventure comic, and with *The Interman* he's off to a first class start. The roots of the story are in the 1960s and a CIA funded project to create a soldier capable of surviving a nuclear war. It involved genetically manipulating a fetus, theoretically enabling it to assume animal characteristics discarded during the normal gestation period. After a single experiment the project was terminated. Now the man who initiated the project wishes to clear up loose ends, and adventurer Van Meach finds himself the target of assassination attempts. Parker crafts an involving globe-trotting thriller in which everyone introduced serves a purpose, and which is a long read over 128 pages. His art is a little problematical. There are elements of both Doug Wildey and Paul Pope, but Parker doesn't approach the skill of his influences. His storytelling is excellent, though, and that's what counts here. He's set up the character for sequels, and they can't come soon enough.~WJ

Recommended

INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE

Innovation: *11 issues 1991-1994*

Undoubtedly the best thing about this title is the eerie John Bolton covers on the first two issues, which capture the urbanity and allure of Anne Rice's famous vampire, Lestat. A young reporter sits down to interview Louis, a man claiming to be a vampire, who obligingly tells the tale of how he was 'created' by the mysterious Lestat in early-nineteenth-century Louisiana. Although widely lauded, Rice's homo-erotic ramble, shot through with moments of extreme violence, is nothing new, and this adaptation lacks even the unintentional humour of the lead characters' incessant bickering.~FJ

INTRIGUE

Image: *3 issues 1999-2000*

Writer/inker Howard M. Shum's dialogue is about as clunky as Kaare Andrews's pencils in this acton thriller about Kirk Best, a violently ill-tempered, privately employed paranormal on the run, framed by the president for the murder of the vice-president. The female lead is an FBI agent hostage present only to be tied up or beaten up. The second half of 3 is well cartooned by Tom Bancroft but the story is unfinished.~GK

INTRUDER

TSR: *4 issue miniseries 1990, 6 issue miniseries (Intruder II) 1991*

Comics based on popular role playing games should have been very successful. They weren't, and here the fault must largely lie with writer Steven Grant, just tossing out badly dialogued clichés for the poorly drawn first series. He'd been given a kick up the arse for the second and uses his imagination, and with more serviceable pencilling from Bruce Zick turns in a worthwhile story. Games based on the strips are also included each issue, as are back-up strips, all decent, with Nat Gertler and Joe Staton's hard-boiled detective in 3-4 the best.~FP

INU-YASHA: A Feudal Fairy Tale

Viz: *15 issue limited series ('Part One') 1997-1998*, 9 issue limited series ('Part Two') 1998-1999*, 7 issue limited series ('Part Three') 1999*, 7 issue limited series ('Part Four') 1999-2000*, 11 issue limited series ('Part Five') 2000-2001*, 15 issue limited series ('Part Six') 2001-2002*, 8 issue limited series ('Part Seven') 2002-2003*

This is Rumiko Takahashi's latest series, published almost concurrently with the Japanese edition. It's up to par with her other material, but doesn't offer much that we haven't seen from her before. Kagome is a schoolgirl dragged by a centipede demon into the past, where she's taken to be the reincarnation of a village's heroine, Kikyo. She had saved the village from a half-demon, Inu-Yasha as he was searching for the Shikon jewel in an attempt to increase his powers to full demon level. Kagome wakes Inu-Yasha, the jewel is shattered, and the two must work together to restore it before its power is stolen by any number of other demons. These include Sessho-Maru (Inu-Yasha's half-brother who fights him for the enchanted sword, Tetsusaiga), a Crow demon, Yura of the Hair and the Mask of Flesh, but the worst of them is recurring villain, Naraku, who caused Kikyo and Inu-Yasha to distrust each other in the first place. With help from Myoga the Flea, a servant of Inu-Yasha's, the pair face these demons, all the while (and, of course, slowly) developing a romantic interest in each other, which is complicated by the resurrection of Kikyo, albeit without a soul. Along the way, other characters join them in their quest, including Buddhist priest, Miroku (in 'Part Three'), with a cursed hole in his hand, young fox-demon, Shippo (in 'Part Four'), and professional demon exterminator, Sango (in 'Part Five'). Every now and then Kagome returns to the present where she has to do catch-up exams and explain to her schoolmates that she's not really as ill as everyone's been led to believe, but these incidents become less frequent as the series progresses. *Inu-Yasha* is best described as a romantic comedy, though the romantic entanglements are often given less weight than the rest of the plot, and the grotesque demons add a more than normal element of horror that can be disturbing.~NF

INVADERS

Marvel: *41 issues, 1 Annual, 1 Giant-Size 1975-1979, 4 issue miniseries 1993*

This was Roy Thomas' wonderful project to revive Marvel's big three 1940s superheroes, Captain America the supersoldier, the original Human Torch Jim Hammond (in fact an android) and Namor the Sub-Mariner, along with their kid sidekicks. The tales were of their adventures during World War Two, but written and drawn in 1970s style. Thomas set himself the task of rationalising some of the uncoordinated events of the 1940s comics, and reintroducing, and partially revamping, some obscure old characters and inventing a few new ones in the old mould.

The regular artist was the extremely underrated Frank Robbins, a former Depression-era child prodigy muralist, highly successful newspaper strip artist (on *Scorchy Smith* and *Johnny Hazard*), and writer/sometime artist for DC in the late 1960s. He was still producing superb work for several Marvel titles late in his career, but *The Invaders* seems to have been his favourite. He clearly loved to draw the tanks, planes, submarines and other hardware of the period in accurate high-contrast detail, but never stinted with his extraordinarily dynamic and expressive figures and faces.

The only giant-size issue contains excellent recaps of the major characters' origins and a good story about a Nazi plot against Winston Churchill, but 1-4 were disappointing, concentrating on boring fights with Teutonic deities. Things picked up with 5-6, crossing over with *Marvel Premiere* 29-30, which débuted The Liberty Legion, a septet of more obscure 1940s supercharacters. 6 is essential for Robbins' definitive portrayal of the maniacal Nazi villain The Red Skull. 7-9

Available in a collected edition

introduced the team to an English aristocratic family, one of whom was a World War I superhero, another the vampire Baron Blood. The intense drama of these issues, largely set in darkness, was not matched again. Thomas moved the action to the Warsaw Ghetto, where The Invaders teamed with a traditional Golem (Robbins excelling himself in 12-13), then too soon unveiled another superteam, The Crusaders. 16-22 raised the standard again with a wild story, set in Germany, featuring captures, escapes, recaptures, Hitler, two hilarious post-modern Nazi supersoldiers, and the near-execution of The Invaders in Berlin. 26-28 are outstanding: Captain America's young pal Bucky Barnes stumbles upon the scandal of US concentration camps interning Japanese Americans. Of course, he founds a new multiracial teen superhero group, The Kid Commandos.

The splendid 1977 annual featured the regular creative team alongside new work from artists who had drawn the characters in the 1940s. Alex Schomburg's Human Torch episode is particularly thrilling. Thomas neatly and entertainingly tied up some inconsistencies between *The Invaders* and *Avengers* 71, where he'd had them guest-star eight years before. *What If?* 4, from the same year, drawn throughout by Robbins, does a similarly great job of clarifying the characters' actions immediately after the war. Giant-Size 1, 10, 20 (the 1939 origin of the Sub-Mariner), 21 and 24 are, incidentally, cheap ways to acquire otherwise prohibitively expensive important 1940s stories. The last dozen regular issues, after Robbins left, were unfit to go under the same name as the others. Don Glut scripted with no sign of interest, although Thomas managed a risible two-parter (32-33) in which The Invaders fought Thor, who conveniently believed everything Hitler told him. The artists need not be named.

In the 1993 miniseries The Invaders returned to New York and battled American Nazi villains. Thomas's lively story unearthed a few old characters that might have been better left alone, rather than drawn in bizarrely revealing costumes by Dave Hoover. Slick inking by Brian Garvey saved it. There's also a good Invaders story in *Marvel Univere* 1-3.~GK

Recommended: Giant-Size 1, 5-9, 16-22, 26-28, Annual 1

INVADERS FROM HOME

Piranha Press: *6 issue miniseries 1990*

Bobby Boomer is approaching a mid-life crisis when his wife tells him she's pregnant. Bobby's inability to come to terms with his new role constitutes most of the plot, which is really an excuse to ask all sorts of stupid questions and get back all sorts of stupid answers. Populated by talking ducks, aliens and bickering household appliances, it's a very witty look at life. Written and illustrated by John Blair Moore, this is Piranha's best and most accessible series.~NF

Recommended: 1-6

INVASION!

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1988*

One of DC's less remembered crossovers, but certainly one of the more entertaining. An alien race known as The Dominators want to know why Earth produces so many superpowered beings. They discover the meta-gene, which, when subjected to great stress, mutates the human body, bestowing a special ability. The Dominators live up to their name and enslave Earth by sending in assorted aliens under their control. Naturally enough, the entire pantheon of DC heroes turns out to stop them. It would have been all too easy for this to become a confusing farce, but scripters Bill Mantlo (in a rare outing at DC) and Keith Giffen, one of the most inventive creators working in comics, turn out a well-paced adventure in three eighty-page issues. Giffen also provides the art breakdowns, but other fan favourite artists who worked on the series include Todd McFarlane, Bart Sears and P. Craig Russell. A marvellously exciting slugfest.~HY

Recommended: 1-3

INVASION '55

Apple: *3 issue miniseries 1991**

1950s-style science fiction tale in which a small group of townsfolk must confront an alien invasion before military reinforcements can be summoned. Chuck Dixon writes a solid story with plenty of action and suspense while Lito Fernandez' detailed artwork is a pleasant blend of various American and European adventure-strip styles.~NF

INVINCIBLE

Image: *1 issue + 2003 to date*

His dad is a superhero, and he discovers he can fly and he's inherited his father's invulnerability, so Mark decides to go into the family business. It's light superheroics updating the Spider-Man school and crimefighting template, and while hardly original, it's a decent stab at an old tradition.~WJ

THE INVINCIBLE ED

Summertime Comics: *2 issues + 2002 to date*

Storyboard artist Ryan Woodward so far borrows heavily from the origin stories of Green Lantern and Spider-Man in this charming, but slight, story of high school kid Ed being given alien powers. It's well drawn, and there are hints of other events, but so far it's a very quick read.~FP

INVISIBLE 9

Flypaper Press: *2 issues 1998*

A comic look into who really runs the world and the way they behave. It's an interesting idea, but none of the characters have any depth, and what they're doing just isn't funny enough.~WJ

The INVISIBLES

DC/Vertigo: *Series one 25 issues 1994-1996*, series two 22 issues 1997-1999*, series three 12 issues (12-1) 1999-2000**

Series one begins with the introduction of wild child, Dane McGowan, whose encounters with Tom O'Bedlam teach him that magic exists. This prepares him to join King Mob (the shaven-headed leader), Boy (ironically, a black woman), Lord Fanny (a Brazilian transvestite) and Ragged Robin (a woman in mime make-up) as a member of the Invisibles, taking the name, Jack Frost (1-4). 5-8 see the team travelling in time to meet the Marquis de Sade, while in the present they're threatened by Orlando, whose idea of pruning the team, involves cutting off Jack's finger, which forces him to rethink his presence with the team. Single-issue stories follow, providing background, including Jim Crow and zombies in New Orleans and Sir Miles hunting humans for sport (9-12). Lord Fanny's tale is told in 13-15, as he/she is attacked by Brodie, who works for Sir Miles. While Dane is invited to join Sir Miles, the latter tortures King Mob, but has difficulty breaking through his psychic defences (16-19). Boy's 'origin' is told in 20, and the rescue of King Mob, with battles against an Archon, Miss Dwyer, Sir Miles and the King-of-all-Tears (21-24). The Invisibles set off for America as Division X is sent to investigate the disturbances at Sir Miles' House of Fun, where they learn that the conspiracy reaches into the highest echelons of British society.

In the second series, Jolly Roger, leader of a separate Invisibles cell, arrives at the home of Mason Lang, where King Mob's group have been recuperating. She has lost her team in trying to retrieve an HIV antiviral agent from a military installation. However, she's under the control of Quimper, and leads them into a trap (1-4). While King Mob, Robin and Boy investigate a time machine and uncover a secret about Robin, Lord Fanny and Jack go in search of the Hand of Glory, which they retrieve by dancing for the Harlequinade (5-7). King Mob travels back in time to 1924 to learn how to use the Hand of Glory, revealing more about the past lives of Invisibles, before Boy is captured and must be rescued from Cell 23, which specialises in the psycho-dramatic debugging of Invisibles agents (8-12). The remaining issues involve a complicated plan, with lots of time travel and an assault on the Dulce installation where Quimper believes that Robin will deliver the Invisibles to him, and Jack meets the Blind Chessman, who explains the nature of the world. The third series is numbered backwards, but is essentially a single storyline, in which the team and Division X attempt to prevent the assimilation of the Moonchild by one of the

Archons materialising from trans-dimensional space at Westminster Abbey.

The series had many different artists, most good storytellers, helping, against the odds, to provide some sense and stability amongst the constant stream of ideas flung at the reader. The best of them are Jill Thompson (series one 5-9, 13-15), John Ridgway (series one 11), Steve Parkhouse (series one 12), Phil Jimenez (series one 17-19, series two 1-13, 15-22), Warren Pleece (series three 11-9), and Frank Quitely (series three 1). Brian Bolland's covers for the second and third series, offer another perception and are themselves a highlight of the title.

Grant Morrison tries to make *The Invisibles* a receptacle for conspiracy theories and political ideology (primarily situationism), all suffused with magic and mysticism and innumerable references to cinema, music, literature, television and the events (real or imagined) that make tabloid headlines. He pushes the boundaries of accepted taste (at least within a 'mainstream' series) with tantric sex rituals and ambiguous sexuality, with horror, violence and piercings. Throughout, the key to survival appears to be language, and this is where the series fails. Whilst it all makes a sort of sense at the end (depending on the reader's ability to suspend disbelief), there are plots to follow and there is even some characterisation occasionally, Morrison's ideas aren't satisfying and they're not expressed particularly clearly. The reader is subjected to a great deal of information (and puns), but whilst it might have some context within the Invisibles, it has no context outside of Morrison's own fantasies.~NF

IRON FIST

Marvel: *15 issues 1975-1977, 2 issue microseries 1996, 3 issue miniseries 1998*

Martial artist Danny Rand acquires the mystical power of the Iron Fist in the remote Himalayan monastery of K'un Lun. The first series is a classic Claremont/Byrne production: intelligent dialogue, thoughtful artwork, layers of sub-plot and lovely cameos of Marvel staffers and heroes in civilian ID. There is no failure to shirk controversial issues, as the sympathetic portrayal of reformed IRA terrorist Alan Cavenaugh enhances a fine supporting cast. Claremont's final three issues of the *Marvel Premiere* run (23-25), these fifteen issues and the resolution in *Marvel Team-Up* 63-64 all read seamlessly into a continuing narrative. 1-7 suffer from some slightly convoluted side-tracking, but 8 onwards are tops, with 14 featuring the introduction of Sabretooth and 15 a warm, homely X-Men guest appearance.

James Felder's microseries script harkens back to Iron Fist's Marvel Premiere tales as Danny Rand returns to K'un Lun. Unfortunately, Robert Brown's scratchy pencils fail to depict a single recognisable character from that era. Dan Jurgens crafts an ambivalent miniseries of routine main action sequences interspersed with juicy plot twists aplenty. It's deeply rooted in Iron Fist's early history, a major plus point. Scott Koblish is not the inker for Jackson Guice, whose pencils are nevertheless clean and solid. He pays a lovely homage to Gil Kane in 1's flashback to Iron Fist's origin. Worthwhile, but no masterpiece.~APS

Recommended: 8-15

IRON FIST / WOLVERINE

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 2000-2001*

An illogical tale of random plot events surrounding K'un Lun's permanent materialisation on Earth embroidered by perfunctory artwork. Considering the plethora of super-hero guest stars, it is hard to fathom Wolverine's title billing. Surely it couldn't be for commercial reasons?~APS

IRON-JAW

Atlas: *4 issues 1975*

Michael Fleisher's metal-mouthed barbarian hero made Conan seem like a New Man. Between threatening to kill children, de rigueur monster-slaying and the attempted rape of his sister, Ironjaw tries to claim his rightful kingdom from some Central Casting tyrants. Artist Pablo Marcos decorates said kingdom with numerous scantily clad lovelies ripe for ravishing. Pretty enough to look at, but some of the dialogue is so deliberately provocative it becomes funny. Most likely to say: "I like a woman with spirit. For the wilder the filly, the better the ride." Least likely to say: "Can I have another piece of quiche?"~FJ

IRON MAN

Marvel: *Series one 332 issues, **15 Annuals, 1 Giant-Size, 2 Graphic** Novels (Crash' 'Iron Man 2020') 1968-1996, one-shot ('The Age of Innocence') 1996, series two 13 issues 1996-1997, series three 60 issues +, 3 Annuals, 2 issue microseries (The Iron Age), 4 issue miniseries ('Bad Blood') 1998 to date*

Mortally wounded in Vietnam, industrialist Tony Stark designs a metal chestplate capable of sustaining his weak heart. This becomes the basis for a weapons and gimmick-heavy armoured suit, with the resulting crimefighter, Iron Man, being officially explained away as Stark's bodyguard.

The first 110 issues are characterised by almost incessant mediocrity. 1-50 have constant coronary scares, secret-identity crises and pedestrian art throughout. You'd have to be mad to want any of them except, perhaps, Barry Windsor-Smith's re-telling of Iron Man's origin in 47 (there's also some great Smith art on a dull story in 232). 50-110 are little better, but do have the odd bright spot. Jim Starlin is obviously making an effort in 55, introducing Thanos, and the Steve Gerber written 57-58 are acceptable, but his strange Annual 3, with a young girl controlling the Molecule Man's all-powerful transmutation wand, is unusual and worth a glance. The much-interrupted supervillains war in 73-81 has its moments, but a terrible ending, and 78 is inexplicably held in high regard by Iron Man fans (and reprinted in series three 46). It's a typically average Bill Mantlo and George Tuska fill-in, commenting on the problems in Vietnam. Mantlo became regular writer from 95, but the spark his scripts possess from 103 is mercilessly extinguished by poor artwork. No sooner has the art improved than Mantlo departs.

116 has writers David Michelinie and Bob Layton (who also inks) join the previous issue's new penciller John Romita Jr. For the first time Tony Stark is actually convincing as an internationally renowned industrial genius, playboy and inventor, and Iron Man as a technology-based superhero, while Romita Jr and Layton's artwork gives Iron Man a polish hitherto unseen. This is a quantum leap in quality, although the really good issues only begin with the first indications that Stark has an alcohol problem. 123-128* resolve that problem amid decently plotted super villainy, corporate shiftiness and a well-rounded supporting cast. 131-132 have an excellent Hulk story, industrial espionage rears its head in 137-141, and there's an offbeat battle with Dr Doom in 149-150 (collected with its reprise a hundred issues later). Michelinie and Layton conclude their plots by 154, and they're gone by 158, at which point *Iron Man* once again becomes very ordinary, with an interminable story from Denny O'Neil, Luke McDonnell and Steve Mitchell. Stark loses his business to Obidiah Stane, slips back into the bottle, and long-time confidant James Rhodes takes over as Iron Man. 182 sees Stark conquer the bottle, followed by another tedious plot as Rhodes goes nuts. Everything concludes in 200 with Stark in charge of a new company and new armour.

215 has Michelinie and Layton back, with penciller Mark Bright, who'd made some later O'Neil issues tolerable. They land Tony Stark with a preposterous pimp's hairstyle in 223, but in the same issue he discovers that many of Marvel's armoured characters are using technology stolen from him, and vows to destroy them all. The 'Armour Wars' story to 231* is a 100% return to form, and all issues to 250 are good superhero comics. A failed assassination leaves Stark paraplegic from 243, and although 248's speedy resolution is cheating (as was the quick conclusion to the initial bout with alcohol), better that than interminably repeated scenes of self-pity. 251-257 are largely fill-ins to be avoided (although 253 is acceptable), but welcome back John Romita Jr as penciller with 256 just in time for 'Armour Wars 2' in 258-266. The title is a misnomer, this having nothing to do with its predecessor, or any other armoured being, John Byrne writing a story about control of Tony Stark. There's a good mystery behind

the plot, but stretched far too thin, as is the succeeding story with old foe the Mandarin, drawn by Paul Ryan and Bob Wiacek to 275, the result being dull comics pointing the way to John Byrne's later slap dash efforts.

Len Kaminski and Kev Hopgood take charge from 280, and their run presents some interesting ideas swamped by dull execution. There's the introduction of substitute Iron Man War Machine in 282, the death and resurrection of Tony Stark, Iron Man becoming nothing more than a remote-controlled shell, and the use of computer capabilities as a recurring feature. Their best is Hopgood's last 'Crash And Burn', a corporate disaster for Stark in 301-306, with plenty of guest stars. Tom Morgan pencils until the end of Kaminski's run with 318, concluding a sometimes touching (and ultimately silly) story about Tony Stark's mentor.

Writer Terry Kavanagh managed what countless foes hadn't: to kill Tony Stark and Iron Man. From 321 to 325 *Iron Man, Force Works* and the *Avengers* tell chapters of the same stupid story relying on shock instead of plot. Despite countless stories offering contrary evidence, Tony Stark is revealed to have been under the control of Avengers enemy Kang for years, and actively working to destroy the team. Although he redeems himself in the end, the Avengers win by pulling a young Tony Stark from an alternate time-stream to save the day, and the star of 325 issues of his own title dies. *The Age of Innocence* re-caps the original's career and foreshadows what's to come as the younger Stark is set up as star of Iron Man with a virtually clean slate in 326. It all seems to have been prepared with the knowledge that the new series would set things right by starting at the beginning once again. The Iron Man graphic novel 'Crash', has computer-generated art and is so dull the script was probably also computer-generated. *Iron Man 2020* is only marginally better. This is Tony Stark's heir, a tormented man susceptible to bad influences, but for all that there's no spark.

An editorial brief to modernise Iron Man, re-working the character from the start using familiar elements from the previous continuity was carried out to decent standards in the second series. It displays spark and imagination even when using old scenarios like Stark being dependent on the energy provided by his armoured chestplate for survival. The first issues intertwine the Hulk's origin with that of Iron Man, and the entire series possesses a dynamism Iron Man hadn't seen in a decade. Jim Lee, Scott Lobdell and Jeph Loeb plot while for the most part, Lee, Whilce Portacio and particularly Ryan Benjamin pencil to great effect. It's a shame everything is negated by a return to the status quo for the third series, which isn't to say that series is bad. As ever, Kurt Busiek's writing picks and mixes the best of the past and gives it a shiny new coating along with sharp characterisation, thereby pushing all the right buttons. Unfortunately he also displays a lazy penchant for expository dialogue that rings jarringly false, thankfully excised with Roger Stern's arrival as co-plotter and scripter with 14. Penciller Sean Chen (to 30) produces fluid and exciting work, and the whole package makes for a decent superhero comic. Warbird is a frequent guest star, her problems with alcohol a recurring theme, and the best sample issues are the scene-setting first or an encounter with the new War Machine and a manipulative rival in 18-20. Busiek with artists Patrick Zircher and Bob McLeod are responsible for *The Iron Age*, a lively expansion of Iron Man and Tony Stark's early careers as experienced by long-time cohorts Pepper Potts and Happy Hogan. Published in 2000, 'Bad Blood' has Tony Stark behaving uncharacteristically and an old enemy lurking, but is a shadow of former triumphs for Michelinie and Layton.

Joe Quesada writes 26-30* (and plots 31-35 and the 2000 annual for Frank Tieri), providing edge of the seat imaginative stories. His first issues tease by turning Stark's life upside down, and Iron Man's armour then develops sentience with harrowing consequences. Quesada characterises the armour first as a jealous partner, then a jilted lover with Stark powerless. Thereafter he turns in a less satisfying plot with roots in Iron Man's origin, before Tieri writes solo to 49. His ideas don't match Quesada's, and stories are hampered by ugly artwork as Iron Man's armour goes through an umpteenth redesign. The best of this period is the 2001 annual in which Chris Claremont writes a story about Stark unable to use his armour, well pencilled by Michael Ryan who takes over on the regular title with 50, drawing a more jagged Iron Man than some, but a solid storyteller. Having previously avoided Marvel over a thirty-year career, Mike Grell writes 50-64. He starts very well, at almost every turn confounding expectations with his plots, which have a basis in the real world. 50-52 are almost as good as Quesada's writing debut, concentrating on Tony Stark rather than Iron Man. Thereafter, though, there's a decline with a trio of stories stretched thin at three issues apiece. 53-55 build on the previous issues, but 56-58 have the unwelcome return of a recent nemesis, and 59-61 send Stark back to the year 1000 in an overlong sorcery story also drawn by Grell. Tony Stark's activities are largely played up at the expense of Iron Man, a matter that's caused consternation among long-time readers, and old villains are nowhere to be seen. Grell is a good writer of human stories, so it's to be hoped he's only in a temporary dip.~FP

Recommended: 123-128, 131-133, 137-141, 149-153, 223-231, 235, 236, 239, 240, 246, Annual 3, 9, series two 1, 8-10, series three 28, 29, 51-52

IRON MAN AND SUB-MARINER

Marvel: *1 issue 1968*

Between the demise of *Tales of Suspense* and *Tales to Astonish* and the start of their solo titles Iron Man and Sub-Mariner filled what really should have been called *Tales of Astonishing Suspense*. The pair only appear together on the cover, as the individual strips are both parts of longer stories and consist of cover to cover fisticuffs. That said, Gene Colan's muscular, dynamic art on both features is considerable compensation.~DAR

IRON MARSHAL

Jademan: *32 issues 1990-1993*

Iron Marshal, on a quest to avenge his master's death, meets the three dominant kung-fu masters of the time, Unmovable Creep, Great Thor and Blazing Titan. They have themselves been drawn into the search for the Unicorn Treasure, with which Bloody Duke intends to make himself Emperor. Though plot threads and characters remain, this storyline is effectively resolved in 22, after which Iron is framed for murder and becomes the target of assassins in another plot against the Emperor. The dramatic, tightly inked artwork of F.L. Khoo (1-17) and Lee Chi Ching (18-32) is often impressive, but this fantasy martial arts series is really just one long fight, leaving no room for depth in the characterisation.~NF

IRON WINGS

Action Press: *2 issues 1999*
Image: *2 issues 2000*

Jay Juch's mix of mediaeval and eastern fantasy introduces Wing, a young woman seeking redemption for some unknown guilt, and starts her on a quest with a thief, Pike and warrior, Ryder. Juch's artwork is clean and clear while the story, though hardly fresh, quickly establishes its own attitude. More issues would have been welcome, but Image, again, merely re-packaged the existing material before the series disappeared.~NF

IRONWOLF

DC: *One-shot 1986, Graphic Novel 1992*

The one-shot reprints Howard Chaykin's classic 1973 Ironwolf story from *Weird Worlds*. Combining elements of fantasy, science fiction and good old rebel-rousing, Ironwolf causes much destruction to the ruling empire and is a great nuisance to its Empress. It's one of Chaykin's earliest published stories, and remains among his best, with a great sense of adventure, great characters and a lovely raw appeal to his artwork. Almost twenty years after the original story there's a graphic novel follow up titled 'Fires of the Revolution'. This time Chaykin is joined by co-writer John Francis Moore, and the novel is drawn by the art team of Mike Mignola and P. Craig Russell. It's

* Available in a collected edition

a worthy successor. Ironwolf survives seeming death, but lies comatose for eight years. Now awakened, he's once again pitted against the evil Empress and her Blood Legion. Victory, deceit and political manoeuvring are all part of this excellent story, while Mignola and Russell's imagery rivals that of the original series. Perhaps it lacks the cutting edge of the original – it's always difficult to go back home again – but fans of the original series should be satisfied.~HY

Recommended: One-shot, Graphic Novel

IRONWOOD

Eros: *11 issues 1991-1995**

Writer/artist Bill Willingham, who'd already attracted attention for his sexy, sinuous superhero drawings on *The Elementals*, is one of the few creators who took his work for Eros seriously. His fantasy world is packed with the kind of interesting sexual encounters only possible with a cast of centaurs, magicians and four-armed Amazons in flying yachts. His wise-cracking, cocky young hero gets himself in all sorts of trouble, including a mystical quest, in a story that has a structure, pacing and a genuinely engaging plot, rather than being an excuse for a load of bonking. *Ironwood* is probably the horniest 'straight' Eros book, equating sex with fun, rather than the rather lamentable violence found in the likes of *Ramba*.~FJ

ISIS

DC: *8 issues 1976-1978*

Professor Andrea Thomas, with the aid of a magic parchment, transforms herself into the Egyptian goddess Isis, nemesis of evil. Based on a TV series, this is an entirely forgettable comic with cardboard scripts from Jack C. Harris and art to match from Ric Estrada and Mike Vosburg.~SW

IT AIN'T ME BABE

Last Gasp: *1 issue 1970*

Frustrated by the misogyny and sexism that permeated underground comix quite as much as it did the mainstream, a group of San Francisco-based women cartoonists formed a collective to publish their own comic. Taking its title from a feminist newspaper, which presumably appropriated it from the Dylan song, *It Ain't Me Babe* is an odd but interesting combination of trippy fantasies and slice-of-life comics, with contributions from Trina Robbins, Michele Brand, Meredith Kurtzman, Lisa Lyons and others. Two strips stand out from the crowd. Brand's 'Monday' is a tale of the workaday fantasies of a wage slave, and the jam strip 'Breaking Out' features comics icons Betty & Veronica, Little Lulu, Juliet Jones, Petunia Pig and Supergirl escaping the confines of their respective series and forming a consciousness-raising collective! The success of this one-shot led to the establishment of the *Wimmen's Comix Collective* and the still-published *Wimmen's Comix* anthology, and thereby kickstarted many women's careers in cartooning.~HS

IT GIRL

Oni Press: *One-shot 2002*

Luna (It Girl) is a member of superhero team, the Atomics, now a musical group. When Cadaver plays minds games with her boyfriend, Adam, convincing him that he's unworthy of her and the band, she grows wings and goes looking for him. Mike Allred's unassuming story is very nicely illustrated by Chynna Clugston-Major, whose artwork is not normally seen in colour, and loses some of its usual flourishes here.~NF

ITCHY AND SCRATCHY

Bongo: *3 issue miniseries, 1 Special 1994*

Owing much to *Squeak the Mouse*, this ultra-violent version of *Tom and Jerry*, gleefully presented in snippets during *The Simpsons*, translates astoundingly well to comics. The first issue is an exceptional example, with the pacing, timing and gags brilliantly achieved on the printed page. Every bit as carnage-crammed as the cover claims, it's not for the squeamish. Succeeding issues fall short, but are worth a look.~WJ

Recommended: 1

ITCHY PLANET

Fantagraphics: *3 issues 1988-1989*

This series looks at political and social issues in comic strip form. 1 has a nuclear theme, issue 2 deals with politics, and 3 covers elections. Well-meaning but dry, with Joyce Farmer and Lyn Chyvely's story of their trials and tribulations in launching *Tits & Clits*, in 2, being the best entertainment to be had.~HS

IT'S DARK IN LONDON

Serpent's Tail Mask Noir: *Graphic Novel 1996*

The Mask Noir series consists largely of young, radical thriller writers. Walter Mosley is their star turn. This anthology, which unites various of their authors, such as Stella Duffy and Graham Gordon, with cartoonists, is intended as a portrait of the city, generally seen from the underside. There are few identifiable thrillers or detective stories as such. Mostly it's meditations, and sometimes it's a load of wank.

Woodrow Phoenix's series of negative, four-panel pages with wordless views of more and less famous sites sets the tone. The story will appeal more to those recognising the iconography than those who've never been to London, though. Some of the stories happen to be set in London but don't need to be, like Neil Gaiman and Warren Pleece's haunting tale of a beautiful boy from a mysterious race, sold to a gangster with a predilection for beautiful youths. Others, like 'Frozen', by Chris Webster and Carl Flint, in which an artist's model takes revenge on the woman who's carved him out of his own piss, have a tokenistic view of the city in the first panel to justify their inclusion. Only Iain Sinclair and Alan Moore actually address the nature of London with any success, though both their pieces are oblique in approach. There's some good work in *It's Dark in London* but as a collection it lacks consistency and direction. There's too much cleverness on display and too many writers unfamiliar with the medium fumbling for effect.~FJ

IT'S SCIENCE with Dr Radium

Slave Labor: *7 issues, 2 Specials 1986-1992**

In the perfect world of tomorrow Dr Radium practises science (in the abstract), usually on his long-suffering assistant Roy. This is school educational films gone mad, as Dr Radium has to deal with the Elvi and a group of time-travellers from 1954 visiting the future. The first special is bit of a mish-mash, but the second, titled 'The Gizmos of Boola-Boola', is hilarious. Scott Saavedra's very funny material cries out to be adapted as cartoon shorts.~FP

Recommended: 1-3, 5-7, 'The Gizmos of Boola Boola'

JAB

Adhesive: *6 issues 1992-1995*

A comic whose editorial response to the proliferation of gimmick covers from major companies is to shoot bullets of varying calibre through the entire print run is to be cherished. Sadly, the contents of this Texas anthology don't always live up to that idea. The most successful graduate is the introspective lunacy of Shannon Wheeler's Too Much Coffee Man, wearing a giant cup of Java on his head for those occasions when an instant full-caffeinated pick-me-up is required. Tom King's 'Teen Squad' also has a few laughs, and both King and Wheeler incorporate the bullet hole into their third-issue stories. Walt Holcombe is in 1 and 4, the latter also boasting two pages of Chris Ware, but by the final issue, with a ventriloquist dummy theme, all inspiration has departed.~FP

Star Wars JABBA THE HUT

Dark Horse: *One-shot ('The Gaar Suppoon Hit') 1995, one-shot ('The Hunger of Princess Nampi') 1995, one-shot ('The Dynasty Trap') 1995, one-shot ('Betrayal') 1996*

One of the more imaginative characters to originate in *Star Wars*, Jabba the Hut is a corpulent perpetually drooling slug-like creature. He's also the galaxy's greatest criminal trader, thrilling in negotiation and one-upmanship. The appointment of Jim Woodring to write raises the eyebrows, but he's sadly reined in here, although producing perfectly acceptable and occasionally amusing stories adequately pencilled by Art Wetherell. None are essential purchases, but the best sample is the first with Jabba in full dealing mode. The Art of the Deal collects all one-shots.~WJ

JACK HUNTER

Blackthorne/Timeline: *1 issue 1987*
Blackthorne: *3 issues 1989*

Writer Bruce Jones recycles the amnesia plot from his acclaimed *Somerset Holmes* series to far lesser effect for rogue security agent Jack Hunter. A few good ideas are tossed in, only to be diluted or discarded and Jones is on autopilot for much of the run, as is artist Nollie Zamora for 2 and 3. The second series is black and white, and half of the first issue reprints the original first issue minus the appalling colour.~WJ

JACK KIRBY'S FOURTH WORLD

DC: *20 issues 1997-1998*

The odd Fourth World title was coined, and never explained, by Jack Kirby to describe what most consider his greatest work, his connected 1970s titles *Forever People*, *Mister Miracle* and *New Gods*. While not matching Kirby in terms of sustainable creations, John Byrne has equalled his ubiquity over a twenty-five year career, but even he was affected by a strange malaise induced by this cast. Throughout his career Kirby created a multitude of characters, almost all of which easily adapted to the subsequent attentions of others. It's curious, then, that the cast of *New Gods* and *Forever People*, stubbornly refuse to perform successfully for succeeding creators. Nevertheless Byrne produced the best reprise to date. He was respectful of his cares, served a majesty rarely seen in comics today with his best art of the 1990s, plenty of Kirby homages, and had the scope to attempt an extended scenario. There were plenty of fine moments, some good and surprising revelations, and even an explanation of the title in 13. The back-ups spotlighting a single character, often by Walt Simonson, were also good. On the downside, there was a lot of blood and thunder, punctuated by unsubtle infodumps and acres of wordage. In the final analysis, despite Byrne's laudable attempts to move the cast forward, the invidious comparisons invited by Kirby's titular prominence – a marketing contrivance to woo older comic buyers, or genuine tribute, you decide – prove the downfall of an ambitious title. As 1-19 are basically one continued story, if you want to sample try 1, or 12, largely concentrating on the past of Mister Miracle's assistant Oberon. 20 details Superman's first encounter with Kirby's cast.~FP

JACK OF HEARTS

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1984*

Intriguing supporting character given his own miniseries, which turns him cosmic with a deus ex machina origin revealing him to be a human-alien hybrid. Bill Mantlo's story limps under fluctuating character motives but George Freeman's all-too-infrequently-seen artwork just manages to save the series.~APS

JACK STAFF

Dancing Elephant: *11 issues 2000-2002*
Image: *1 issue + 2003 to date*

Written and drawn by Paul Grist, this starts as his interpretation of Marvel's Union Jack, with 1-4 based on events in a *Captain America* comic (253) featuring Union Jack that he'd read as a child. In Grist's version there's a Sgt. States, and it's a great introduction to Jack Staff's world – a mix of old-style Marvel and British action weeklies. In 6 and 7, we see the return of the Spider, the classic British anti-hero thief. He is drawn out of retirement by the theft of one of his costumes by a petty criminal, who then goes on a crime spree. Further characters familiar to British comic readers of a certain generation appear in later issues. The appeal of Grist's work is a multitude of simultaneous plot threads, creating genuine interest in the cast's myriad secrets. Who is Tom-Tom the Robot Man? What is chasing Becky Burdock, vampire girl reporter? And most importantly, where was Jack Staff for the twenty years he was missing, and why hasn't he aged? Grist's love of British comics is clear, and here he offers a unique mix of cups of tea and masks and tights. The series has been relaunched in colour at Image.~DB

Recommended: 1-10

JACK THE RIPPER

Eternity: *3 issue miniseries 1991**

Humdrum, tedious and just plain bad rehashing of the Whitechapel murders that manages to be both gratuitous and coy at the same time. Includes the worst drawn top-hat of all time. Avoid.~WW

The JACKAROO

Eternity: *3 issues 1990*

A Jackaroo is the Australian equivalent of a cowboy, and in this case that's Jack Keegan, good bloke in a fight, and not the type to let some bludger make off with his $5000 winnings therefrom. The obvious comparison to Keegan is Crocodile Dundee, but as written by Will Eisner. It isn't written by Eisner, though, it's written and drawn, very nicely as it happens, by Gary Chaloner. In chasing his money Keegan becomes involved with gangsters, robots and kung-fu experts, dealing with them all in his inimitable style. Sadly incomplete when cancelled, this is a forgotten gem of an adventure series that deserved a far wider audience.~WJ

JACK'S LUCK RUNS OUT

Beekeeper Cartoon Amusements: *One-shot 1998*

The lead characters' heads and dress are based on playing cards in Jason Little's very stylish, and stylised lead story. Gambler, Jack, and his girlfriend, Gina, meet and are charmed by bar-owner, Rex, but his intentions are not as friendly as they think. The back-up is about a woman who receives a ransom note before the kidnapping and is therefore prepared when the kidnapper arrives. This has more realistic artwork from Little, presented as stereographic images.~NF

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* Available in a collected edition

Recommended

Chaos! Presents: JADE

Chaos!: *4 issue miniseries 2001, 4 issue miniseries ('Redemption') 2001-2002*

Jade is a 4000-year old vampire who has decided to restore the honour of China by defeating all the Triads, which effectively control the country. The first miniseries takes place in China as, aided by the mute ninja, Silence, she takes on the government-backed Kuei agency, which has been monitoring her dreams. She also has to contend with the apparent resurrection of her lover, Shiro and the sorcerer who killed him, Pai Lung, the White Dragon. 'Redemption' takes place in America where the Triads have been raising forces against her and allied themselves with an organisation called The Progeny, dedicated to eliminating all vampires using its Iron Racer armour. Inside the armour is Kayleigh, a young woman fighting to protect her father who invented it and is now a prisoner of the Triads. These two series are both action-driven, without losing track of character development, and, as written by Christopher Golden and Tom Sniegoski, Jade and Silence are an interesting pair with a lot of promise. The pencils by Wilson Tortosa (except for the first issue by Ken Lashley) show a more marked manga influence in Redemption, but fit well with the mix of magic and technology on display.~NF

JADE WARRIORS

Image: *3 issues 1999-2000*

Mike Deodato's skin mag collection provides extensive reference for this story of evil female Japanese warriors seeking to kill a defector from their group. Existing for no other reason than to provide page after page of half-naked women, you'd be better off, and probably achieve greater satisfaction with the original reference material.~FP

JADEMAN KUNG-FU SPECIAL

Jademan: *One-shot 1988*

Promotional anthology that served to introduce the English speaking market to the mega-successful kung fu Superhero comics that are a mainstay of Hong Kong and Chinatowns all over the planet. The four previewed titles are *Blood Sword, Drunken Fist, Force of Buddha's Palm* and *Oriental Heroes,* all credited to Tony Wong, but actually a production line of approximately twenty anonymous creators. They're translated, hopefully very tongue in cheek, by Hong Kong movie addict Mike Baron. The storylines are practically irrelevant, simply a way to get to the long, lavishly illustrated and overblown fight scenes. Lip-synching optional.~WW

THE JAGUAR

DC/!mpact: *14 issues, 1 Annual 1991-1992*

Dispensing with the Archie character, !mpact retain only the name and vague background details for this teenage feral female. William Messner-Loebs and the initial art team of David Williams and José Marzan turn out a fine combination of college angst and superheroics, as Brazilian Maria deGuzman comes to terms with not only university life in a new country but also her genetic inheritance of the Jaguar powers. The supporting cast is well conceived, particularly spoiled teenage prom queen Tracy Dickerson, sadly tempered in later issues. David Williams' pencils in 1-6 are extraordinarily confident for a newcomer (although deadline pressures seem to be affecting him towards the end of his run), and while successors were adequate, they fail in comparison. Improbabilities of plot convenience are the major flaws in an otherwise consistently entertaining series. It could have done without a covert lab beneath the college, for instance, unsubtle expository dialogue and thought balloons, and the occasionally woefully pedestrian diary entries as narrative. On the plus side, Loebs has a fine time prodding at political correctness and insulting comedians, among other more prosaic topics.~FP

Adventures of the JAGUAR

Archie: *15 issues 1961-1963*

Following the moderate success of *The Adventures of the Fly,* Archie launched this companion title, in which zoologist Ralph Hardy discovers a magic Jaguar belt in an ancient temple. It grants him the power of flight (via belt jets – pretty sophis, these ancient Incans), incredible strength and control over all animals. It also, inexplicably, gives him a snazzy red jumpsuit and rips off his moustache (ouch!) whenever he uses it to sally forth and fight crime as The Jaguar. Art for most of the series was by John Rosenberger, benign but bland, and the writers remain anonymous, but were almost certainly moonlighting *Superman* staffers, as the similarities between the two series were marked. Sample 7, in which the Jag's three girlfriends – immortal goddess Cat Girl, "sea Circe" Kree-Nal and secretary Jill Ross – join forces as the "Jaguar Rescue Team" to fill in during his absence. Lightweight, silly fun.~HS

JAGUAR GOD

Verotik: *8 issues (0-7) 1996-1997*

Frothing letters page correspondents would have it that this combination of Frazetta style fantasy action with detailed sex is a breakthrough for adult comics. In reality it's an extremely unpleasant misogynistic coupling of brutality with sex, aimed at retards who consider Conan a wimp and like their decapitations graphically portrayed. Plots? There are a few, but then again, too few to mention, although the art throughout is of a decent standard from an ever shifting cast.~WJ

THE JAM Urban Adventure

Matrix: *1 issue 1987*
Comico: *1 Special 1988*
Slave Labor: *5 issues 1989-1991*
Dark Horse: *3 issues (6-8) 1993-1995*
Caliber: *5 issues (9-13) 1995-1996*

This is almost sit-com, and the Matrix, Comico and Slave Labor issues are magnificent. Bernie Mireault is a one-man-band producing these stories of Gordon Kirby, an ordinary guy who likes to dress up in tracksuit and hood to roam the streets performing good deeds as The Jammer. He encounters bizarre situations, and a rabid and preposterous terrorist group, and serves as a test case for the Devil to ruin his cosy and contented domesticity: this isn't your everyday superhero title. The delightful whimsy begins to fade a little with the Dark Horse issues, in which Kirby is psychoanalysed, and non-Mireault material begins creeping in. At Caliber *The Jam* coasts into navel-gazing and becomes prone to meaningless padding and interludes; while it still contains good ideas, they're stretched very thin indeed. Worse still, issues are packed with wilfully self-indulgent and plain bad strips from other creators. He was given a decent final hurrah, though in *A Caliber Christmas.* Many guides list the existence of a second Matrix issue, which was never actually published, and portions of the Matrix comic were reprinted in the first Slave Labor issue.~WJ

Recommended: Matrix 1, Comico Special, 1-7

JAMES BOND

Acme/Eclipse: *2 issue microseries ('Permission To Die') 1989, One-shot ('Licence To Kill') 1989*

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries ('Serpent's Tooth') 1992*, 2 issues ('A Silent Armageddon') 1993, 2 issues ('Shattered Helix') 1995, 3 issue miniseries ('The Quasimodo Gambit') 1995*

Mike Grell started the *James Bond* revivals hoping to revert from the gimmick-ridden format of the later films back to the suave, rather sadistic mood of Ian Fleming's original novels. There are some nice touches, and Grell carefully limits the villains, who're flamboyant, but not ridiculously superheroic characters. Grell also worked on a bog-standard movie adaptation of *Licence To Kill,* written by Richard

* Available in a collected edition

Ashford, and also featuring the art of Chuck Austen, Tom Yeates and Stan Woch.

Doug Moench's take on the quintessentially British superspy in 'Serpent's Tooth' relies much more on our familiarity with films, taking from them its pacing and its reliance on a pretty woman popping up with a vital piece of info whenever the plot starts to droop. Moench attempts some of the trademark one-liners, which, never exactly side-splitting on screen, fall even flatter on paper. A standard-issue mad villain (who's experimented on himself with some lizard genes and become a serpentine hybrid) plans to use stolen nuclear missiles to set off earthquakes that will destroy 83% of the Earth's population and allow him to remake the earth in his own image. Gripping it isn't, and it's not helped by Paul Gulacy's stiff, badly painted artwork that looks like a relic from the 1970s. He'd have been much better off drawing a crimplene safari-suited Moore than a slick, narrow-trousered Connery. Poor show all round.

John Burns restores some dignity, drawing Simon Jowett's scripts for 'A Silent Armageddon', and drags our hero kicking and screaming into the computer age. Jowett's Bond doesn't grate, but neither does he shine, and Burns' art is the real star of the show. For some reason only two parts of the advertised four were ever published. This was also the case with 'Shattered Helix', although Dark Horse had more cautiously only promoted a three-issue run. Jowett's back, with David Jackson pencilling. It doesn't have many twists, though. Bond and a floosy race Cerberus to the CIA's old Antarctic hang-out, which Bond must destroy.

Finally there's Don McGregor's stab at Bond. His characters traditionally have plenty of flair, but here he saves most of it for the villains. Larger-than-life characters are right up his street and the deadly warrior Maximillian 'Quasimodo' Steele could have stepped straight out of an issue of Sabre. The plot, such as it is, is an excuse for a face-off between the two that has Bond tracking Quasimodo and other bizarre disciples of the 'Heavenly Way' through the Georgia swamps.~FJ

JANE'S WORLD

Girl Twirl: *3 issues + 2002 to date*

Featuring a hapless newspaper reporter in a series of gag strips, Jane's World has gathered a respectable following through web page hits (www.janesworldcomics.com), and it's easy to see why. Paige Braddock's sketchy cartooning is very expressive, and her gags match those of most newspaper strips. Rather than just collecting the earlier work, the comics expand on it. This is good clean wholesome fun for everyone but fundamentalist christians.~WJ

JAR OF FOOLS

Black Eye: *2 volumes 1995**

Ernie Weiss is a destitute magician obsessed with his brother's suicide and mourning the termination of a relationship when he encounters a conman and his daughter. The conman wants Weiss to teach his daughter magic, and the trio are accompanied by Al Flosso, former master of the prestidigitatory arts, now nursing-home escapee. Esther, Ernie's former lover, is facing a dead-end working in a coffee bar. All have problems to face and resolve, and over 140 pages creator Jason Lutes skilfully weaves a compelling plot. The warmth and humanity of the cast shine through the pages, and Lutes' assured storytelling is all the more amazing for this being his début. The first part is also available as a self-published volume.~FP

Recommended: 1, 2

JASON AND THE ARGOBOTS

Oni Press: *4 issue miniseries 2002*

After an earthquake, Jason finds a giant robot buried beneath the desert and uses it to stop some super-powered criminals, who have taken advantage of the quake to escape from a nearby prison. Taking it home to his grandfather and precocious sister, Juni, he learns that his mother built the robot, Chiron, with the help of aliens, who came to warn of a terrible threat from space. Now the military want the robot back. J. Torres writes a good tale, with humour and charm, only hinting at the connection to classical mythology and the much larger adventure to come in 2003. The open storytelling and clean lines of Mike Norton are also appealing.~NF

JASON AND THE ARGONAUTS

Tome: *5 issues 1990-1991*

Patrick Zircher's attempt to be utterly faithful to the original text led to pages of dull material in this adaptation, particularly in 3 when almost the entire issue is occupied by the introduction of dozens of bit players. Discounting that, though, he managed a fine job in bringing the Greek legend to life, and those interested shouldn't be discouraged that it was never completed.~WJ

JASON GOES TO HELL – The Final Friday

Topps: *3 issue miniseries 1993*

A shoddy adaptation of what was at the time the final *Friday the 13th* film with Jason jumping from body to body in an attempt to be reborn.~WJ

JAVA TOWN

Slave Labor: *6 issues 1993-1996*

Scott Saavedra's comic/zine began with strips about coffee and its effects, but evolved into something similar to his later *Comic Book Heaven*, containing reprints old adverts from comics and magazines. Saavedra also creates new stories by cutting up panels from old comics and rewriting dialogue (2-4). In the best of Saavedra's own strips, 'The Brain Eaters of Outer Mongolia' (6) takes coffee as a starting point and then diverges into film parody. The first, forty-eight-page issue is mostly reprinted from *Suburban High Life*, *Splat!* and *Graphic Story Monthly* with some new pages.~NF

JAX AND THE HELLHOUND

Blackthorne: *3 issues 1986-1987*

Jacob 'Jax' Morosco operates as a freelance troubleshooter. When he joins forces with a huge demonic hound named Mulu, who is in fact an interdimensional guardian, his workload becomes more other-worldly. Mulu enhances Jax's occult profile along the way. Dennis Marker's artwork is inventive but not quite up to professional standard, but hints of an affection for Dan Spiegle's work don't do the characters any harm. The writing is better, and greater success might have been achieved in colour.~SW

JAY AND SILENT BOB

Oni Press: *4 issue miniseries 1998-1999**

The characters Jay and Silent Bob have cropped up in all of director Kevin Smith's movies, culminating with their starring role in *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*. Written by Smith and illustrated by Duncan Fegredo, this sends the undynamic duo on a rambling road trip to Shermer, Illinois, the setting for many of John Hughes' 1980s teen comedies, where "all the bitches are fine" and "all the dudes are preps and dorks." Along the way the pair encounter the star of *Doogie Howser, MD* (now making 'indie' porno films), grumpy celebrity Mister Rogers, and an escaped female orang-utan. As with Smith's movies, this is filled with an extraordinary amount of slangy, X-rated dialogue revolving around sex, porn, weed and pop culture. It's something of a minor miracle that Fegredo manages to fit in so many excellent drawings amidst the heaving word balloons. Fans of the films will have no cause to complain about this comic's adolescent sensibilities; the unconvinced or unconverted, however, may find fratboy humour, and constant use of the word 'gay' as an insult to be exceptionally tiresome after a while.~AL

JAZZ AGE CHRONICLES

EF Graphics: *3 issues 1989**
Caliber: *5 issues 1990-1991*

Well-researched and engrossing stories set largely in Boston, 1926. The EF series is a very competent début for creator Ted Slampyak, a decent story about a vampire on the loose and a mysterious baroness. It introduces private eye Al Mifflin, uncouth and inventive as should be the case, and Harvard archaeologist Clifford Jennings, cultured, refined and deliberately conceived to play off Mifflin. Many elements of the first Caliber story (1-2) stem from the Boston police strike and rioting of 1919, most pertinently revealing Mifflin's former career, and it's the highlight of the series. While not original, Slampyak has the private-eye routine down well, and if there's a few too many talking-head shots, those interested in detective stories will find the tale compelling enough to overlook them. The final story, 'The Flowers of San Pedro', is the weakest *Jazz Age Chronicles* tale, very much in Indiana Jones territory, with a remote Arizona town falling prey to evil machinations, and two new female characters, one introduced as no more than the irritating bimbo whose part in the plot is to be captured.~FP
Recommended: Caliber 1-2

JAZZBO!

Slave Labor: *2 issues 1994-1995*

Subtitled "Comics That Swing", Eric Searleman mixes off the wall observational humour, some interesting slices of life, and some unobtrusive whimsy, often with musical connections. The whole works far better in the second issue than the bitty first, where a collection of experiences begin with the appearance of a giant egg in Phoenix. Sadly discontinued, the cover theme of a different style of band each issue was also working well.~WJ
Recommended: 2

JEMM, SON OF SATURN

DC: *12 issue limited series 1984-1985*

This is basically DC's version of *E.T.* Jemm is a displaced prince of Saturn – obviously the rightful ruler since he was born with the pulsating jewel embedded in his forehead that allows him to see into people's souls. Luther Mannkin is an orphaned boy living in Harlem, whose elder brother is mixed up with some very nasty people. Jemm and Luther meet, and it's love at first sight. But there are baddies demanding their attention on Earth and on Saturn: gangster bosses with artificial eyes, and Saturnian warrior women with high-heeled boots and whips. In its favour, it's downbeat in unexpected areas, but it seems to go on forever, and the plot (writer, Greg Potter) and storytelling (artists, Gene Colan and Klaus Janson) are very confused. You'd need a heart as big as a house to care a jot about any of the participants, and the last two pages should carry a health warning.~FC

JENNY FINN

Oni Press: *2 issues 1999*

Created and written by Mike Mignola and Troy Nixey, drawn by Nixey, this is a murder-mystery based around a woman fished from the sea, bodily corruption and, possibly, love. It's a surreal, horror, historical melodrama, perfectly suited to Nixey's slippery artwork. Regrettably, it's also only half-finished.~NF

JENNY SPARKS The Secret History of the Authority

WildStorm: *5 issue miniseries 2000-2001**

The Authority's caustic, chain-smoking sweary English girl was the Spirit of the 20th Century. Not the easiest power to define in a fight, but her death at the turn of the millennium provides a good excuse to delve into a bit of retro-continuity dressed up as her final diary entries. Written by Mark Millar and illustrated by John McCrea, this is good superhero fun and a gentle introduction to the WildStorm style, thus a nice jumping on point to anyone thinking of giving *StormWatch, The Authority*, or any of its myriad spin-offs a go.~JC

JEREMIAH

Adventure: *2 issue microseries ('Birds of Prey') 1991*, 2 issue microseries ('A Fistful of Sand') 1991*, 2 issue microseries ('The Heirs') 1991*
Catalan: *1 volume ('Strike') 1990*
Venture: *1 volume ('Gun in the Water') 2002*

Rather suprisingly adapted for television in 2002, this black and white series contains just three of revered Belgian artist/writer Hermann's *Jeremiah* graphic novels, now numbering twenty-three in European editions. Each album is split into two comics. Set in violent and lawless post-apocalyptic America, the series chronicles the adventures of two young drifters, Jeremiah, the young, trusting Everyman, and Kurdy, his worldly-wise partner, as they attempt to survive in a violent and lawless world. 'Birds of Prey' tells how they meet after Jeremiah's farm compound is destroyed by outlaws.

Like *Judge Dredd, Jeremiah* works in many timely icons and fads such as bowling, commenting on current society as it goes. Many of the stories revolve around Western scenarios. 'Fistful of Sand' finds our heroes lost in the desert, trapped between a bunch of thieves and a local militia band, both trying to find and steal a stash of gold. It could just as well be a *Blueberry* strip. The third graphic novel, 'The Heirs', concerns the now infirm but still tyrannical community ruler whose son is a drunken wastrel and whose daughter is scheming to inherit his position. Jeremiah's arrival changes everything.

The reprints are inferior to the colour graphic novel translations as the wider, European-size pages are shrunk considerably to fit the US comic format, and while Hermann's artwork is detailed, but loose and full of energy, the ochres and oranges of coloured versions add greatly to the spaghetti Western atmosphere. One graphic novel, the thirteenth, was published by Catalan. Combining the pleasures of bowling with recruitment for a shady religious cult, it works its way to a facetious, if unpredictable ending. More recently, Venture has published 'Gun in the Water' (22), in which Jeremiah and Kurdy rescue Jason, from a water tank and find themselves involved with his suspicious family, whose guilty secret will endanger them all.~FJ
Recommended: Birds of Prey 1-2

JERRY IGER'S GOLDEN FEATURES

Blackthorne: *6 issues 1986-1987*

Black and white reprints of 1940's and 1950's strips produced by the Iger comics 'shop'. A common practice was for publishers to subcontract the creation of a comic's contents to story factories rather than have writers and artists on salary. The Iger group was responsible for some of the best strips of the period, and *Golden Features* represents them under a separate theme in each issue. 1 showcases Ruth Roche and Matt Baker' gypsy adventuress Flamingo, 2 has superhero Wonderboy, 3 features Girls (scantily clad heroines), 4 recounts the cases of ace spy ZX-5, issue 5 has horror stories and 6 stars child heroes such as Pee-Wee and Kid Patrol. Although many stories seem dated by today's standards, there are many hidden gems dotted throughout, but the spotty reproduction makes enjoying them a rather an effort.~WW

JERRY LEWIS

DC: *84 issues (41-124) 1957-1971*

This was originally *Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis*; the alleged comedian inherited the title when the pair severed their professional relationship, so the 'début' issue of *Jerry* is 41. Mostly, these are innocuous, if irritating, slapstick routines, with little to commend them apart from the sterling work of DC's comedy stable of artists: Bob Oksner, Win Mortimer etal. Hard-core fanatics of one persuasion or another might want to pick up some later issues for one shaky reason or another. 92 has a Superman cameo, 97 a guest-shot by Batman, Robin and Joker, 101-104 are alleged to feature Neal Adams art, though because of the high stylisation in humour comics, picking out styles is tricky. 105 features a full Superman guest appearance, 112 co-stars the Flash, and 117 the non-superpowered version of Wonder Woman.~HS

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* Available in a collected edition

JESTERCROW

Castle Rain Entertainment: *3 issue miniseries 2000-2001*

Science fiction series from Michael Angelos set in the far future. In the centuries following a catastrophic war many intelligent species band together in an embattled federation called the Quindarin Heirachy and form an elite band of superpowered warrior monks/secret police called the Ves'Da'Va Crow Order. Jester is high in the ranks, and more concerned with the philosophy of the Order in its search to recruit and train the many super-powered outcasts than in their latter-day governmental role. Thus it is no surprise that he finds himself the victim of a traitorous plot from within the Crow military faction that forces him upon a vengeance trail to regain his honour and save the world. Complex and ponderous in all the wrong places, the art from Stephen Sadowski and Scott Lee buoy up the package but can't save it.~WW

JET

WildStorm: *4 issue miniseries 2000-2001*

Jet is Jodi Slayton, daughter of Backlash, now at college after the death of her boyfriend. A reluctant heroine, she's mistrusted by the local police who are forced to accept her help when Mr. Meaner turns up. He's been giving super powers to the likes of Rhyme and Reason and the Timewaster, who cause havoc at the mall and on campus. Written by Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning, the story's amusingly told, portraying Jodi as a young woman with spirit and sense, determined to make her own place in the world. Dustin Nguyen and Derek Fridolfs, on pencils and inks respectively, combine to produce some detailed and very attractive artwork.~NF

JET COMICS

Amaze Ink: *3 issues 1997-1998*

Alex is a high school kid who gains a variety of powers from a mysterious super-science disc. So he does what any youngster would and becomes a superhero. Calling himself Spectrum he sets out to make the world a better, cooler place. A successful foray into reproducing those fun comics of childhood from relative newcomers Josh Olsen and Steven Martinez.~WW

JETCAT CLUBHOUSE

Oni Press: *3 issue miniseries 2001*

The 6 year old superheroine is joined by child rock star Oddette and mummified boy king Tutenstein for delightfully lightweight adventures. Their meetings are also attended by an incontinent monkey named Ploppy. In 2 and 3 we meet Jetcat's super-team The Two-Fisted Five consisting of Teen Idol, Snakefist, Suburbanaut and Neon Varmint. There's an eight page colour section in the centre of 1 and all issues feature adaptations by creator Jay Stephens based on storyboards for Nickelodeon's animated Jetcat shorts.~SW

A JEW IN COMMUNIST PRAGUE

NBM: *3 Volumes 1997-2001*

Very few graphic novels are worthy of the title, but this series of books by Vittorio Giardino is precisely that: a novel in pictures. The story chronicles the early years of a young Jewish boy, Jonas Finkel, growing up in 1950s Prague. Giardino superbly combines a subtle study of adolescent anxieties and relationships with the desperate paranoia of life under totalitarianism and, more to the point, he manages to make it immensely readable. Jonas is a believably complex character trying to support his mother while his father is serving time as a political prisoner, and his teenage insecurities are echoed throughout the three books by the constant threats of persecution or imprisonment. As with his other books, Giardino reveals himself to be a master of economy and his elegant figures, delicate linework and pastel colours are a delight for the eye. Truly one of comics' masterpieces.~DAR

Recommended: 1-3

JEZEBEL JADE

Comico: *3 issue miniseries 1988*

Spinning off from *Jonny Quest*, this miniseries spotlights Race Bannon and Hong Kong's best thief, Jezebel Jade, in a fast-moving thriller. The Quests' old foe Dr Zin has kidnapped an American scientist who's working on a formula to prolong life, and it's up to Jade and Bannon to rescue him. Strongly plotted by William Messner-Loebs, with plenty of action and surprises, the illustration by Adam Kubert is excellent. Don't be put off if you haven't read Comico's *Jonny Quest* (although you should): this is superior adventure material.~FP

Recommended: 1-3

JEZEBELLE

WildStorm: *6 issue miniseries 2001*

Magic was introduced into the WildStorm universe in the 2000 annuals during which the demon Ghoulgotha was defeated in his attempt to gain the mystical Soulstone, but at a cost. Now, her sister's death has made Harper (Jezebelle) Harrison the next in line to inherit magical powers and she must deal with her boyfriend's suicide, the return of Ghoulgotha and High School. With nods to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Jezebelle* is a teen-friendly look at the consequences that all actions have and the responsibilities they engender. Ben Raab and Steve Ellis have produced a pleasant-enough comic but neither script nor artwork are anything special.~NF

JIGABOO DEVIL

Millennium: *1 issue (0) 1996*

Set in a distopian 1968 where a separate Pan African-American nation has existed in North America since the 1930s. We see various deals being made that will make the reunification of the PAAC with the USA result in the continuation of the USA's institutionalised racial prejudice. The appearances of a 1930s masked vigilante named Jigaboo Devil and 1960s artist Keisha Mella's portfolio of paintings depicting him seem set on a public relations collision course. This is writer LaMorris Richmond's a controversial take on a black *V For Vendetta*. The writing, whilst crammed, is accomplished and compelling. Barton McGee and Seitu Hayden's artwork suffers from being mono, characters aren't always named and continuity can be weak as a result. A fascinating story idea that deserved completion.~SW

JIGSAW

Harvey: *2 issues 1966*

Astronaut Gary Jason's body is reassembled by aliens after they have unwittingly injured him. He discovers his limbs now stretch just like Mr Fantastic's and Plastic Man's. A very silly comic.~SW

Hellraiser Nightbreed JIHAD

Marvel/Epic: *2 issue microseriess 1991*

Ninety-six pages of red-flecked painted art by Paul Johnson is a lot to waste on a bloody silly and heavy story, based on characters from two Clive Barker films. The plot, such as it is, is unholy war between Pinhead and chums and another gang of sado-masochistic freaks. And surely, in a tale of dark gods, even Goths would like to see that someone on the project would have noticed that they were mis-spelling 'deity'? There is no parental advisory, but few would want their children to read such sexual and gory material.~GK

JIM

Fantagraphics: *Series one 4 issues 1987-1990, series two 6 issues 1993-1996*

Jim Woodring's first magazine-sized series contains some of a character called Jim's Dreams and Daydreams, the introduction of the cat Big Red, whose gruesome feeding habits are explored, and Pulque (in 4), a frog-shaped vegetable that smells terrible. Woodring packs text stories and pages of novelty items in as well to make for a delightful comic. The dream stories mix surreal images and non-sequiturs, usually involving some sort of artistic endeavour but also as simple as getting drunk before going to the public baths and coming across a one-legged man. These strips remain rooted in an everyday world that proves to have hidden depths of suffering if you know where to look. Some of the greatest pieces in these issues, however, are the covers and single-page images, from the skeleton leaning against a gate-post to the horse's head with a cigarette between its teeth. *The Book of Jim* collects material from these issues.

The second series is collected as *Frank* volume 2, but continues in much the same vein with a mix of stories centring around the above characters but now, significantly, adding Woodring's best-known character, Frank, to the roster. The colour Frank stories are beautiful, wordless reflections on voyeurism, godhood and, as usual, suffering, especially in the plight of the Manhog, usually coming off the worse in his encounters with Frank or the other strange denizens of Jim's fantastic landscape. Woodring's tales of insecurity are simply told, often deceptively so, but whether you feel that there's any real meaning here or not, they're an extraordinary read.~NF

Recommended: Series one 1-4, series two 1-6

JIMBO

Zongo: *7 issues 1996-1997*

Anyone who saw Gary Panter's primitive cartooning in *Raw* will not find it easy to forget. In this series Panter brings back a number of familiar characters, most notably his dense, punk Everyman Jimbo, for a series of oblique adventures. Initial issues are structured as one-page strips, drawn in Panter's distinctive, child-like style. It is almost impossible to explain the quality of his work if you don't see it immediately; if you're put off by the wavering lines and crude panels don't bother with this. However if you like it, *Jimbo*'s a feast, giving Panter room to regularly experiment, producing extraordinary comics pages like the 'Bogstage' sequence in 5. Here he uses a combination of scratchy line and minute hatching alongside crudely outlined negative image drawings in a circular panel framework, drawing deranged, multi-armed rock star monsters and picturing Godzilla, straddling the Empire State Building, strumming away.

One of the great iconographers of our times having fun. Read it.~FJ

Recommended: 1-7

Superman's Pal JIMMY OLSEN

DC: *163 issues 1954-1974*

Introduced very soon after Superman (in *Action Comics* 6), Jimmy Olsen is the red-haired cub reporter at *The Daily Planet*. Always striving to better himself or obtain that elusive scoop, he'll don any disguise no matter how preposterous, indulge in any ruse no matter how ridiculous, or undergo any transformation no matter how astounding. The structure of the strip is very basic, and almost any issue until 133 will feature the same rudimentary elements. Jimmy dates Lois Lane's younger sister Lucy (from 36), and due to his propensity for stumbling into unfortunate circumstances he's got a signal watch, which when activated attracts Superman to bail him out of trouble.

The very early issues have tracing news leads high on the agenda, and are generally light-hearted, but not as preposterous as what would follow. From the late 1950s, though, the title became ever more daft. The news angle was forgotten in favour of densely plotted gimmick stories, often three eight-pagers to an issue. The writers, perhaps advisedly, remained anonymous, but the artists were those regularly used on other Superman titles, usually Curt Swan, with the occasional John Forte, Al Plastino or Kurt Schaffenberger strip. Popular transformations for Jimmy included a rampaging giant turtle man, the superhero Elastic Lad, a wolfman, a human octopus and a human porcupine. All of these and more can be found in 105. Elastic Lad was particularly popular, débuting in 31, and as that character Jimmy would regularly meet the 30th-century Legion of Super-Heroes. Jimmy often went undercover, using myriad disguises, with a particular fondness for cross-dressing, and he's masqueraded as a hitman, an oil millionaire, a robot, a witch doctor and many more.

Any story selected at random gives an indication of these issues as a whole, so here's 'The Menace of Insect Island' from 79, 1964. Jimmy and Lucy see a film about giant ants, and journey back to Metropolis in the *Daily Planet* helicopter. Jimmy is overcome by a "strange mental compulsion" and heads out to sea to land on a remote island. There he and Lucy are greeted by a strange race of... wait for it, ant people! Jimmy pricks his finger on a thorny plant. This, by the way, is packed into eight panels. The ant people are an advanced civilisation transformed when a vengeful scientist infected their water supply with a potion. "Incredible! I took a drink a while ago. Now I'm shrinking into an ant-like creature," says one remarkably detached individual. "Me too!" replies his equally sanguine chum. "And I can detect your thoughts with these antennae which are growing out of my head!" Some red ants escape a war with black ants to land on Earth, but discovering their side won the war they want to return. They require Superman's help to recharge their craft, and so have lured Jimmy, as Superman's pal, to signal him. But Superman's away in space, and won't be back until the next day. And we're still only halfway through the story. The following morning Jimmy wakes to see white protoplasmic blobs edging their way towards the ant people, engulfing them. Jimmy is given an anti-gravity ray, with which he propels himself onto a cliff top, cutting his finger again as he lands. Shining the anti-gravity ray on the blood produces dozens of little Pillsbury dough-boy creatures that chase the white blobs into the ocean. At this point Jimmy realises he could have signalled Superman for help, and does so. Superman refuels the craft, the aliens return home and, back in Metropolis, Jimmy deduces the white blobs and red dough-boys were actually enlarged corpuscles from his dripped blood! That's a contracted synopsis of eight pages from an issue also featuring the equally nutty 'Red-Headed Beatle of 1000 BC', as Jimmy, thrown back in time, earns a living selling Beatle wigs!

There are hundreds of Jimmy Olsen stories every bit as insanely enjoyable, and anyone with a sense of humour should sample at least one. The best way to do so is via the oversize reprint issues 95, 104, 113, 122, 131, 140, each chock-a-block with silliness. This light touch made the series the most enjoyable of the Superman titles on a regular basis, but by the politically aware late 1960s they were beginning to lose their charm. A particular duffer is 'Planet of the Capes' in 117, which features a tale about... er... capes. Pete Constanza was now the main artist, and his cartoony style resisted a more serious tone. When social relevance hit Jimmy Olsen, however, it was noticed, with 127's 'The Secret Slumlord of Metropolis' eliciting more letters than any previous DC comic.

Regular readers must have been shocked when 133 turned up. "Kirby is here!" proclaimed the cover. Not half! Kirby introduced the new Newsboy Legion, children of the 1940s kids gang he co-created with Joe Simon, and their super-vehicle the Whiz Wagon. They and Jimmy become involved with a motor-bike gang and the mysterious Hairies (it's still hippie season in 1970), strange inhabitants of The Wild Area. Kirby was ahead of his time in revealing that The Hairies are clones bred by a secret government organisation called The Project. The Golden Guardian, the Newsboys' mentor, reappears as a clone in 135, while current Superboy supporting character Dubbilex is introduced in 136. Kirby firmly places the series within his *New Gods* saga, as Darkseid's minions are also tampering with DNA in a rival project aiming to develop a creature powerful enough to destroy Superman. 139 introduces Goody Rickles, a double of American comedian Don Rickles, in an amusing story stretching through 140's reprint to 141 and displaying the diversity of Kirby's writing. There's another change in 142-143 with a Count Dracula lookalike, but afterwards Kirby returned to the Project. He certainly ended his run on a high note in 147-148, as Jimmy and the Newsboys take on the megalomaniacal Victor Volcanum. Under Kirby *Jimmy Olsen* almost became a supporting character in his own title, but the great plots compensate. His artwork was stunning. Even the inking of Vince Colletta didn't do much damage, though the issues inked by Mike Royer (146-147) do stand out. 141-148 also offered 1940s reprints of the Newsboy Legion by Kirby and Simon. Could you ask for anything more?

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* Available in a collected edition

After Kirby everything had to be downhill, and so it proved. Initial replacements John Albano and José Delbo, provided mundane adventure stories, with the Newsboy Legion cast back into limbo, although 149-150 are worth picking up for the Jack Cole Plastic Man reprints. When writers Leo Dorfman and Cary Bates took over they evoked the past with 1960s style stories, but after Kirby and the social upheaval of the era, having Jimmy imagine he's Olsen the Red in Viking times is out of place. Even Kurt Schaffenberger's lovely art was subdued by Vince Colletta. The series numbering was transferred to Superman Family with 164, with Lois Lane and Supergirl also featuring. It couldn't have come too soon.~WJ/HY

Recommended: 133-139, 141-148

Paul Dini's JINGLE BELLE

Oni Press: *2 issue microseries 1999*, one-shot ('All-Star Holiday Hullabaloo') 2000*, one-shot ('The Mighty Elves') 2001*, one-shot ('Jubilee') 2001*, one-shot ('Winter Wingding') 2002*

In the first series, drawn by Stephen DeStefano, Jingle Belle, Santa's daughter, sits in for her father in a New York department store before being tricked by the Blizzard Wizard, who's determined to spoil Christmas. The 'All-Star Holiday Hullabaloo' features short stories, illustrated by Bill Morrison, J. Bone, Chynna Clugston-Major (with characters from Blue Monday), Sergio Aragonés and Jeff Smith. 'The Mighty Elves' has Jingle tricked into playing for Santa's elves' hockey team and having to foil more of the Blizzard Wizard's scheming. 'Jubilee' again contains short stories, this time explaining how Jingle met girlfriends, Tashi Ounce, Polly Green (by Dan DeCarlo and Bill Morrison) and Ida Red (from *Mutant Texas*). In 'Winter Wingding', with less attractive artwork from Tony Cervone, Spike Brandt, Mrs. Claus has to catalogue her daughter's annual misdeeds, including those springing from the all-girl band she starts with her girlfriends.

Writer Paul Dini has created a spirited, rebellious character in Jingle allowing lots of opportunities for humorous adventure as Jingle tries to correct her mistakes before her father spots them, all the while desperate for the attention that he seems so freely to bestow on every child but her. The first collection, 'Naughty and Nice', includes a new painted story by Lawrence Marvit in which Jungle Belle conquers the Martians, whilst the second, 'Cool Yule' features a new Summer vacation strip by DeStefano and a few internet-published strips.~NF

Recommended: 'Naughty and Nice', 'Cool Yule'

JINN

***Image/Avalon Studios:** 3 issue miniseries 2000*

Enjoyable enough variation on an angels and demons theme as cat burglar Karen Lane gains her own personal Jinni (genie), Roland. Unfortunately for her, Roland has a powerful Jinni enemy who plans to kill Karen (and all of humankind straight afterwards). The artwork by Gabriel Rearte is like a cross between Barry Windsor-Smith and Humberto Ramos, never matching either but satisfying except for a lack of facial consistency. J. Cameron's script allows for character and humour and provides a colourful background to the main action plotline.~NF

Brian Michael Bendis' JINX

Caliber: *7 issues, 1 Special 1994-1997**
Image: *5 issues, 3 Specials 1997-1998**

This is an ambitious tale, which doesn't quite come off. We have a present-day female bounty hunter (and aspiring writer!) and her small-time crook boyfriend on the trail of a fortune, told in photo-referenced stark black and white art, a lot of it reminiscent of Frank Miller's work, sometimes jarringly using treated photographs for backgrounds. The story is influenced by writer/artist Brian Michael Bendis' beloved movies, probably especially by Tarantino, and the attempt at highly naturalistic dialogue produces huge strings of twisting and interlocking balloons that can confuse the reader and make the characters seem to be always stuttering. Perhaps they are. The best episode is the forty-three pager in the Caliber published charity special, about the teenage Jinx, which is told almost entirely in photographs. Don't be put off by the huge stack of crummy pin-ups in the back. A massive Image paperback collects the entire works along with sketches, scripts and background articles.~GK

Recommended: Charity Special

Scott Russo's JIZZ

Fantagraphics: *10 issues 1991-1993*

The product of a seriously disturbed mind, this is part cut-and-paste fanzine and part comic, guaranteed to offend everyone somewhere along the way. Stories range from encounters with celebrities through self-loathing and racial diatribes to autobiographical vignettes. *Jizz* won't be to everyone's taste, but there's plenty of funny content. The best starting point is 9, drawn more traditionally by Jeff Wong and detailing events following a crank assassination letter sent to George Bush signed in Russo's name. Wong also illustrates decent (and disgusting) parodies of the work of Canadian cartoonists in 10.~WJ

Recommended: 9

JLA

DC: *74 issues +, 4 Annuals, 3 80-Page Giants, 4 Secret Files & Origins, 1997 to date*

This title, which of course abbreviates Justice League of America, has been a top seller since its inception, but it's a mystery as to why. Throughout its run, it's aspired to much, but delivered very little. Trying to get back to basics after the previous, sprawling incarnation of the Justice League, it first focused on DC's biggest hitters: Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Green Lantern, Flash, Aquaman, and the Martian Manhunter. This obviously helped sales, which were hardly hurt by the appointment of Grant Morrison as writer.

Arriving with a solid commercial record, although better known for his weirder projects, here Morrison was saddled with an artist just not up to the task. Howard Porter has trouble just telling a story, so it's a chore to read, and Morrison takes a year before producing anything remotely memorable. The first spark comes with 'Rock of Ages' in 10-15*, introducing evil versions of our heroes with more to them than meets the eye. Some very familiar villains comprise a new Injustice Gang, and a story with more than a few nods to Jack Kirby throws in intergalactic villain Darkseid, some time travel and some new members in a convoluted, but fairly interesting adventure. The art doesn't improve, though.

Later writer Mark Waid writes a pair of two part stories in 18-21, disappointing with the first. He redeems himself in the second by repairing some damage done to DC's classy science fiction hero, Adam Strange and his wife Alanna some while back. The JLA's first ever villain, Starro the Conqueror makes a strange reappearance in 22-23, while 24-26* introduce a secret U.S. military super-team, the Ultra-Marines, to battle the JLA. Just how many secret government-based super-teams are there in comics? Are the Ultra-Marines remotely interesting? There's only one answer, and it's not "yes". 28-31* resurrect a regular theme from the 1960s series: a team-up with Justice Society of America. The plot involves a war against the 5th

Dimension featuring various genies and imps, and introduces J.J. Thunder, the new owner of the JSA's Johnny Thunder's thunderbolt. It's a decent effort, and Porter's art is finally starting to tell a story. Morrison's run ends with 'World War III' in 36-41*, featuring Lex Luthor and another new Injustice Gang including a new version of an old JLA villain, the Queen Bee. She adds a nice galactic flavour to the ensuing battle, but a simple alien invasion isn't enough for Morrison, so he throws in an ancient inter-galactic weapon, Mageddon from the time of the Old Gods (who of course became Jack Kirby's New Gods). It's a bit of a muddle. There's a complexity to many of Morrison's tales that only becomes apparent when reading them collected, which they all are. On the one hand better that than rehashing old clichés, but slightly more respect for the readers of the monthly comic would have been nice.

Mark Waid returns as full time scripter with 'Tower of Babel' in 43-46*, featuring old-time Batman villain, Ra's Al Ghul who has somehow learned the weakness of each JLA member. Apparently he gained the knowledge from Batman's secret files. Naturally the other JLA members aren't too pleased by this, so they boot Batman out of the team. It's a shame Waid didn't keep up the good work, seemingly concentrating on maintaining the off-kilter elements Morrison specialised in, rather than writing to his strengths. Still Waid is immensely helped by new pencil artist, Bryan Hitch, who can not only tell a story, but produces dynamic and imaginative pages. In 50 the team reveal their identities to each other, ending questions of trust within the group following the Ra's Al Ghul episode. Here Waid solved another problem, ending the feeling that the JLA were merely members of a group rather than a tightly-knit-team. Their dual identities played an unusual role until 54 when their bodies are split into heroes and alter-egos. 55-58 could've been a great swansong for Waid, but instead gruesome and totally unnecessary violence spoils everything. A mainstream comic like *JLA* isn't the place for scenes such as human brains being scooped out by Martians. Shame on the editors for letting this through. Despite the low quality threshold almost all stories to the end of Waid's run are available in collections.

A new creative team of Joe Kelly and artists Doug Mahnke and Tom Nguyen get off to a good start in 61, but disappoint thereafter until 65, a tale featuring Plastic Man and Batman – and the former's little known son! It's a fun tale where young Plaz has inherited his father's powers. Perhaps a bit sentimental, but it's such a pleasure to read a memorable story in this title. If Kelly concentrated more on his forte – personalities – rather than boring plots involving crows and ancient warrior-priests he'd be by far the best writer on this series. 69-75 disappoint, but return Aquaman, who'd disappeared. Issues alternate between ancient Altantis where the original members are fighting various creatures and such (yawn), and in the present time where their replacements are trying to figure what's going on. They're not the only ones. Nevertheless, there's a sense of hope for the title now.

All annuals are based on the theme of the year. 3 features the JLA as apes (an old DC favourite), while 4 introduces DC's first Turkish character, the female warrior Janissary. *JLA Showcase 80-Page Giant* as well as the first two issues of *JLA 80-Page Giant* feature a multitude of stories featuring past and present powers. The full length story in the third 80 pager, matches the standard of the regular title. Say no more. Three *JLA: Secret Files & Origins* are worth picking up for background information on various characters, old and new, good and bad. *JLA Gallery* features pin-ups of our favourite characters by a multitude of artists. Pointless and indulgent, but nice to look at.~HY

Recommended: 65

JLA:YEAR ONE

DC: *12 issue limited series 1998**

Mark Waid and Brian Augustyn script and Barry Kitson illustrates an excellent reworking of the early days of the Justice League of America. In DC's revised continuity an alien invasion initially brought Flash, Green Lantern, Aquaman, Black Canary and the Martian Manhunter together, and this is set following that event, nominally, and fluidly, ten years before the current adventures of the JLA. Waid and Augustyn sparkle when contemporising the classic moments of Justice League history. They manage to transfer their affection of the source material to a sharp, extended thriller dealing with an involved plot by a gang of rogue geneticists who plan to remake the world and the life forms upon it, to the specifications of an unknown leader. The tension builds through the team slowly getting to know and trust each other, with plenty of contemporaneous guest stars such as the first Blue Beetle, the original Doom Patrol and the Blackhawks. The finale is a superhero fan's dream as every hero on Earth unites to battle an all out alien invasion and the solid underplayed art from Kitson sucks the reader totally into a gripping climax. When it's done right, there's nothing wrong with being made to feel like you're ten years old again.~WW

Recommended: 1-12

JOAN

Comics One: *3 volumes 2000*

A rare Japanese comic produced in colour throughout, and telling the story of seventeen year old Emily, raised as a boy in 14th century France. She lives ten years after Joan of Arc rallied the French, but receives visions of Joan guiding and warning her. Determined to follow in Joan's footsteps, she becomes an important political figure, and over the course of several meetings with the objectionable Dauphin, and his reluctant wife, her destiny appears to be to follow all the way to Joan's final fate. This is ambitious work from Yoshikazu Yasuhiko, rich in historical detail and with an application of emotion subtle compared with most Japanese titles. For all her pious nature, the dogmatic Emily is not a particularly sympathetic lead character, possibly deliberately so as few of the people she encounters could be described as pleasant. The quality of the art and research ensures this is a superior adventure story, but in places it drags and the colouring is very strange as if Yasuhiko is attempting to use all primary shades of the rainbow, but nothing in between.~FP

Cops:THE JOB

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1992*

Admirably realistic attempt at recording the day-to-day life of two New York policemen. Larry Hama and former cop turned artist Joe Jusko handle the writing and there's good art from the team of Mike Harris and Jimmy Palmiotti. The breakneck pace of the comics conveys the fast life, where one wrong move can mean death, and dialogue and social interaction are deftly handled. An excellent package, from the Mike Golden covers to the experiences of real cops on the text page.~FP

Recommended: 1-4

JOE SINN

Caliber: *2 issues 1993-1994*

Joe is a brainwashed ex-soldier with an Augmentor jacked into his spine. He can flick a switch and become unbeatably strong and fast. Various agents, including the glamourous Nikki, keep Joe in their sights and occasionally help him out, much to his confusion. It gradually becomes clear that The Augmentor is being tested for use in undercover domestic policing. Brooks Hagan's art is energetic and exciting but lacks professional finish. Writer Scott Finley's gassy script still manages to inject a measure of grit into the first person commentary, but the story was never completed.~SW

JOHN CARTER OF MARS

Gold Key: *3 issues 1952-1953, 3 issues 1964*

Soldier John Carter is injured in battle on Earth, and finds himself walking away from his body, and then, paces later, realises he's on Mars. Yes, that's all there is to it. He's captured by warlike lizard creatures, escapes, is recaptured, rescues a human-like princess, etc., etc. Hopelessly confused and boring. Were people really that desperate for entertainment in 1952 that they'd sit through three issues of this? Read this and you'll never complain about TV again. These Jesse Marsh-drawn issues are reprinted by Gold Key in the 1960s.~FC

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* Available in a collected edition

JOHN CARTER, Warlord of Mars

Marvel: *28 issues, 3 Annuals 1977-1979*

Unlike Edgar Rice Burroughs' more famous creation, Tarzan, John Carter has never been well known outside the field of fantasy. However Burroughs' early stories of a Virginian gentleman transported when near to death from an Indian-besieged cave to the violent and barbaric world of Barsoom (Mars) were immensely influential in the heroic-fantasy genre. Unlike Conan, John Carter represents the forceful necessities of civilisation, championing the Martian race, who looked most like him, against the numerous funny-shaped, multi-coloured barbarians at the gate and marrying its princess, Dejah Thoris, who promptly laid an egg to establish the Carter dynasty. The comic version is loosely based on the series of novels, many of which feature ludicrous plots, as Carter engages in much sword-swinging to defeat the devilish intentions of wizards, mad scientists and marauding tribes. Marv Wolfman's initial scripts were no more than average, although he was allocated some talented guest pencillers on their off days (Gil Kane, Carmine Infantino and Walt Simonson, for instance). Sadly, few of them lasted long, even when Chris Claremont, a long-time fan of the stories, took over. Unsurprisingly, he made Dejah Thoris into a sword-toting adventurer alongside her husband, and played up the power of their relationship. Unless you particularly like sword-and-sorcery with a remarkably silly slant, John Carter is only of note because a young Frank Miller pencilled issue 18.~FJ

JOHN LAW Detective

Eclipse: *One-shot 1981*

In his attempts to work up a successful newspaper strip in the 1930s, Will Eisner created John Law, hard-boiled detective. The preparatory pages were produced, but no one picked up on the idea, and the stories were later reworked for the successful Spirit. Although there's some nice early Will Eisner artwork, this is nothing more than a curiosity for those wanting a complete collection of Eisner's work.~WJ

JOHNNY THE HOMICIDAL MANIAC

Slave Labor: *7 issues 1995-1997**

This is the archetype of stalk and slash movies taken to logical extremes without the requirement to conform to any parental guidance system. For the more acceptable pieces, gratuitous and explicit violence is served up as the answer to life's trivial annoyances. The less pleasant delve into sordid brutality that creator Jhonen Vasquez seeks to mitigate with blocks of ponderous self-analysis for his lead. It's deliberately unpleasant without any leavening humour, thus all in all very unsatisfactory. As your parents always told you, it's not big, it's not clever, and in this case it's not any good either.~FP

JOHNNY DYNAMITE

Dark Horse: 4 issue miniseries 1994

The return of a 1950s detective strip, updated and spin-doctored by the Ms Tree creative team of Max Collins and Terry Beatty. This starts off as a straightforward hard-boiled sleuth tale, but takes a spin into the supernatural to great effect. Beatty's blocky, down-to-earth style makes the horrific events even more so by its matter-of-fact presentation. Involving Satanic deals and zombie gang-war, it can safely be said that you haven't read anything entirely like this before. Mitch O'Connell's hallucinogenic covers are the icing on the cake.~HS

Recommended: 1-4

JOHNNY NEMO

Eclipse: *3 issue miniseries 1985-1986*

Brutal hard-boiled detective in the future, as previously seen in *Strange Days*. Some nice lines, but otherwise slim fare. Nemo later resurfaced in *Deadline*.~WJ

JOHNNY THUNDER

DC: *3 issues 1973*

This is one of the best of the reprint titles DC were issuing in the early 1970s. It featured the cream of the company's 1950s Western strips, with art by Alex Toth, Mort Drucker, Gil Kane and others at a fraction of the cost of the originals. With stories by Robert Kanigher as well you really can't lose with this comic.~DAR

Recommended: 1-3

THE JOKER

DC: *9 issues 1975-1976, one-shot (The Killing Joke) 1988, Graphic novel (Devil's Advocate) 1996, one-shot (I, Joker) 1998, one-shot ('Joker's Apprentice') 1999, 3 issue miniseries ('It's Joker Time') 2000, 4 issue miniseries (Joker Mask) 2000*, one-shot ('Emperor Joker') 2000, 6 issue miniseries ('Last Laugh') 2001-2002, one-shot ('Secret Files') 2002*

If character inconsistencies between the homicidal maniac seen in Batman and the merry prankster in the 1970s series aren't cause for concern, it's a nice, if bizarre, read, appeallingy drawn by Irv Novick. Most issues guest-star other characters, with the best being the Creeper's appearance in 3. *The Killing Joke* by Alan Moore and Brian Bolland suffers from the weight of expectation brought to it via reputation. It's worth reading, and the best solo Joker story to date, but not as good as you've heard. Few things would be. It supplies an origin for The Joker amid some good art and a life-changing experience for Batgirl. *Devil's Advocate* has the Joker innocent of the crime for which he's about to be executed while Batman attempts to track down the culprit. It's an interesting set-up, but otherwise very ordinary work from Chuck Dixon and Graham Nolan hardly justifying the format and price. The title *Joker's Apprentice* provides the premise for what is largely a decent Batman story by C.J. Henderson and Trevor Von Eeden. Batman is plagued by murders arranged to torment him.

Bob Hall uses *It's Joker Time* to belabour obvious points about the lowest common denominator values of contemporary television with detours into the Joker's brain. It long outstays its welcome, and Hall's *I, Joker* is better, depicting a future in which Batman villains are resurrected as cannon-fodder to appease followers of a corrupted Batman religion. The Joker's insanity quotient is upped and he's given powers to match his state of mind in the very workable *Joker Mask*, although quality dips at the end. Writer Henry Gilroy (with co-plotter Ronnie Del Carmen) milks the possibilities, throwing in Harley Quinn, Poison Ivy and Batman, and includes a good take on Joker TV. The unrestrained cartooning of Ramon Bachs is the polar opposite of Bolland's discipline, and while equally valid might put off those who like their superheroes in a semi-realistic style. *Emperor Joker* is part of a crossover in Superman titles that makes little sense independently, although Joker fans might enjoy a story in which the Joker is given the power to reshape the world.

'Last Laugh' has a chemical compound activating a Joker mentality within an army of super-villains who then seep into most DC titles. It's accompanied by the extrapolation and pin-ups of a Secret Files issue, and while the miniseries can be read without the extras *Robin* 95 is advisable for a full understanding. The plot has a dying Joker creating global mayhem before his demise. There's nice art from the team of Pete Woods and Andrew Pepoy in 1, and a fabulous cover from Bolland on 6, the best issue overall. Otherwise, like most Chuck Dixon comics it levels off at competent.~FP

Recommended: *The Killing Joke, Joker Mask* 1-3

JONAH HEX

DC: *92 issues, 1 Spectacular 1977-1985*

DC/Vertigo: *5 issue miniseries ('Two-Gun Mojo') 1993*, 5 issue miniseries ('Riders of the Worm and Such') 1995, 3 issue miniseries 1999 ('Shadows West')*

Although it's often credited to John Albano, it was Michael Fleisher who wrote the classic tagline: "He was a hero to some, a villain to others, and wherever he rode people spoke his name in whispers. He had no friends, this Jonah Hex, but did have two companions. One was death itself, the other the acrid smell of gunsmoke..." It encapsulates 1870s bounty hunter Jonah Hex succinctly and accurately.

Fleisher starts by altering two constants from Hex's run in *Weird Western*, firstly introducing a thread of continuity while still producing largely single-issue stories. Hex is framed for murder by his old enemy Turnbull and becomes a fugitive, a plot that's very tired by its conclusion in 16 and is recycled to better effect in 44-45. He also introduces crooks who survive Hex's blazing pistols to return, El Papagayo (2) being the first. How Hex became hideously scarred is revealed in 7-8, and his start as a bounty hunter is told in 30. Fleisher continues to be gruesomely inventive throughout the early issues, never more so than in the Russ Heath drawn one-shot *Jonah Hex Spectacular*. It details Hex's death and subsequent movements, and still brings a lump to the throat. 1-43 are drawn by a variety of artists, with Luis Dominguez (24, 30, 31) best at providing a gritty Western flavour, although the cleaner styles of José Luis Garcia-Lopez (1-5, 10, 32) and Vincente Alcazar (12-17, 19, 22, 27) are also appealing.

45 is a turning-point as Hex marries Mei Ling, introduced in 23, a condition of the nuptials being that he renounce his life of violence. By this time Dick Ayers is the regular penciller, inked by original *Hex* artist Tony DeZuniga, for a fine combination who stay until 82, after which DeZuniga manages another six issues solo. Of course, given the demands, Hex's marriage wasn't likely to last and he soon reverts to bounty hunting.

65-71 concern an army payroll robbery and its consequences, and reintroduce Emmy Lou Hartley (from 50), one of many attractive women inexplicably drawn to the gruesomely visaged Hex. Those issues see Fleisher recovering from an uninspired run. From 76 the emphasis switches to continuity-based plots as old characters return. Cliffhanger endings are the norm, and there are fine individual issues (80-81 resolve the Turnbull situation), but the soap-opera tricks are jarring in a title that survived so long with barely a nod to them. Gray Morrow draws the final four issues of the DC series, leaving dangling sub-plots featuring the supporting cast as Jonah is transported to an ignominious future postscript in the pages of *Hex*.

Joe Lansdale and Tim Truman's 1990s take on Jonah Hex is spot-on, with Truman's gritty rendering ideally suited to the character, and Lansdale providing suitably acerbic dialogue. The first two plots seemingly stem from Hex once starring in *Weird Western*, and if you can overlook the anomalous introduction of supernatural elements to the Wild West, the newer stories are tine, but don't match the best of the previous run. The third, though, is woeful, replacing the supernatural with comedy, resulting in a poorly plotted excuse for feeble jokes.~FP

Recommended: 1-3, 7, 8, 10, 11-13, 24, 27, 32, 42-45, 48, 51, 58, 65-70, 73-75, 81-84, 86, Spectacular

JONAS

Caliber: *One-shot 1996*

Another collection of Mike Deodato reprints from Brazil. The title strip is about black cowhand Jonas Creole whose mysteriously white sister Aurelia is tied to a tree and whipped to death. He tracks down the killers in thinly disguised exploitation posing as a western. Two shorter, relatively tasteful pieces, 'Land of Fire' and 'Beyond Life', round out the comic.~SW

JONES TOUCH

Eros: *One-shot 1993*

These days Jeff Jones is a renowned fine artist, but in the early 1970s he was turning out one and two page strips for men's magazines. Seemingly the only criteria was that each page contain female nudity, because Jones' musings are astonishingly idiosyncratic, surreal and sometimes downright perverse, even for the times. The strips suffer from the original pastels being reproduced in black and white, but serve as adequate demonstration of an astonishing talent. For those not captivated by the art, though, this is an extremely slim read at sixteen pages and hardly adheres to the Eros code of arousal. Anyone wanting to investigate further could try looking for Jones' 1979 collection *Idyl*, where art once again dominates.~FP

JONNI THUNDER Aka Thunderbolt

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1985*

Based on 1940s character Johnny Thunder, who could summon a mystical being, this update is a tolerably scripted female-private-investigator story. Ironically, it's the extraneous supernatural elements that spoil the revamp, as writer Roy Thomas is unable to resist giving her superpowers. Dick Giordano illustrates in his usual ineffable fashion.~HS

JONNY DEMON

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1994*

Lighthearted romp through an era where magic and demons are as commonplace on earth as science today. Average stuff from Kurt Busiek.~FP

JONNY DOUBLE

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1998**

Taking the obscure character introduced in *Showcase* 78, this is an obtuse tale of cross and doublecross as the Private Eye, a crappy 1960s burn-out gets sucked into a plot to (ostensibly) steal the contents of Al Capone's secret bank account. A poor showing from the usually sharp Brian Azzarello, although the art by Eduardo Risso is stylish and effective.~WW

JONNY QUEST

Comico: *31 issues, 2 Specials 1986-1988*

Generally excellent and vastly underrated series based on the 1960s cartoon show, with the care and attention lavished on the series exceptional, from the double-sized cover illustrations on. The writing of William Messner-Loebs underpins everything, with meticulous plots encompassing a vast range of topics, always warm, humorous, and able to adapt to whichever artist is handling a particular issue. And there's a stellar selection of artists before Marc Hempel and Mark Wheatley draw most issues from 14. Doug Wildey and Steve Rude both draw strips in 1, and other highlights include Adam Kubert on 6's story of a great discovery at the North Pole and Murphy Anderson illustrating an undercover operation in 9. Jonny Quest is the pre-teen son of the widowed Professor Benton Quest, all-round boffin, accompanied by his Indian friend Hadji and his dog Bandit. Adventurer Race Bannon keeps a watchful eye on all parties during their travels, particularly when nemesis Dr Zin is in the vicinity. It's rare that a story runs two issues, so sample away. There shouldn't be a dry eye after reading 2's story of Jonny's mother, 11 has Jonny meeting the Princes in the Tower, 20's 'Time Storm' is a trans-temporal mystery and 25 is a Bandit solo. They're four very different stories, but each typical of the series. Loebs has no hand in the specials featuring alternate-reality doppelgängers of Jonny & Co and a re-animated Lenin. They're to be avoided, but check out the affiliated *Jezebel Jade* series.~WJ

Recommended: 2-12, 17-29, 31

The Real Adventures of JONNY QUEST

Dark Horse: *12 issues 1996-1997*

Above average tie-in to the Cartoon Network series that takes the Questworld team all over the world and into cyber-space on a number of adventures ranging from a modern day computer vampire to the Missing Link. One of the few times a licensed property actually captures both the spirit and the letter of its primogenitor. Especially noteworthy iare 1-4 by Kate Worley and Francisco Solano Lopez wherein a Gypsy terrorist takes control of the world's computer and satellite network. Good fun for the youngster in us all.~WW

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* Available in a collected edition

JONNY QUEST Classics

Comico: *3 issue miniseries 1987*

Doug Wildey adapts three episodes from the original *Jonny Quest* cartoon series 'Shadow of the Condor', 'Calcutta Adventure' and 'Werewolf of the Timberland' ('The Invisible Monster' can be found in *Jonny Quest* 30). Wildey's art is, as always, top notch, but the material he's adapting doesn't have the depth or resonance of the stories written by William Messner-Loebs for the ongoing *Jonny Quest* title.~WJ

JOSHUA'S STORY

Off Panel: *1 issue 1998*

There's a desire to like self-published comics. People with an individual vision possess the faith to devote considerable amounts of money to follow their muse. Unfortunately self-belief can also blind. Jerry Williams devotes eleven pages to a shootout. It's central to the story of a gangster experiencing a crisis of conscience, but represents just under half the comic. The remaining art is hardly great on depth and detail, or transcending the merely 'functional' category. That being the case there's little to lure anyone back, and there was never an issue 2.~FP

She's... JOSIE

Archie: *44 issues 1963-1966.*

Archie artist Dan DeCarlo created Josie in a clear attempt to repeat the winning formula. Josie could have been Archie's long-lost twin sister: redheaded, attractive but wholesome, klutzy, well-meaning, bright and easily distracted by the opposite sex. The majority of her supporting cast were also introduced in 1: her long-suffering parents, wimpy boy-friend Albert, wisecracking best friend, Pepper, Pepper's boy-friend, the dimwitted Sock (short for Socrates), and...Melody. The traffic-stopping blonde bombshell Melody was the closest to a sex symbol one could have in a Comics Code-approved comic. The chaos caused by her inability to grasp facts was equalled only by the disasters that occurred when her startling figure was seen by drivers, traffic cops, or just about any male, who developed a sudden inability to focus on what he was doing. Hugely popular with readers of both sexes, she gave the book such a boost that a proposed Melody spin-off was rejected, for fear Josie would lose too many readers! The only significant later additions to the cast were resident villainous siblings Alexander and Alexandra Cabot, spoilt rich kids who, peculiarly, were the most inept practitioners of witchcraft ever seen in comics. For forty-four issues, Josie and her gang trundled along in teen-comedy misadventures, occasionally interacting with the Archie characters, but pretty much minding their own business. Come 45, the title was suddenly renamed *Josie & The Pussycats*.~HS

JOSIE & THE PUSSYCATS

Archie: *62 issues (45-106) 1966-1982, 2 issues 1993-1994*

Without explanation, Josie and Melody were two sides of a pop triangle. Albert, Pepper and Sock were gone, to be replaced by blond bimboy Alan M. as Josie's new love, and a new character, Valerie, only about the fifth black person seen in Riverdale, as the third Pussycat. Though seen throughout the issue, Valerie's one line of dialogue was a less than groundbreaking 'Yeah!' Maybe Archie didn't want to traumatise the Mid-West by having her be too uppity. No longer students, the trio toured as an internationally famous award-winning rock band – except when the plot required that they be an obscure struggling garage band, in which case that's what they'd always been. Continuity has never been a hallmark of the Archie line! This was done to tie in with the 1970s *Josie and the Pussycats* TV show. Revamping the Josie cast to a pop milieu, the comic was obliged to hastily shoehorn the changes in to gain those TV-led readers. Some changes were for the better. Alan M. couldn't be less fun than Albert, and Valerie, though no substitute for the acerbic Pepper – I've always imagined she and Albert eloped, after burying Sock under a patio! – did eventually develop a personality. The TV show was popular enough to come back as *Josie & The Pussycats In Outer Space*, whose premise was...oh, you guessed. Yep, accidentally launched into deep space, the Pussycats, Alan M. and the Cabots struggled to find their way back to Earth while entertaining bug-eyed monsters galaxy-wide with bubblegum rock. Clearly they did, eventually, make it back, as the title lasted until 106, and the group features in sporadic specials and one-shots to this day. Delightful fluff, usually drawn by either DeCarlo (early issues inked by his brother Vince, whose tragic death robbed DeCarlo of his most sympathetic tinisher) or, later, Stan Goldberg, the Josie books are a fun read as long as you're not expecting deep thought...and let's face it, if you were would you pick up an Archie comic at all?~HS

JOURNEY

Aardvark-Vanaheim: *14 issues 1983-1984*

Fantagraphics: *13 issues (15-27) 1984-1986, 2 issues (Wardrums) 1986*

The life of early-19th-century frontiersman Wolverine MacAlistaire wasn't obvious subject matter in 1983, but the deft writing and Eisneresque art of William Messner-Loebs make for a fine comic, with the entire series occurring over a year. From the extraordinary sixteen-page opening sequence of a bear chasing MacAlistaire, *Journey* stamps itself as unique. In the same issue he agrees to deliver a package to a community called New Hope, thus starting the journey of the title. MacAlistaire is fictional, but you wouldn't know it from the depth of research Loebs brings to Journey, conveying both historical accuracy and a real feeling for the knowledge of a trapper. Fanciful intrusions such as Sasquatch in 3 and a crossover with Normalman in 13 jar. A winter stopover with an old companion whose marriage is wilting through lack of communication in 8-11 is subtle and insightful while also harbouring some dangerous adventure: it's the highlight of the run. MacAlistaire's participation in 14-17 is minimal as the series concentrates on Fort Miami, an outpost precariously close to falling to Tecumseh, and the series is weaker without him. The predicament of folk at Fort Miami becomes dull, and Loebs seems to recognise this by an abrupt change of direction with 18, as MacAlistaire again takes centre stage. Refined Bostonian poet Elmer Alyn Craft plays an increasingly important role from 18, acting as narrator, foil to MacAlistaire's rough-hewn ways and partner as they reach New Hope in 20. The community seemingly belies its name, and conceals several deep secrets that begin to emerge once the package is handed over. The final seven issues are a dark and separate journey which considers just how much is acceptable in protecting a utopian vision, as Craft and MacAlistaire play a deadly game of truth and consequences. *Journey* is best read as a series from the start. There are few concessions to new readers and issues from 8 on are more or less one continuous story, although 12, 18 and 20 just about qualify as jumping-on points. A follow-up series titled *Wardrums* has a memorable start with Wolverine vs beavers and picks up on some of the supporting characters from the Fort Miami issues. It was very promising, but lasted only two issues of a proposed six, as more lucrative assignments came Loebs' way. 1-7 were collected by Fantagraphics along with the *Cerebus* back-ups.~FP

Recommended: 1, 2, 4, 5, 7-12, 21-27, Wardrums 1

JOURNEY INTO MYSTERY

Marvel: *Series one 145 issues, 1 Annual 1952-1966 (1-125), 1996-1998 (-1, 503-521), series two 19 issues 1972-1975*

Despite a brief publication hiatus in 1958 and change of title to Thor from issues 126-502, *Journey into Mystery* enjoyed a forty-six year run. The standard horror/monster shorts in issues 1-82 are most notable for their presentation of the Hulk (no relation) in 62 and 66, a shaggy alien who menaced Earth. Cunningly disguising himself with a name change to Xemnu the Titan, he tried again during his reprints in *Monsters on the Prowl* 11 and 14 and made his formal introduction to the Marvel Universe in battle against the Defenders in *Marvel Feature* 3.

Weird shorts served as back-ups in 83-108 to the new lead feature: The Mighty Thor. Early issues in particular are ludicrously antiquated. Central plot themes involve Thor's love for mortal nurse Jane Foster, Odin's remonstrations with his son regarding non-revelation of his identity to her, and Loki's scheming machinations. The God of Mischief appears in over half of the Thor issues, and Odin's credibility as All-Father is stretched well beyond belief as Loki endlessly beguiles him into overlooking his treachery. Perhaps it is just as well; Stan Lee might have been hamstrung for plot ideas otherwise. He delivers dialogue with pomp and splendour and, with Kirby's power-packed pencils, ensures smooth improvement over the run. Many classic Marvel villains début in this strip. Worthy issues introduce Grey Gargoyle (107) and Absorbing Man (114, 115), although the Carbon Copy Man is probably best left unmentioned. The finest two issues are 110 and 111, in which Loki enhances the powers of two of Thor's most formidable villains, Cobra and Mr Hyde. This story encapsulates all the vital elements of early Thor and, in a stirring climax, a desperate and noble Thunder God clings to Odin's mercy when powerless to save the dying Jane Foster, yet finally "...turns his back upon his defeated foes, and upon the house of darkness, as he walks into the shining light of morning!" They don't make them like that any more. 97-125 include five-page back-up strips of the 'Tales of Asgard'. Mostly set during Thor's boyhood, they feature many characters from the Norse pantheon, hordes of Frost Giants, Storm Giants and Trolls, and encompass the riotous, far-flung corners of Asgard. Two *Marvel Masterworks* volumes reprint the Thor stories from 83-110.

The 1996 title change arose from Thor's revamp following Marvel's 'Onslaught' saga. Tom DeFalco stews the 'Lost Gods' storyline, a potboiler of amnesiac, depowered Norse Gods exiled to Earth. Death God Seth takes advantage with a cunning plan to extinguish all life in the universe. Not much fun during the aftermath then. The tale rises to perfunctory, although Asgardians spouting hip 1990s dialogue is even harder to swallow than the poor man's Shakespearean fare Stan Lee force fed the reader thirty years previously. Deodato uses the opportunity to flash hot babes but thankfully his studio henchmen exert greater influence over later issues and disproportionate limbs become less abundant. *Journey into Mystery* peters to cancellation with eight further anthology issues. A routine Shang-Chi encounter with a narcotics baroness in 514-516 is graced by Brian Hagen's pencilling. Scott Lobdell's Black Widow three parter (517-519) is a spy thriller with plenty of twists, but is hindered by Randy Green's inappropriate, cartoony art. Marv Wolfman spares Hannibal King no torment in the final two issues before the title effectively reverts back to Thor, renumbered from 1, the following month.

The second series reprints 1950's weird shorts, although the first five issues are enlivened with new adaptations of stories by master writers of the macabre Robert E.Howard, Robert Bloch and H.P. Lovecraft.~APS

Recommended: 110, 111

JOURNEYMAN

Image: *3 issue miniseries 1999*

Journeyman's world is suffering after an inter-dimensional cataclysm known as The Turning. Technology no longer works, and the sun has begun to dry up the planet so water has become a precious commodity. Our hero is a diviner, learning to wield the incredible power of his staff from his mysterious master. The Diviner finds himself up against the conquerors of his world – the Dragon Riders from the beyond. Author Brandon McKinney does a terrific job of putting together the start of a wide-ranging saga in these issues. His artwork and storytelling are clean and well-balanced, and he manages to have you care about the characters in this bleak scenario. Deserves the colour its mono pages cry out for.~SW

JSA

DC: *41 issues +, 1 Annual, 2 Secret Files 1999 to date, 2 issue microseries ('The Liberty File')*

Ever since the cancellation of *All-Star Comics* fifty years ago there has been a clamour to return the Justice Society of America, lest we forget the first long-running super team. Each previous attempt has been short-lived, but this time it's succeeded. DC's promotion was exemplary, trailing the new series with six one-shots named after 1940s comics and two book-ending issues of *All-Star Comics* forming a complete tale. It's no classic, but the plot serves its purpose. Artistically, though, there are some treats. Russ Heath illustrates Hawkman and Wildcat in *Thrilling Comics*, Peter Snejbjerg draws Atom and Starman in *Adventure Comics*, and Chris Weston's version of Sandman, Star-Spangled Kid and Stripesy in *Star Spangled Comics* is joyful. Aaron Lopresti holds his end up on *National Comics*, the best written of the one-shots as Mark Waid relishes his chance to handle Mr Terrific, along with the 1940s Flash.

The title proper was preceded by the introductory 'Secret Files', ostensibly there to whet the appetite and provide background information, but responsible for two nice snippets. There are a fine few valedictory pages for Wesley Dodds, star of *Sandman Mystery Theatre* and Chris Weston draws a discussion between Sentinel (1940s Green Lantern that was) and the new Star-Spangled Kid. Although popular from the off, *JSA* takes a while to hit its stride, with 10 the only wholehearted success in the first year, in which the weakest JSA member Wildcat has to defeat the entire Injustice Society alone, with the added handicap of having a broken arm. Main pencil artist Stephen Sadowski has a superficially attractive style, but his foundation is woeful and not helped by inker Michael Bair, and at first the writing teams seem to unite weaknesses rather than strength. Geoff Johns is co-writer from 6, with his writing partner David Goyer having co-written 1-5 with James Robinson.

There's a neat plot twist in 15, in which several members depart, but with the return of the Injustice Society in 16 things step up a gear, and what had been an okay superhero title becomes, generally, a very good one. While keeping the team resolutely modern and shiny, often to the point of blinding with science, Goyer and Johns never forget there is a tradition. It might be by underlining Justice Society connections with ancient Egyptian dynasties, through the dialogue, or simply reinforcing the legacy by constant references to their museum. Something handled well is the conversion of the evil antithesis to Captain Marvel, Black Adam. His reformation in 18 at first strikes as pointless, yet over succeeding issues the nobility of the man he once was is spotlighted, and he becomes a valuable point of reflection for other cast members. From the start a pattern is set of large stories with the entire team, spliced by smaller catch your breath issues focussing on the individual members, and most importantly from 15, plenty of moments that catch the reader off guard.

Hawkman is returned in 21-25, the JSA are kidnapped to participate in challenges for the benefit of gambling villains in 28, 30, and body switching villain the Ultra-Humanite returns in terrifying fashion in 32-37. Sadowski's final issue is 30, by which point he's improved, but his shortcomings are shown up by guest artists such as Rags Morales (26, 27) and Peter Snejbjerg (31, 32), who provide stunning iconic images of Captain Marvel and Batman respectively in the midst of fine storytelling. 26-31 are collected as 'Fair Play'. Replacement penciller Leonard Kirk doesn't have the flash, but he's more solid all round. If there is a fault to the series it's that a broad cast sees members sidelined for lengthy periods to the point where you've almost forgotten about them. Otherwise superhero fans should enjoy most of this run.

Dan Jolley and Tony Harris' gloomy 'Liberty File' is set during an alternative World War II, and is largely a Batman story with Dr Mid-Nite, Hourman and later Mr Terrific along for the ride. There's some nice art, and the confounding of expectations is well-handled for the climax, but it's otherwise ordinary.~WJ

Recommended: 10, 26-28, 31-37

J2

Marvel: *12 issues 1998-1999*

A line of titles featuring variations of Marvel characters set a century in the future failed, so Marvel had another stab. Voila! A line of titles with variations of their characters set 15 years in the future. Genius! This specimen is the teenage son of X-Men villain the Juggernaut, with Tom DeFalco doing his Stan Lee impersonations for the relentlessly mundane art of Ron Lim and Al Milgrom. It's largely the inspiration free zone one might assume, but the back-up strips in 4-10 can raise a smile.~FP

J.U.D.G.E.

Image: *3 issue miniseries 2000*

The hook for this miniseries is Greg Horn's computer manipulated photographic art. It's ultimately a distracting technique, as the direct use of posed photographs provides no distance, so constantly prevents immersion in the story. The plot very much serves the art, concerning a group of beautiful people in skimpy clothing who're supposed to be a top notch covert action team. It'll look hopelessly dated when you read this.~WJ

JUDGE DREDD

Eagle: *33 issues 1983-1986*

Quality: *Series one 2 issues (34-35) 1986, series two 77 issues 1986-1993*

For those who don't know, Judge Dredd lives in the future, where huge Mega-Cities exist, full to breaking point, with people living on top of one another. Outside the cities there are only radioactive wastelands, the 'Cursed Earth', full of mutants, outlaws and horrible, deadly wildlife, and the Black Atlantic, much the same with water. The Judges are this society's police force, with the right to pass sentence on the job, as it were, whether it be a death sentence or a long jail term. Mega-City One's main problems are the block riots caused by too many people living too close together and venting their frustrations against their neighbours, the Russian Mega-City (always prone to invade) and the normal, average working citizens who can get arrested for countless activities which we'd consider minor. The Law's the thing, here.

Dredd is the greatest of the Judges, totally incorruptible, never seen without his mask and as humourless a character as you could wish for. Fortunately, writers John Wagner, Alan Grant and, sometimes at the start, Pat Mills inject humour (normally very black) into most of his adventures. They range from bizarre fads (like products to make you ugly in 25) that help keep the city's occupants sane (well...) to Dredd's robot helper Walter (who, through a speech impediment, calls him 'Dwedd').

The stories here are reprints from 2000AD, the British weekly comic in which Judge Dredd first appeared (2). The Eagle run starts with the highly polished Brian Bolland-drawn stories, including Judge Death, who comes from a parallel dimension in which the Judges have decided that the only way to keep the law is to kill all humans. When they've finished with their own dimension they come looking for others to cleanse. By 4 we're onto Ron Smith as well as Bolland ('Father Earth', a messianic prophet who seems to be in communication with the Earth itself), and soon Mike McMahon is also represented with the 'Cursed Earth' saga (5-9*), followed by the deranged Judge Caligula's takeover of Mega-City One. 'Block Mania' (18, 19*) and its sequel 'The Apocalypse War' (20-24*) deal with the almost total devastation of Mega-City One, and Dredd's visual creator Carlos Ezquerra draws most of these issues. 27 introduces Chopper, a character who'll later become very popular as a sky surfer, here a graffiti artist. Continuity isn't integral to Dredd, but there are elements, particularly stories sparking from previous tales. From 30 there's a policy of reprinting stories in roughly the same time-frame as originally published, balanced by the attempt to employ only a single artist for each issue. Eagle's final issue is a particularly good look at the ludicrous fads that sweep through the city, featuring 'The League of Fatties', new food product Gunge and people having all facial features removed to become blobs. The Eagle issues have new Brian Bolland covers throughout. Quality take over the title, cancel it and later relaunch it (1986). From this point, *Judge Dredd* is printed on toilet paper and we're onto Steve Dillon's run on Dredd, apart from the first Dredd story, reprinted in number 2 (perhaps not a coincidence).

The poor colouring, appalling printing, and art stretched to fit the American comic page monopolise the Quality title, and the initial issues of its companion title *The Law of Judge Dredd*. Anyone interested in seeing these stories, seemingly selected at random, is directed to the Titan Books black and white reprints. With 38 the logo changes from Quality Comics to Fleetway Quality but the publishers are listed as S.P.Q. Inc (as they have been for some time before). By 57, we're back to reprinting the first Dredd story again and the Steve Dillon werewolf story from 1, and the title becomes *Judge Dredd Classics* from 62. Judge Dredd's politics are definitely suspect but the better writers have made the series a very black comedy, as much a satire on contemporary society as a science-fiction adventure.~NF

Recommended: Eagle 1-33

JUDGE DREDD

DC: *18 issues 1994-1996*

With the advent of the *Judge Dredd* movie UK licence holders Fleetway felt that DC would provide better exposure and dropped their line of reprints from *2000AD*. Regrettably they also chose to totally rewrite the character, and to a great extent the entire concept. He's still a lawman doling out instant justice on the streets of the big, big city, but the mania, irony and black comedy are all missing. 1-10 involve Dredd's role in setting up the Judge system in Mega-City One before being sent to the future to become just another badge on the street. The box office failure of the film mercifully killed the title and its companion *Legends of the Law*.~WW

JUDGE DREDD Collections

Titan: *50 volumes 1982-1990*
2000AD Books: *1 volume ('America') 1991*
Mandarin/2000AD Books: *9 volumes 1992-1996*
Hamlyn/2000AD Books: *8 volumes + 1996-2001*
Titan: *6 volumes + 2001 to date*

Judge Dredd is particularly well served by the 1980s Titan reprint books in black and white. In addition to twenty-five volumes each concentrating on a single artist's interpretation of the character, and two combination tomes, there are a further fifteen volumes collecting longer stories. The best sample is just titled *Judge Dredd*. Witty John Wagner scripts are illustrated by Brian Bolland, and it contains the first appearance of Dredd's arch-nemesis Judge Death (with the remainder of the Bolland Judge Death strips collected in *Judge Death*). Bolland-drawn stories are also part of *The Cursed Earth*, originally published as two separate editions, now collected in a single volume. The only early Dredd stories to strongly feature writers other than John Wagner and Alan Grant, *The Cursed Earth* sees Dredd having to travel across a mutant-infested wasteland to deliver a plague antidote. He encounters alien slave traders, robotic vampires and a tyrannosaurus rex among other oddities. It's consistently inventive, and it's a shame the threat of legal action prevents episodes using advertising trademarks and a war between McDonalds and Burger King ever being reprinted. Completists can find them in the UK's *2000AD* 77-78 and 71-72 respectively. With the exception of the *Judge Child Quest* (three volumes), which has a similar inventive quality to *The Cursed Earth*, successive extended Dredd stories reprinted by Titan are largely disappointing. *Judge Caligula* (two volumes) has a mad judge taking over Mega-City One and Dredd leading a desperate attempt to regain control. Despite several fine individual episodes and strong art from Bolland and McMahon, it lacks the thrust of *The Cursed Earth*, a casualty of a continued story seemingly plotted on a week by week basis. *Apocalypse War* (two volumes) and its precursor *Block Mania* see a full-scale invasion of Mega-City One, and while *Judge Dredd In Oz* (for a surf contest) works in places, there's too much padding. *City of the Damned* picks up from the plot of *The Judge Child Quest*, as the predicted event from which the Judge Child would save Mega-City occurs, but stretches too little too far.

The twenty-seven volumes spotlighting artists almost all contain strong and amusing John Wagner and Alan Grant strips, and that the massive disparity of artistic approaches all work with the character is a testament to the quality of the writing. Ron Smith (5, 6, 8, 10-12, 26) was the most prolific Judge Dredd artist of the late 1970s and early 1980s; the other featured artists are Mike McMahon (2), Carlos Ezquerra (4, 7, 23), Steve Dillon (9, 20), Cam Kennedy (13, 15, 17), Brendan McCarthy (16), Cliff Robinson (18) Ian Gibson (19, 25), John Higgins (21), Brett Ewins (22) and Barry Kitson (27). 3 pairs Mike McMahon and Ron Smith, while 14 is a combination of Smith, Robinson and Dillon. Stories by artists who haven't drawn enough Dredd to warrant their own album are collected in catch-all titles *Mega City Vice* (three volumes) and *Rough Justice*. Despite including Dave Gibbons, Kevin O'Neill, Bryan Talbot and Colin Wilson (largely unknown in the USA, but popular in Europe) alongside other material by artists whose work was already collected, they're hit and miss propositions, although each has some decent strips. The same applies to *Judge Dredd's Crime Files* (four volumes).

In the early 1990s Dredd's home, *2000AD*, went to full colour, Dredd was serialised in Rock Power magazine as 'Heavy Metal Dredd', and a companion title, *The Judge Dredd Megazine*, ensured there was more Dredd material appearing than ever before. The downside was that Wagner and Grant cut back on their Dredd writing. The best colour volume by far is *America*, by Wagner and Colin MacNeil. It's a bittersweet story of love and revolution under tyranny that tested the waters before *2000AD* began licensing material to Mandarin, then Hamlyn. MacNeil also draws half of *Mechanismo* (completed by Peter Doherty), in which giant robot judges are introduced, and, inevitably, begin to malfunction. It's not the best Dredd, but certainly readable, which is more than can be said for *Heavy Metal Dredd*, which has Simon Bisley art, but very slight stories. *Three Amigos* is Wagner back on form with some nice Mike McMahon-style art from Trevor Hairsine, which prompts one to consider why McMahon wasn't asked to draw the story. The amigos are Dredd and his two most popular adversaries, Judge Death and Mean Angel, the unlikely teaming occurring to trap a redneck outlaw. Even better is *The Pit*, another Wagner story, in which Dredd must clear out a Justice Department division riddled with corruption and apathy aided only by misfits. It survives four artists (including the very good Alex Ronald), and only a predictable *Assault on Precinct 13* ending disappoints.

Democracy Now re-runs themes utilised better in Titan's volume 21, but has John Burns art, as does *Blind Justice*. That's two more satisfactory Wagner stories of corruption and manipulation, backed-up by a spectacularly drawn Western. Wagner also writes connected aspects of the same story when a crime boss triggers a takeover of Mega-City One, interpreted by a variety of artists in two volumes. Former Judge Galen DeMarco is the chief protagonist of *Doomsday For Mega-City One*, notable for some fine pages from Colin Wilson. The longer *Doomsday For Dredd*, though, is the better story for most of the book, with Dredd on trial and good art from Wilson, Cam Kennedy, Simon Davies, Charlie Adlard and seven Mike McMahon pages. The remaining collections are lesser quality throughout, either because Wagner and Grant are retreading old ground, or because other writers lack inspiration. John Smith deserves credit for not retreading old plots in *Fetish*, but it's plodding until enlivened by an appearance from camp Vatican martial arts and arcane practices expert Devlin Waugh. The previously high standard of art has also slipped since the introduction of colour, with too many artists hiding basic deficiencies behind layers of acrylic paint. Don't bother with *Rapture*, or *Wilderlands*.

When Titan retrieved the reprint licence, in addition to re-issuing their earlier collections, they made the sound commercial move of prioritising Garth Ennis written Dredd stories. Ennis, however, has never really shone on Dredd and his early stories reprinted in *Death Aid*, with Carolos Ezquerra, and *Emerald Isle*, with Steve Dillon, while not bad, rely on diluted Wagner's innovation. By the work collected in *Goodnight Kiss, Helter Skelter, Justice One* and *Muzak Killer* Ennis' writing was better, but he still coasted on Dredd, which was further cursed by widely variable and often substandard art at this point.~FP

Recommended: *America, Blind Justice, The Cursed Earth, Judge Death, Judge Dredd* Vols 1-3, 5, 11, 13, 17, 19, 21, 25, *The Pit*

JUDGE DREDD In 'The Judge Child Quest'

Eagle: *5 issue miniseries 1984**

Certainly a contender for the best Judge Dredd multi-parter, the *Judge Child Quest* was seemingly begun with an end in mind, yet is flexible enough to permit the eccentric detours that keep Dredd fresh. It also introduces the popular Judge Hershey and the Angel Gang, members of which have proved enduringly recurring foes for Dredd; artists Brian Bolland, Mike McMahon and Ron Smith are on top form. After a slow start, so is writer John Wagner, throwing out good ideas at such a clip there's a frenetic pace to the stories when collected from the originally published weekly versions. Precognitives see a time of great trauma when only Owen Krysler can save Mega City. Krysler is now a child able to see into the future, and has been kidnapped and flown off Earth by the Angel Gang. Dredd has to return him, encountering all sorts of strange beings and planets along the way. The Titan collections reprint the story in black and white, while a Fleetway published volume collects the entire story in colour.~WJ

Recommended: 2-5

JUDGE DREDD The Early Cases

Eagle: *6 issues 1985-1986*

It took almost a year of continuous weekly publication before writer John Wagner fixed his concept of what Dredd was, how his world operated and how best to handle him. The system he settled on was Dredd as straight-faced foil to the lunatic goings-on around him. The early stories, while gradually developing Dredd's world, are relatively primitive, as artists Mike McMahon, Carlos Ezquerra and Ian Gibson also develop their styles. Brian Bolland's first Judge Dredd story is reprinted in 3, and while there's a novelty in seeing a classic strip develop, there's plenty of better Dredd material available.~WJ

JUDGEMENT DAY

Awesome: *3 issue miniseries 1997, one-shot ('Aftermath') 1998*

This series is at once an attempt to define an Awesome universe, to summarise the pasts, and indicate the future paths of the characters that Awesome planned to publish. It's also a homage to comics and genres of the past, an indictment of the comics of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and an introduction to the art of storytelling. It's a specific tribute to the work of Gil Kane, a metaphysical detective story and a cosmic joke. What else would you expect from Alan Moore?

Ostensibly covering the trial of Knightsabre for the murder of Riptide (both members of Youngblood) Moore

challenges the traditional roles of storyteller and reader/listener by having one of the characters be responsible for most of what's written – but how could he be? While Rob Liefeld scripts the 'present day' trial, there are large numbers of guest artists on the flashbacks including Kane himself, Stephen Platt, Keith Giffen, Dan Jurgens, Chris Sprouse, Jim Starlin, Steve Skroce, Rick Veitch and Ian Churchill. In 'Aftermath', Moore portrays Kane (drawn by himself) as an 'imagineer', illustrating six short strips involving the core superheroes in Awesome's line:- Youngblood, Glory, New Men, Maximage, The Allies and Spacehunter. Perhaps not the most challenging of Moore's work but hugely enjoyable for all that.~NF
Recommended: 1-3, Aftermath

JUDGEMENT PAWNS
Antarctic: *3 issue miniseries 1997*

A band of fighters are mystically summoned from other times and other planets to fight a seemingly omnipotent mystical menace. It's an old plot given no purchase inducing twists here, although artist Jean-Sébastien Duberger is worth watching out for as he develops his style.~FP

JUDOMASTER
Charlton: *10 issues (89-98) 1966-1967*

In the usual Charlton fashion, rather than renewing their magazine-rate postal permit they cancelled a title, in this case *Gun Master*, and merely started their new project by continuing the numbering of the old title. In the final months of World War II Sgt Rip Jagger becomes the freebooting Judomaster. From his island base he and his band of raiders foil Japanese sabotage attempts in the South Pacific in what was the first martial arts strip to appear in comics. Drawn by martial arts devotee Frank McLaughlin and débuting in *Charlton Special War Series* 4, Judomaster proved to be one of Charlton's best. The back-up feature, a revival of Sarge Steel, by Steve Skeates and Dick Giordano, was also very good, making for an eminently readable comic.~SW

JUGGERNAUT
Marvel: *One-shot 1997, one-shot ('The Eighth Day') 1999*

Joe Kelly and Duncan Rouleau tell a tale of rednecks and mayhem in the first story as D'Spayre, demon of, well, despair steals the mystic energy that makes Charles Xavier's step-brother an unstoppable engine of destruction. Fast-paced, very readable, and not afraid to make fun of itself. The second one-shot is the last chapter of a company crossover (see *Iron Man* 22, *Thor* 17 and *Peter Parker, Spider-Man* 11). Juggernaut is revealed to be one of eight Exemplars, earthly tools of supernatural entities created to wage war. Cain Marko must fight free of the influence of his patron Cyttorak before he is compelled to battle his supernatural counterparts and consequently devastate the world. Pretty pictures from Terry Shoemaker but Joe Casey's script is mindless nonsense.~WW

JULIUS KNIPL, Real Estate Photographer
Penguin: *1 volume (Cheap Novelties: 'The Pleasures of Urban Decay') 1991*
Little, Brown: 1 volume 1996
Pantheon: *1 volume ('The Beauty Supply District') 2000*

Julius Knipl wanders the streets of New York, ostensibly in his job as a photographer, but actually, for our benefit. He points out the nooks and crannies of the city, the businesses, still flourishing or long gone, leaving behind some small evidence of existence, like a sign on the side of a building that no-one has ever replaced. He chronicles forgotten novelties, gadgets and foodstuffs, real and imaginary, with a weather eye open for sales, as well as the lives of salesmen in single-room apartments and the countless clubs and societies (like *The Holey Pocket League*) that keep men occupied when they're not working.

These volumes reprint selections of Ben Katchor's newspaper strip, but each also contains an extended episode, 'The Cheap Merchandise District', 'The Evening Combinator' and 'The Beauty Supply District' respectively, which, though maintaining the same eight-panel format, allow Katchor to develop specific themes more thoroughly. His narrative is terse, playful and wondrous, his artwork is sketchy and yet full of the minutiae of the streets, shops and lives with which he fills his strip. This is a lyrical, nostalgic, melancholy look at the architecture of life and loneliness, yet it's also funny, heart-warming and deeply felt.~NF
Recommended: 'The Beauty Supply District', *Cheap Novelties, Jules Knipl, Real Estate Photographer*

JUNGLE ACTION
Marvel: *24 issues 1972-1976*

Jungle Action's original remit was to reprint stories of scantily clad male and female Tarzan rip-offs, and apart from some drawn nicely by Joe Maneely in 1-3 there's nothing of note. The Black Panther is the featured character from 6, and was immediately launched into the epic 'Panther's Rage' story until 18. The Panther was a blank slate for writer Don McGregor, who fleshed out the bare bones of his background from previous appearances. The Panther was the ruler of Wakanda, a technologically advanced hidden African society, from which McGregor extrapolated a complex culture, mythology and geography, devising a complete map of Wakanda and the surrounding area, and being consistent in sticking to it for the duration of his run. They may seem obvious pieces of preparation, but few comic creators at the time bothered with background to that degree. In the company of artists Billy Graham and Klaus Janson (from 10), McGregor wove a complex tale of an uprising led by the imposing Erik Killmonger. Mixing exotic characters, a Wakandan travelogue and political machinations, and still finding space for small human moments, it's a considerable achievement, albeit flawed by McGregor's florid writing style. McGregor cared about the feature, though, to the extent of preparing text and illustration pages more in keeping with the tone of the Panther's strip to replace the reprint back-ups, and including an extra level to some stories by, for instance, planting subtle clues as to the identity of a mystery assassin in 9. The complexity of McGregor's plotting and the ideas incorporated make 'Panther's Rage' a forerunner of the current crop of adult-oriented comics. 19 began another multi-parter with the Panther back in the USA confronted by the bigotry of the Ku Klux Klan. Unfortunately, McGregor's prolix tendencies run out of control, producing dull issues. The story was unfinished as Jungle Action was cancelled (to let Jack Kirby start his *Black Panther* title); Ed Hannigan completed it none too satisfactorily in *Black Panther* 14-15 and *Marvel Premiere* 51-53.~FP
Recommended: 8-17

JUNGLE ADVENTURES
Skywald: *3 issues 1971*

Bob Gordon-Manning, film star and cat lover is hit on the head and wanders off to become Zangar, yet another Lord of the Jungle in this second rate adventure series. Of more interest to fans are the classic reprints of Sheena, Jo-Jo, Blue Gorilla, Taanda the White Princess and Slave Girl that fill out each giant sized issue.~WW.

JUNGLE COMICS
Blackthorne: *One-shot (Jerry Iger's Classic Jungle Comics) 1986, 3 issues 1988*
A-List *6 issues 1997-1998*

For Blackthorne, Bruce Jones and Dragan Flaesc give Sheena a potion to return her youth and send her back to Africa to face some poachers, teaming her with Kaänga. The black and white of 2 is a big improvement after the poor colour printing on 1, but perhaps fittingly, 3 ends on a cliffhanger, and story remains unfinished. The one-shot reprints, very badly, the first issue of Fiction House's *Jungle Comics*.

A-List begin promisingly with a reprint of Sheena in 3-D from 1953, and an introduction by Jerry Iger, but the credits disappear completely after 3 and 5-6 (both all Sheena issues) are very poorly printed. 2 contains reprints of Wambi the Jungle Boy by Iger, South Sea Girl by Thorne Stevenson and Hydro Celestial Battle by Lionel Sanders. 3 has the Congo King by Taylor Tibett and Iger, and a two-page parody called Snarzan The Ape, while 4 has episodes of Buck Johnson, Captain Cutlass, Sally the Sleuth and Kismet Man of Fate.~NF

JUNGLE GIRLS

AC: *16 issues 1988-1989 (1-2), 1992-1993 (3-16)*

Serving both as a home for new stories about Tara, a member of the Femforce, and for reprints of various jungle girls of the past, the unremarkable quality of the first and the lack of variety in the latter eventually saw off this title. The artists primarily influence the selection of reprints and these include Bob Powell (Cave Girl), Matt Baker (Tiger Girl, Camilla: Wild Girl of the Congo), Bob Lubbers (Camilla), Maurice Whitman (Nyoka the Jungle Girl), Robert Hayward Webb (Sheena Queen of the Jungle, Tiger Girl), Gene Fawcette (the original Tara, Taanda) and Jack Kamen (Tangi). Recognising the limitations of the genre, Howard Nostrand's *Mad*-style parody, 'Shirl the Jungle Girl', appears in 16. Tara's solo adventures (1-4, 10, 13), are by various creators, including Bill Black (1, 4, 10, 13), Dick Ayers (4) and the John Byrne-like Vic Bridges (10), but none have any depth. An attempt to offer something different begins with Nick Northey's 'Wild Side' (14-16), teaming Tara with Nyoka, Cave Girl, Tygra and Princess Pantha on the island of Taragonia, where nuclear experiments have created a new world of dinosaurs and strange creatures. Though this does spark some characterisation, it was too mediocre to provide the boost the title needed.~NF

JUNGLE JIM

Dell: *20 issues 1953-1959*
King: *1 issue (5) 1967*
Charlton: *7 issues (22-28) 1969-1970*

The original comics featured adventures of Alex Raymond's syndicated hero Jungle Jim Bradley and his faithful companion Kolu in the greenery 'East of Suez'. Despite the newspaper strip being discontinued in 1954, the character's popularity was maintained due to movie B-features starring a post-*Tarzan* Johnny Weissmuller, and a TV series.

The first two Dell comics are issues of *Four Color* (although Jim's name is large on the cover), and the series officially picks up with 3. They're largely drawn by Paul Norris and Frank Thorne in a conservative 1950s style, and the King issue reprints 5. Perhaps that's why it's numbered as such rather than 21. The only additional item of interest was the tantalising Wally Wood cover. When Charlton leased the feature they were given the unpublished art for stillborn future King issues, so 22, 23, and 27 have artwork by Wally Wood (and his assistant Wayne Howard) and Steve Ditko, inked by Wood (or Howard). The balance of the stories are by Joe Gill and Pat Boyette, who did an unconventional but highly reverential job on the strip. The Charlton series also features a one-page lesson on how to speak Swahili each issue.~SW
Recommended: 22, 23, 27

The Exploits of the JUNIOR CARROT PATROL

Dark Horse: *2 issues 1989-1990*

The whimsical surreality of *Flaming Carrot* is present and correct and Rick Geary's a better artist, yet somehow these junior crimefighters attempting to emulate their hero fall flat.~FP

JUNK CULTURE

DC/Vertigo: *2 issue microseries 1997*

14 year old Eve and Lola are twin sisters who wear blue lipstick and have shaven heads. On the way home from school one day Lola is accidentally electrocuted. Surviving the shock, Lola becomes seriously deranged, spouting advertising slogans and wreaking serious havoc. Then some mysterious men appear out of nowhere and try to fix Lola. It slowly dawns on Eve that she and her sister are both results of an experiment and they're artificial humans. So, being emotionally only fourteen, they throw an incredibly destructive temper tantrum. This reads like a rushed adaptation of a cult carnage movie. *Natural Born Killers* comes to mind with its motif of ubiquitous advertising infecting everyday life, but that overstates how deep the story goes. The scripting is terse and oblique, the art is very stylised, distancing us from the real horror of situations like being clobbered with your own torn-off arm. It's thin stuff with almost no motivation going beyond cliché, but that may be writer/artist Ted McKeever's whole point. If you don't get off on the attitude then there's precious little here to engage the reader.~SW

JUNKWAFFEL

Print Mint: *4 issues 1971-1972*
Last Gasp: *1 issue (5) 1983*

One of the underground's most prolific artists, Vaughn Bodé produced a large body of work that was variously touching and bawdy, profound and cutesy depending on the strip. Junkwaffel was conceived as a receptacle for obscure, early or unpublished stories, and was inevitably a patchy affair, but certainly contained fine work. Highlights of the run include the powerful and violent anti-war strips 'The Machines' in 1, dating from his college days, and 'Cobalt 60' in 2, the chapters of which were later collected from disparate sources. By contrast the magazine-sized 5 reprinted Bodé's charming unpublished newspaper strip 'Zooks', the story of the first lizard in space. Some of the material now appears a tad sexist and inconsequential, but there's much of interest here overall. The issues have been kept in print by Last Gasp, and all are still available.~DAR
Recommended: 1, 2

JUNKYARD ENFORCER

Boxcar Publishing: *2 issues 1998*

Streetwise newsboy Little Bruce joins a junkyard gang of young offenders led by an older kid named Pinchorelli. The gang pulls a heist for gang boss Butch Franco. Things soon go wrong thanks to Pinchorelli's wild-eyed anarchist girlfriend Tanya. Josh Sheppard's writing is gripping although the vagueness of the period the stories take place in undermines the realism. His artwork is suitably dynamic but lacks finesse at the inking stage – this isn't gritty its just inept – and Gerald Forton lends a helping hand with 2. A worthwhile read.~SW

JURASSIC JANE

London Night: *7 issues 1996-1997*

Cover marked "Mature Readers", it's only immaturity that will attract anyone to this collection of titillation and fantasy clichés. Jane wanders an ancient land on a quest, chancing across assorted mystical and neanderthal dangers and flashing her breasts at all and sundry. Further exploiting those adolescent hormones this nonsense is priced at an exorbitant $3 for sixteen pages. For the really desperate there's an alternative edition of this shoddy comic with all characters fully nude at double the price.~WJ

Return To JURASSIC PARK

Topps: *8 issue limited series, 1 Annual 1995-1996*

Tom and Mary Bierbaum pick up where Englehart left off with the *Raptor* series, by introducing a story that parallels the events of the source film. Drs Grant and Sattler investigate the military occupation of Jurassic Park in 1-4. Two new scientists are introduced for 5-8, which features them abandoned on the island during a storm, and coming into conflict with the military. Armando Gil returns as penciller, but Michael Golden's covers are the artistic highpoint of the series. The annual (1995) and *Jurassic Jam* (1996) complete the *Jurassic* spin-offs, the latter a story by Keith Giffen illustrated with single-pagers from the likes of John Byrne, John Bolton, George Pérez and Walt Simonson.~NF

JUST A PILGRIM

Black Bull: *5 issue miniseries 2001, 4 issue miniseries 2002*

The titular Bible-quoting reformed cannibal is nameless, and, pursued by pirates, tries to lead a wagon train of innocents to safety in this violently hilarious post-apocalyptic wild western set on the dried-up bed of the Atlantic Ocean. This could hardly have been written by anyone other than Garth Ennis, and is not for the soft-hearted. Castenado, the hook-handed blind captain whose remaining senses have been enhanced by radiation (reminds me of something), is the wicked pantomime villain of the first series. Carlos Ezquerra's gritty art, well-coloured, is among his best. The second series ties up loose ends while repeating the old routines, so is merely all right.~GK

Recommended: miniseries one 1-5

JUST IMAGINE STAN LEE'S...

DC: *12 issue limited series 2001-2002*

Michael Uslan is credited as initiator of this project, which allows Marvel mainstay Stan Lee to re-imagine DC's major characters, collaborating with artists who are not usually associated with them. The biggest coup in this respect is having Superman drawn by John Buscema, who had not worked outside Marvel for many years, but who, as with most of the other artists, is perhaps better described as 'well-regarded' than a major draw to the series. Lee's scripts are flamboyant (sometimes pompous), and the emphasis on magic and the limited characterisation all count against the series. Nevertheless, it's fun to see Lee's interpretations (with references to as many other DC characters as possible it seems), wrapped up in an overall storyline concerning the plans of the Reverend Darrk to allow his evil master, Crisis to enter and conquer the world. It's hard to complain about any of the artwork, but Jim Lee (*Wonder Woman*), Kevin Maguire (*The Flash*) and Chris Bachalo (*Catwoman*) are the most effective visually, with John Byrne's *Robin* and Joe Kubert's *Batman* perhaps most disappointing. Uslan also provides short backups adding some flesh to the bones of Lee's world, in all but the *JLA* and *Crisis* issues, again illustrated by an eclectic group of artists, including Sergio Aragonés, Kyle Baker, Gene Colan, Darwyn Cooke, Richard Corben, Ramona Fradon, Mike Kaluta and John Severin.~NF

JUSTICE

Marvel: *32 issues 1986-1989*

A memorable disaster area. How on earth did it last for so long? Archie Goodwin created a confused alien called Tensen who had been a law officer on his own world, Spring (the baddies are from Winterland), and continued to punish evildoers after arrival on Earth. He judged them by their black auras and battered and fried them with his electric shield and sword. Steve Englehart took over the scripting from 2, and it's not bad. The earth scenes are typical 1980s sub-Frank Miller mean-streets stuff, and the fantasy elements are by way of vintage Steve Ditko strips such as *Dr Strange* and *Shade The Changing Man*. The chief problem is the eccentric pencilling by Geof Isherwood, plainly inked by Vince Colletta. It looks a mess.

Keith Giffen, heavily under the influence of the South American master José Muñoz, drew some decent issues, written by old hand Gerry Conway (9-11). Then, after some rough fill-ins, halfway through the run someone decided to try some creators who weren't incompetent or clapped-out on the comic. It was revealed that Tensen had been under the hypnotic spell of a paranormal. The editors explained: "Unfortunately, in the creative crunch to get the books done for Marvel's 25th anniversary, we accidentally let a few stray concepts – aliens and alternative dimensions – creep in, concepts we soon realised were 'old universe'." Peter David wrote the strip to its end and packed in a lot of slapstick and digs at comic-book writing and cultural events such as *Live Aid*. 16-32 are quite readable – even funny if you followed the title from the beginning. Lee Weeks and Mike Gustovich's art is clear and dynamic. Tensen learns to walk on his shields (i.e. fly) and the criminals still get incinerated.~GK

JUSTICE Four Balance

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1994*

No relation to the 1980s character, this Justice is a telekinetic teenage member of the New Warriors, and later the Avengers. Having suffered heavy beatings as a child, Justice is keen to investigate the death of a possibly abused teenager. The first issue is reasonably well handled, but precedes two issues padded with superfluous cameos and jarring 'fantasy' sequences to stretch the series to four issues. The concluding issue stands apart from the remainder, and is the best of the run, making every necessary point on its own.~WJ

JUSTICE INC

DC: *4 issues 1975, 2 issue microseries 1989*

A contemporary of The Shadow, and like his counterpart operating a pool of agents, The Avenger was created for 1930s pulp novels by writer Kenneth Robeson. An experimental operation by enemies of the state endowed Richard Benson with the ability to morph his features to resemble anyone he chose, a technique he used to the full in fighting crime. The first series can't make up its mind if it's to be a home for adaptations of the novels or for original material, and the identity crisis resulted in an unsatisfactory series. Al McWilliams does a nice job illustrating the first issue and Jack Kirby draws 2-4, but they're strangely lack-lustre, as Kirby often was when working on creations other than his own.

Andy Helfer wisely chose to have the microseries span twenty years from 1948, distancing it from the pulps to avoid invidious comparisons, but retaining the essential period feel. Helfer provides a dense plot, adding elements to the Avenger's origin and portraying him as a man manipulated by the security services from day one. In keeping with the tone of the feature, Kyle Baker's art is distinctly unsettling. He appears to have drawn in coloured chalks, adding black outlines on an overlay, for an overall ghostly and distancing effect. There's perhaps a little too much exposition and set-up beginning the second issue, but once Benson knows the truth about himself he embarks on an ingenious course of action that engrosses until the end. Baker and Helfer don't top their work on *The Shadow*, but they're even less reverential here and their take on *Justice Inc* is well worth reading.~WJ

Recommended: microseries 1-2

JUSTICE LEAGUE Graphic Novels, miniseries and one-shots

DC: *3 issue miniseries ('A Midsummer's Nightmare') 1996*, 2 issue microseries (League of Justice) 1996, one-shot (Justice Riders) 1997, 3 issue miniseries ('Paradise Lost') 1998, 2 issue microseries ('World Without Grown-Ups') 1998, 3 issue miniseries ('The Nail') 1998*, 3 issue miniseries (JLA/Titans) 1998-1999*, one-shot ('Super-Spectacular') 1999, one-shot ('Superpower') 1999, one-shot ('Foreign Bodies') 1999, one-shot ('Primevil') 1999, Graphic Novel ('Earth 2') 2000, 2 issue microseries ('Created Equal') 2000, one-shot ('Realworlds') 2000, one-shot ('Heaven's Ladder') 2000, 2 issue microseries ('Secret Society of Super-Heroes') 2000, Graphic Novel ('A League of One') 2000, one-shot ('Seven Caskets') 2000, 3 issue miniseries ('Act of God') 2000-2001, 5 issue miniseries ('Justice Leagues') 2001, 4 issue miniseries ('Black Baptism') 2001, one-shot ('Gods and Monsters') 2001, one-shot ('Our Worlds At War') 2001, one-shot (JLA/Haven: 'Arrival') 2001, 3 issue miniseries ('Gatekeeper') 2001, 7 issue limited series ('Incarnations') 2001-2002, one-shot ('Riddle of the Beast') 2002, one-shot ('Shogun') 2002, 4 issue miniseries ('Destiny') 2002, one-shot ('Island of Dr Moreau') 2002, one-shot (JLA/JSA Secret Files and Origins) 2002, Graphic Novel (JLA/JSA: 'Virtue and Vice') 2002*

DC/Dark Horse: *One-shot (JLA vs Predator) 2000*

DC/Image: *One-shot (JLA/WildC.A.T.S.) 1998, one-shot (JLA/Witchblade) 2000*

The JLA miniseries and one-shots, with one exception, divide handily into two groups: those that are 'supposed' to have happened, and are in continuity, and 'Elseworlds', which take place outside the main DC Universe, and never 'really happened'.

In terms of the in-continuity adventures, the most important is 'A Midsummer's Nightmare', which presages the ongoing JLA revival. Mark Waid and Fabian Nicieza provide the story, with Jeff Johnson and Darick Robertson the art. The 'Big Seven' – Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Flash, Green Lantern, Aquaman and the Martian Manhunter – are stripped of their memory of their superpowers, while the rest of the world's population is suddenly discovering abilities far beyond those of mortal men. This stylish and intelligent prelude set up the reason for these key characters to regroup as the JLA, while sweeping away the debris of all those lesser Leagues – International, Europe, Task Force, Extreme – that had cluttered the playing field for so long. 'Pardise Lost' focuses on Zauriel, the angel introduced by Grant Morrison as a new member of the JLA, in a seeming attempt to offend both the pious and the pagan alike. If you can get past the imposition of the Judeo/Christian heaven as 'real' in the DC Universe, Mark Millar turns in a tolerably entertaining story.

JLA/Titans is the work of two obsessive fannish type creators Devin Grayson and illustrator Phil Jimenez, who bring in, or at least mention in passing, every single member of both teams in an incredibly crowded and convoluted tale of a former Titan who becomes a menace to earth. Lots of nice character touches, snappy dialogue and lovely art do not entirely compensate for the incredibly claustrophobic feel, which ideally could have used another issue to decompress. It was a huge commercial success, however, and resulted in the 1999 *Titans* revival. A similar successful launch for *Young Justice* was engineered by Todd Dezago's entertaining and well-characterised script for 'World Without Grown-Ups'. Earth is split into two worlds, identical in every way, save that one has only adults, and one only teenagers and children, among its population.

'Superpower' introduces Mark Antaeus, a promising young metahuman who joins the League, but ultimately finds the burdens of powers too great, while 'Foreign Bodies' is the old story standby of having the heroes exchange bodies, and their familiarity with each other's strengths and weaknesses being their undoing. In 'Primeval' our heroes must thwart the progressive de-evolution of Earth, and of themselves. These three, like so many other JLA one-shots, illustrate the problem with a popular franchise like JLA spawning endless spin-offs; all are perfectly competent stories, but there's absolutely no reason they should be prestige format one-shots rather than issues of the actual comic. 'Seven Caskets' is lavishly illustrated by Dan Brereton, who also provides the singularly pointless story. Seven undead kings unleash an evil so great that in order to combat it, the JLA must become monsters themselves. Ho-hum.

Three longer stories have been issued as hardcover graphic novels. 'A League of One' is written and painted by Christopher Moeller. It's rather lovely, and really a Wonder Woman story with the JLA guest-starring. Diana receives an oracle's warning that a member of the League will die in battle against an enemy, so she sets out to disable or nullify all the other Leaguers before the menace arrives, in order that she will be the one to sacrifice herself. Beautifully illustrated and a lot of fun, even if the basic plot is very familiar to old *Legion of Super-Heroes* readers, (Saturn Girl and Zaryan the Conqueror, anyone?). 'Earth 2' also revisits an old story (*Justice League of America* 29-30) in which the JLA met their evil counterparts, and gives it a modern dystopian spin. This time rather than being simple thieves, the evil forms of Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Flash and Green Lantern are drug addicts, perverts, and sadistic murderers. Given that the creative team are Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely, the whole story possesses rather more style than initially expected, but although well done, it still leaves a sour aftertaste. *JLA/JSA*: 'Virtue and Vice' not only revives the old tradition of team-ups between the Justice League and the Justice Society, but is a substantial improvement on most previous entries in that category. The Seven Deadly Sins possess members of both teams, and the remainder mobilise to stop their rampage, which is, of course, orchestrated by an unexpected enemy. David Goyer and Geoff Johns turn in a deft action thriller that doesn't stint on character touches and snappy dialogue, and the presentation of several of the lesser heroes is particularly appreciated. Carlos Pacheco and Jesús Meriño, having cut their teeth on multi-hero epics in *Avengers Forever*, take this is their stride. Despite the hefty price for the hardcover, the story is a triumph. It was preceded by *JLA/JSA Secret Files*, which includes a prologue, revealing more when re-read after the graphic novel, the revival of Metamorpho and a couple of other competent but undistinguished tales along with some profile pages.

'Heaven's Ladder' was a tabloid-size special introducing the new creative team on the *JLA* monthly at the time, Mark Waid, Bryan Hitch and Paul Neary. A monstrous machine of incalculable scale snatches the Earth from under the nose of the startled JLA, and they pursue to find the machine stringing planets together, like beads in a celestial necklace. The art is sublime on the extra-large pages, and the script is both profound and playful, giving the characters appropriate heroic stature, but we've seen the ending, or variants on it, numerous times. 'Gods and Monsters' takes the interesting premise that DC heroes have been likened to earthbound gods, and combines that with the cult of the celebrity to create a body of people who literally worship the JLA as deities. Needless to say, all is not as it seems, and ultimately very little is done with the concept of literal 'hero worship'.

'Justice Leagues' has the JLA split and rendered amnesiac, forgetting that there ever was a Justice League. Each individual member, however feels compelled to form his/her own Justice League of something, therefore we are offered *JLAliens*, *JLAmazons*, *JLAtlantis*, *JLArkham*, and so on. It's not without moments of interest, but over-extended. The same applies to 'Black Baptism', which unites the DC's magic users against a team of menaces that the JLA themselves are helpless to handle. 'Arrival' is written by Ashley-Jayne Nicolaus and Matt Schuster, with art by Ariel Olivetti. It introduced a new group of alien heroes, and was essentially a pilot for the Haven series. Since the DC was already overstocked with under- or unused heroes, the Havenites eventually went nowhere. 'Our Worlds At War' was the team's entry in that year's company-wide crossover, and was notable mainly for the presumptive death of Aquaman. 'Gatekeeper' was an ill-advised follow-up to *Green Lantern Annual* 9, in which the team has to rescue a foreign heroine trapped in an alternative dimension. Written and drawn by Tim Truman, it's strictly demons-by-the-numbers. 'Incarnations' is a retro-continuity series looking at different eras of the team's history, sincerely intended by writer John Ostrander, but Val Semeiks' art is so poor that the effort is wasted.

The best of the Elseworlds efforts is 'The Nail', written by Alan Davis and sumptuously-illustrated by Davis and Mark Farmer. It takes its inspiration from the old rhyme in which a minor event – the missing nail from a horse's shoe – has catastrophic repercussions. The 'Nail' in question causes a flat tyre on the Kents' truck, so that they don't find the spacecraft from Krypton, and someone else does. That minor event causes the underpinnings of their entire world to erode, and brings them to the brink of disaster. It's genuinely special. 'League of Justice' is pointless magic elfy bollocks recasting the team as folkloric characters. In *Justice Riders* Chuck Dixon re-casts the JLA as western heroes with Wonder Woman as a sheriff gathering an unusually powered posse. It's offbeat, but not without merit. 'Act of God' opens with an inexplicable event stripping all the super-beings of their powers, a potentially interesting premise. Unfortunately, the event is never explained, the premise collapses under examination, and the characterisation of the heroes ranges from the insulting to the outright stupid under Doug Moench. 'Created

Equal' might as well be titled, 'They Saved Superman's Sperm', as half the world's population, with one notable exception, is wiped out, and the survivors have to redefine everything in their lives. Despite the obligatory Supes/WW flirtation, it's actually well-characterised by writer Fabian Nicieza, and Kevin Maguire's art is lovely. The story could, however, have done with a middle bridge to explore the consequences of the situation. In 'Secret Society of Super-Heroes' investigative reporter Lois Lane discovers a secret cabal of super-beings who have been dispensing justice from beyond the law. Howard Chaykin writes in his usual dystopian twists, (though at least refrains from his habitual blowjob scenes), but it's a pretty good read, and Mike McKone's art is suitably edgy. 'Riddle of the Beast' is a *Lord of the Rings* inspired fantasy story in which a young boy named Robin lays claim to his heritage. With more than a dozen artists, this is rambling and dull. 'Shogun' is set in the ancient Japanese Empire, but everyone talks like contemporary Americans. Even amongst the field of *JLA Elseworlds*, in which it has plenty of competition, Ben Raab's story is outstandingly stupid and pointless. 'Island of Dr Moreau' reinterprets the classic novel, with the JLA as 'manimals' in the Victorian era, directed by their creator to hunt down Jack the Ripper. For all its unoriginality, it's reasonably well done by Roy Thomas and Stephen Pugh.

'Destiny' seeks to go one better than 'The Nail' by posing the musical question, "What if Superman and Batman had never happened?". The answer, at least according to this over-long, muddily drawn effort, is "not a lot". Futile and derivative.

Three which are not explicitly 'Elseworlds', but clearly can't be 'in continuity', are one-shot crossovers between the JLA and other characters or properties. *JLA/WildC.A.T.S.* by Grant Morrison and Val Semeiks is a bog-standard slugfest showing no flair or style, done with both eyes on the paycheck, while *JLA/Witchblade* is marginally the least worst of the three, with the enchanted blade seeking out the JLA femmes as its host. *JLA Vs. Predator* has the movie monsters taking on the World's Greatest Super-Heroes in a humdrum battle featuring Kevin Nowlan's most cursory and dismissive art to date.

'Realworlds' defies categorisation. By J.M. DeMatteis and G. L. Barr, the exploits of fictional superheroes inspire all-too-real people to attempt superhuman things. Old friends reunited by a mysterious summons, who used to 'play JLA' together as children, face greater challenges in later life. It's an intelligent and thoughtful story, and, rarely for a DeMatteis tale, not over-written. For completeness' sake, mention should also be made of the *JLA Gallery*, collecting various artists' pin-up interpretations of the team, and the *100 page Super Spectacular* reprinting 1960s JLA tales backed up by a 1940s JSA story.~HS

Recommended: 'Earth 2', 'Heaven's Ladder', 'League of One', JLA/JSA, 'Midsummer's Nightmare' 1-3, 'The Nail' 1-3, Realworlds

JUSTICE LEAGUE ADVENTURES

DC: *15 issues + 2001 to date*

A stylish and enjoyable interpretation of DC's premier super-team derived from the continuity of the 2001 TV cartoon series. All issues to date are smartly done, of a higher and more consistent quality than DC's overblown and pretentious 'main' JLA title, and several are excellent. Ones to watch out for are Dan Slott's 6, in which an apparent triumph for the League's opponents conceals an ingenious 'sting', and Matt Howarth's 9, in which the Flash's dating problems are sharply contrasted with his JLA duties. In 10 Josh Siegal produces a shrewd and non-mawkish exploration of the Martian Manhunter's difficulty in being accepted by Earthlings. The art throughout is generic animated style, but never less than competent. One of DC's best contemporary titles. A collection gathers 1, 3, 6 and 10-13.~HS

Recommended: 6, 9, 10

JUSTICE LEAGUE AMERICA

DC: *113 issues, 9 Annuals, 1 Spectacular* ***1987-1996***

As the previous version of the Justice League had stagnated and died in mediocrity, something radical was required to entice readers back. Writer Keith Giffen (plot and often art breakdowns) came up with the goods. The new JLA's multinational cast were likely to mess up before they came through, and had a difficult time taking the concept, or each other, seriously. Humour is paramount, in the way the characters mesh and J.M DeMatteis' snappy dialogue, but it's backed up with strong plots and thoughtful characterisation, deftly switching tone to tragedy when required.

Of course, it helps that throughout most of their run Giffen and DeMatteis are blessed with gifted art teams. Pencillers Kevin Maguire (1-12*, 16-19, 22-24, 60), Ty Templeton (20, 21, 24-29), Mike McKone (28, Annual 3, 4, 41, 42), and Adam Hughes (30-40, 43, 44, 51), and inkers Al Gordon, Joe Rubinstein and Art Nichols produce slick and dynamic superhero art that flows from page to page. It's likely that if you enjoy one of the Giffen and DeMatteis issues you'll enjoy most of them. Good samples are the Justice League moving into their new global embassies (8), the ludicrous Injustice League (23), or 43-44, in which a novice wins the accoutrements of some of DC's daftest villains in a poker game and proceeds to cause havoc.

From 7 to 25 the title is called *Justice League International* (not to be confused with the later *Justice League International*), and the final Giffen and DeMatteis story arc, 'Breakdowns' (53-60), switches back and forth between this title and *Justice League Europe* 29-37. By then the formula is sagging a little at the seams, not least because Adam Hughes was never adequately replaced as pencil artist. The appointment of Dan Jurgens solves the art problem, but his writing is largely unspectacular with the exception of one excellent story. The first part of 'Destiny's Hand' (72-75) features the shocking return of the old Justice League of America.

After Jurgens it's downhill. Dan Vado (78-91), a good writer on idiosyncratic projects, seems decidedly uncomfortable here, and Gerard Jones (92 on) is on comics-by-numbers mode throughout. Their accompanying art teams, Kevin West inked by Rick Burchett, and Chuck Wojtkiewicz and Bob Dvorak, hold their ends up, but Jones' policy of constant guest stars and temporary members initially leaves little time for any individual focus. The title never reaches the depths plumbed by its predecessor, but the end was just as merciful.~FP

Recommended: 1-12, 16-28, 31-47, 51-54, 58, 72, Annuals 2-5

JUSTICE LEAGUE EUROPE

DC: *50 issues, 3 Annuals 1989-1993*

Following the success of 1987's *Justice League America* revival, a spin-off was quickly devised, written by the Keith Giffen J.M. DeMatteis aegis that established the League as an international peace-keeping force, with embassies all over the world. Set initially in the League's Paris embassy, 'Ugly American' jokes abounded, as the team attempted to come to terms with culture shock under the guidance of their formidable Paris liaison. Marred only by the oily, soaplike art of the inexplicably popular Bart Sears, these were cheerful character-based stories with a high comedic element, frequently involving conflicts with the curvaceous and nefarious Queen Bee and her thralls, the Global Guardians, rival international heroes. 6 introduced the Crimson Fox, a French heroine who became an integral and popular team member, and with 15, the Silver Sorceress (who, given her costume, should correctly have been called the Beige Bunnyrabbit) and Blue Jay, displaced heroes from a parallel world, joined the series, as did their sadistic enemies the Extremists. Gerard Jones became co-plotter with Giffen from 17, replacing DeMatteis, but the standard of comedy remained unimpaired, apart from 20, in which lame Basil Fawlty parody, the Beefeater, masquerading as a British hero, appears. This precipitates the team's relocation to London, as an unfortunate accident befalls the Paris embassy. The 'Breakdowns' storyline, alternating with issues of *Justice League America* between 29 and 36, effectively deconstructed both series, preparing them for a more serious relaunch in 1992's *Justice League Spectacular* one-shot. From 37, Gerard Jones was sole writer, with Ron Randall as primary artist, producing an era of blandness. The previous comedy schtick may have become tired, but replacing it with generic superheroics wasn't the answer. Introducing Green lantern (Hal Jordan) and Aquaman as series regulars, and prominent guest-appearances by Batman and Wonder Woman, didn't help sufficiently. The best of these issues is the six-part Red Winter storyline in 45-50, which refines the team to a global line-up. New regulars included the Japanese Dr. Light, Tasmanian Devil from Australia, France's Crimson Fox and the UK's Chandi Gupta, avatar of a Hindu goddess Maya, setting the scene for the series' transition to Justice league international with 51.~HS

JUSTICE LEAGUE INTERNATIONAL

DC: *18 issues (51-68), 2 Annuals 1993-1994*

Not to be confused with the former run of Justice League International, which was actually Justice League America 7-25. This continued from Justice League Europe, and is little more than a succession of pedestrian superhero adventures, the invention and vitality of the series long having fled under writer Gerard Jones (and Will Jacobs to 63). Despite the presence of several likeable characters in the roster, it never gels. The final issue is written by Christopher Priest and introduces Triumph, an all-new founder member of the Justice League. However intriguing this sounds, it's wretchedly executed and cancellation comes as a blessed relief.~HS

JUSTICE LEAGUE OF AMERICA

DC: *261 issues, 3 Annuals, 1 Spectacular 1960-1987*

Astounding as it seems today, there was an era when the uniting of a company's top-of-the-line superheroes was distinctly novel, with the long gone Justice Society of America in *All-Star Comics* still fondly recalled. This despite the characters rarely teaming in more than pairs or trios. Having successfully refurbished DC's more popular 1940s superheroes for the 1960s, editor Julie Schwartz took the next logical step in teaming them in *Justice League of America*. Even then it was a tentative introduction, with the idea having to prove itself commercial through tryouts in *The Brave and the Bold* 28-30.

The early *Justice League* issues have aged badly. Schwartz co-plotted with writer Gardner Fox (author of many of the 1940s Justice Society tales) and with pencil artist Mike Sekowsky and they adhere rigidly to a four or five chapter formula. The unsophisticated, cleancut, radiantly cheerful heroes team in pairs and trios to combat aspects of that issue's menace before uniting for the final chapter. While the plots and means used to deal with villains are imaginative, and Sekowsky's quirky art is oddly appealing, modern-day readers will find 1-20 formularised and naïve. Characterisation was never a priority, and their respective limitations apart, Green Lantern, for instance, could have substituted for Martian Manhunter to little obvious difference. The origin of the League wasn't presented until 9. It's a decently plotted tale that serves as the best sample of the first three years.

With the new versions of their characters instituted, it was inevitable that the Justice League would meet their predecessors. The teaming with the Justice Society in 21 and 22 remains a landmark and set a precedent. Until almost the end of the run the Justice League and Justice Society would team annually. These stories are highlights of the Fox and Sekowsky run, with 29 and 30 introducing Earth 3, where the JLA counterparts are criminals; Earth A in 37-38 introduced an evil version of the JSA's Johnny Thunder.

By 23 Fox has begun integrating his heroes a little, making for a more satisfying read, and by 40 the stories are no longer as formularised. By this time the *Batman* TV show was at the height of its popularity, and Batman dominated the covers of issues in the 40s and early 50s. Inside as well there are reflections of the TV show, with wackier dialogue and more gimmicks, but Fox had the common sense not to let the issues become too entrenched in the times. 46 and 47's teaming with the Justice Society reflect this era, with an inventive menace, several jokes (both visual and verbal) and a decent plot, combined with some ludicrous dialogue. The ongoing hardbound *Justice League Archives* has now reprinted issues to 52.

65 was Fox's last issue, and he upgraded another 1940s superhero in Red Tornado, now a thinking robot with tornado-generating abilities. A good selection of Fox and Sekowsky reprints can be found in 39, 48, 58, 67, 76, 85, 93, the hundred-page *JLA* special, and the hundred-page issues 110-116, but it was time for a change. Whereas Fox might have been a tad predictable, his well-plotted light superhero stories had characterised the JLA, and Denny O'Neil's heavy-handed moralising and frequent overwriting just didn't suit the title. His lasting effect was the well-considered application of a character to Green Arrow, who'd spent forty years without one. From then he was the title's conscience, and often disagreed with his team-mates. In 77 O'Neil also rid the JLA of their enthusiastic teenage mascot Snapper Carr, now well past his sell-by date, in a plot with later ramifications. The best of O'Neil's run was the teaming with the Justice Society in 73-74. Despite a preposterous villain, there's a genuinely touching ending that sees the JSA's Black Canary transfer to the JLA, largely to replace the Martian Manhunter, who'd departed with 71 and wouldn't be seen again for over a decade. Sekowsky was also gone, replaced by Dick Dillin in 64. Dillin, very much an artist of the old school, turned out unpretentious pages of consummate storytelling, finely inked by Joe Giella to 101, Dick Giordano to 116 and Frank McLaughlin thereafter. He drew every non-reprint issue until his death in 1980.

The idea of incorporating relevance into superhero stories was a largely ridiculous conceit that few pulled off successfully, and Mike Friedrich from 86 wasn't among them. Gardner Fox had introduced issue-based stories to *JLA* with 57's unsubtle but well-meant tract on brotherhood. Equally well-intentioned, Friedrich's florid proselytising is almost unreadable today, and his best issues lack a drum to beat. 87 introduces counterparts of Marvel's Avengers shortly after they'd encountered barely concealed JLA equivalents, and 98's desperate last battle against the invincible Starbreaker is okay. Ironically, the worst run of issues *JLA* was to have for many a year was largely graced by excellent Neal Adams covers, and Adams drew portions of 94.

Len Wein's writing from 100 blew away the cobwebs, restoring the superhero aspects with stunning success in a three-part teaming with not only the JSA, but another 1940s group, The Seven Soldiers of Victory. 107-108, introducing a group of heroes acquired from the defunct Quality line, in a world where the Nazis had won World War II, was another triumph, and from that point the annual team-up usually incorporated a third superteam. Wein's entire run to 114 was well conceived, and other highlights were a sentimental yet hard-edged Christmas story in 110, and a tragic story of the original Sandman in 113. On Wein's departure numerous writers took over, producing nothing above ordinary.

The arrival of Steve Englehart with 139 altered that. He defined the Justice League as no previous writer had done, establishing inter-dynamics for the team, noting which members were friends and which didn't get on. He additionally produced page-turning plots, including a now forgotten alternative origin of the Justice League in 144, and mixed in unlikely characters such as the Phantom Stranger and Red Tornado to great effect. That the new villains he created were largely poor was of no concern when his use of existing ones was so deft, particularly the

Key in 150. The new hero he introduced, The Privateer, formerly a Manhunter, and the plots stemming from his appearances, were excellent. Any of Englehart's issues are worth a look, but they're interrupted by an average JLA/JSA and Legion of Super-Heroes team-up in 147-148. Gerry Conway wouldn't have been many people's choice to replace Englehart from 151, and he took a considerable while to settle in, but the unlikely plot of concluding loose ends from his cancelled Secret Society of Super-Villains series in 166-169 sparked something. He seemed to have tapped into the same conduit that had fed Wein, and from that point his plots were more inventive, and usually enjoyable. As was often strangely the case, among his best were the annual team-ups with the JSA. 171-172 was a locked-room murder mystery, and 183-185 was Conway's best ever use of Jack Kirby's New Gods characters, a cast he'd ritually abused in their own title.

Sadly, 183 was to prove Dillin's final issue. Never flashy but always solid, reliable, and versatile enough to be convincing no matter where a story was set, Dillin's art is woefully underrated. His replacement was George Pérez, who had considerable experience with superteams and relished packing his panels with as many characters and as much detail as possible. Seemingly thrilled at drawing the title, his best sample is a strange tarot-related story in 194, but the art is stunning on every issue he illustrates (184-186, 192-197). Sadly, the same can't be said for Don Heck and Rich Buckler, and their regular contributions appear to dissipate Conway's inspiration. The Secret Society of Super-Villains have a sprightly return in 195-197, but Conway's final decent issue is the celebratory 200. Many different artists contribute, a nostalgic joy being a return of pencillers Gil Kane to Green Lantern and Atom, Joe Kubert to Hawkman and Jim Aparo to the Phantom Stranger. The highlight, though, is Brian Bolland, in some of his earliest American work, illustrating a chapter starring Green Arrow, Black Canary and Batman.

With Conway off the boil and sales slipping, radical surgery was required, and it came in the form of the major characters being displaced by third-string heroes and new creations. Only Aquaman, Elongated Man, Zatanna and the returned Martian Manhunter remained from 233. The issues were a disaster, creatively and financially. The audience hated the new characters, and uncharacteristically DC gave the remaining readers what they wanted, with the decimation of the pretenders in the final four issues. Those were written by J.M. DeMatteis, and, all things considered, were a shabby end to what should have been a top of the line title.~WJ

Recommended: 21, 22, 100-102, 107-108, 110, 113, 142-144, 146, 149-150, 166-168, 171-172, 183-185, 194-197, 200

JUSTICE LEAGUE QUARTERLY

DC: *17 issues 1990-1994*

At the height of their popularity the Giffen and DeMatteis version of the Justice League spawned this oversize publication featuring solo and group tales of the superteam, their associates and their enemies. There's a fair amount of decent material, starting with 1's eighty-pager, with Booster Gold forming a new team, the Conglomerate, who appear to be a model of efficiency when compared with the League. 3-12 usually have Mark Waid writing the lead, although his best is the costumeless back-up 'When Titans Date' in 10, a generally excellent issue. When JLQ is bad, though, it's appalling: witness Paul Kupperberg and Don Heck's reduction of parody patriot General Glory to the level of the stories he was conceived to lampoon in 15. Oddly enough, though, Kupperberg redeems himself in 16 with a touching story amid more half-assed homages. The Praxis series running in 11-15 chugs along nicely until a stupid concluding episode, 3's mini-Justice League has excellent art from Mike McKone (also artist on 5), most of the assorted Fire and Ice shorts are worth a look, and Phil Jimenez and John Stokes provide stunning artwork for a Maxima solo in 17.~WJ

Recommended: 1, 3, 10

JUSTICE LEAGUE TASK FORCE

DC: *37 issues 1993-1996*

After the *Zero Hour* series, the Justice League was split into three titles, supposedly to represent different aspects of the 'Justice' in the title. *Justice League Task Force* began life as a UN police force, sent into trouble spots or assigned to investigate potentially dangerous organisations. J'onn J'onzz, the Martian Manhunter, provides the backbone. Little's been done with him for years and he links the team to the past. He's shown as a clever if manipulative leader, ideally suited to managing young heroes. The original premise creates a new group for each mission and the first story-line featured Nightwing, Flash and Aquaman. 5 and 6 tie into the Batman series 'KnightQuest: The Search', with Gypsy, Green Arrow and Bronze Tiger helping Bruce Wayne find a kidnapped doctor. 7 and 8, written by Peter David, have an all-female team investigating a race of lost women. Bizarrely, J'onn J'onzz, as leader, feels compelled to become a woman for the duration of the mission! Around 16 the permanent team of Gypsy, The Ray and L-Ron/Despero start to coalesce. This issue ties into the other *Justice League* titles and introduces Triumph, an original League member who's been missing (and apparently forgotten) since the League's first adventure. The next issue provides a recurring villain in Vandal Savage, and by 21, with Christopher Priest writing, they're all in matching costumes doing traditional superhero team stuff. Up to this point Sal Velluto had provided a real sense of continuity through his artwork. Though the overall quality is dependent on the skill of his inkers, Velluto's style (somewhere between Gene Colan and George Pérez) gives the series a distinctive look. However, from issue 25 Ramon Bernado takes over the art chores, with a style far too close to Sal Buscema's to have much merit of its own (even if you like Buscema). Later issues rely on traditional DC team plots: fights for leadership, members being tried for criminal activity. They even end up crossing over with Travis Morgan, The Warlord and having a 'land that time forgot' adventure in 34-36, at which point another revamp of the Justice League titles was announced, resulting in the title's cancellation.~NF

Recommended: 7, 8

JUSTICE MACHINE

Noble: *5 issues 1981-1983*
Texas: *1 Annual 1984*
Comico: *29 issues, 1 Annual, 1 Summer Spectacular 1987-1989*
Innovation: *3 issue miniseries 1990, 7 issues 1990-1991*
Millennium: *3 issue miniseries ('The Chimera Conspiracy') 1993*

The Justice Machine was and is artist Mike Gustovich's baby. The original series in magazine size proved popular enough to spawn a role-playing game and accompanying sourcebook, but issues are so difficult to find that when the series was picked up by Comico in 1987 Gustovich decided to ignore past continuity and start again from scratch, with Tony Isabella handling the script.

The Justice Machine are the government enforcers of the unsubtly named planet Georwell. After meeting up with Earth's Elementals (who débuted in the Texas annual) in issue 4, *Justice Machine vs The Elementals* (1986), they begin to question their orders and when they push too far find themselves framed for treason. After that, it's time to team up with their former enemy, Maxinor, for Justice Machine vs the evil regime, via Earth, where the rebels have allies. The basic idea might not be the most original, but along the way the comic addresses issues of where you draw the line between heroic freedom fighters and evil terrorists. It also tackles drug addiction (Justice Machiner Demon's powers are derived from drugs to which he is addicted), albeit in a way which makes you feel you're being preached at rather than offering much advancement to the plot. Mostly, though, the Comico issues are a competent superhero romp, nothing special but a satisfying, easy read. The Innovation miniseries and subsequent seven issues, and Millennium's miniseries, are poorer quality and best avoided.~JC.

JUSTICE SOCIETY OF AMERICA

DC: *One-shot ('The Last Days of...') 1986, 8 issue limited series 1991, 10 issues 1992-1993*

Allegedly under instructions to eliminate the venerable Justice Society of America from continuity, writer Roy Thomas, rather than killing them, created the contrived one-shot. In order to stop a rip in time eliminating All There Is (what, again?), the JSA'ers sacrifice themselves to an eternal limbo of fighting the battle of Ragnarok over and over again, forever (or at least until DC relented and wanted them back). Lame, but at least his heart was in the right place.

The 1991 series is set in 1950, towards the end of the JSA's original run in *All-Star Comics*, and is a real treat for ageing nostalgists everywhere. The team's immortal enemy Vandal Savage sets out to forcibly regress the world to the Bronze Age, eliminating the 'blights of modern life', which include electricity, atomic power and – gasp! – television. The artistic tag team of Mike Parobeck, Rick Burchett, Tom Artis and Grant Miehm evokes the style of the 1940s stories with a modern vitality, and Len Strazewski reveals a previously unsuspected skill and finesse in plotting and characterisation. Critical and commercial support was such that an ongoing contemporary JSA series was launched. Strazewski returned as a writer and Parobeck became sole artist. The series intelligently and unflinchingly addressed issues many readers had raised, such as whether the heroic ethos of the JSA was outdated or if a group of (on average) septuagenarian superheroes could be effective. It was also a big, splashy, witty adventure deftly put together, and the finest hour for both Strazewski and Parobeck. Although selling adequately, the title was cancelled when the powers that be decided that kids didn't want to read stories about old guys, and the JSA were more or less irrevocably destroyed in *Zero Hour* – a decision that revealed a contemptible attitude towards characters, and readers, over the age of 30.~HS

JUSTICE TRAPS THE GUILTY

Prize Comics/Headline Publications: *92 issues 1947-1958*

One of the few crime comics to survive the introduction of the Comics Code in April 1955, *Justice Traps The Guilty* was another Joe Simon and Jack Kirby foray into the lucrative and popular field of crime fiction. Supplementing their flagship title, *Headline Comics*, which had converted from a superhero/action title to a "True Crime" format in the same year, it began well enough, with Joe and Jack producing well-crafted and thoughtful anthology shorts, aided by their regular team of co-workers, which included Will Elder, Mort Meskin, Jerry Robinson and John Severin, and the likes of Al Feldstein and Bernie Krigstein popping in for the occasional guest shot. The greatest difference between the two titles is a concentration on fictional crime that, as the issues progressed, became somehow less realistic as plots moved in to areas owing more and more to the action/adventure costume dramas they had supplanted. Although they started off well enough, by the twentieth issue, Simon and Kirby were producing less and less material themselves, and the stories lost the feel of being there that was probably due to Kirby's childhood in the slums of New York. Also, a number of lesser artists began to illustrate a greater proportion of the short stories that made up each issue as the big guns were moved around to Prize's other titles. The comic ran until the dissolution of Prize Comics in 1957 and Kirby's return to Atlas/Marvel, although for the last twenty issues, his presence is undetectable.

The numbering is incredibly confusing. The first issue is Volume 2 Number 1 and each volume comprises six issues until the final issue, Volume 11 Number 2, at which point the title limps on as nondescript western *The Fargo Kid* for three further issues.~WW

Recommended: vol 2 No 1-6, vol 3 No 1-3

JUSTY

Viz: *9 issues 1988-1989*

Tsuguo Okazaki's sparse artwork, with its emphasis on facial expression and character, is what defines the quality of this manga. Justy is an agent of the Galactic Patrol with super-psi powers. With his sister Jerna and companion Lieutenant Trever, Justy must fight pirates and renegade espers. Not first-class but well worth reading.~NF

K

The K CHRONICLES

Manic D Press: *1 volume (Dances With Sheep) 1997, 1 volume (Fear of a Black Marker) 1999*
Top Shelf: *1 volume (What A Long Strange Strip It's Been) 2002*

Single page takes on subculture and city-dwelling in 1990s San Francisco. *The K Chronicles* is a syndicated strip first run in *The San Francisco Weekly* by cartoonist Keith Knight. Much of the reference may be outside all but a local reader's scope but Knight is very good at slapstick and comic timing too. Its value as a social document can't be ignored as easily as Harvey Pekar's introduction to the first collection.~SW

KABOOM

Awesome: *3 issue miniseries 1997-1998, 3 issue miniseries 1999*

Awesome's version of Impulse. Geof Sunrise turns 16 and is given these enormous gloves that draw on the energy of the 'Kaboom Cycle'. That's all you need to know, except that Jeph Loeb and Jeff Matsuda handle it with a light touch, and it's all good, clean fun. Each issue comes in a bewildering variety of covers, so don't be fooled.~FC

KABUKI

Caliber: *One-shot ('Fear the Reaper') 1994*, 6 issue miniseries ('Circle of Blood') 1995*, one-shot ('Color Special') 1996*, one-shot ('Dreams of the Dead') 1996*, 4 issue miniseries ('Masks of the Noh') 1996-1997*, 3 issue miniseries ('Skin Deep') 1996-1997**
London Night Studios: *1 issue ('Dance of Death') 1995**
Image: *9 issue limited series 1997-2000*, one-shot ('Dreams') 1998, 2 issue microseries ('Images') 1998, 12 issue limited series ('Classics') 1999-2000, 8 issue limited series ('Agents: Scarab') 1999-2001, one-shot ('The Ghost Play') 2002*

A future Japan is bursting with criminal types following the Communist takeover of Hong Kong and invasion of the Triads. The Noh is a secret government organisation dealing with gangster excesses and government corruption by turn, to keep the country's delicate economy in balance. It's run by an aged general who's officially dead, and staffed with shapely female operators, chief among these his own granddaughter, Kabuki, who kills mercilessly with a pair of scythes (then gets cut up about it later).

After introducing the character in 'Fear the Reaper', writer/artist David Mack settles down to the extremely serious business of recording her origin and epic fight with her father, the old general's Yakuza son, in 'Circle of Blood'. The repetitious nature of the storytelling here is only a prequel for a series of miniseries, which will move the character on not one jot. Whole specials will be spent watching her wallow in guilt and anguish, albeit prettily. Mack has a lot of storytelling quirks that make the story's pacing jerky, and a number of drawing quirks, which also stand in the way of your enjoyment. And later on he manages to employ artists with similar ticks. His strangest habit is to put lingerie catalogue style shots of the various agents posing with their weapons where you'd expect to see them slicing and dicing, while they describe what they're done to various villains. Altogether there are far too many stiff splash pages and 'symbolic' full-page layouts with 1970s style floating heads and images melting into each other. It's like looking at Paul Gulacy circa Sabre being advised by Steranko on particularly 'trippy' pages.

At Image the art becomes even stranger. A series of artists contribute odd chapters, pin ups, or simply employ half a dozen styles in the same issue, including execrable pencil crayon stylings of the sort twelve year old girls consider artistic. And guess what, Kabuki's undergoing psychoanalysis, allowing us to relive her past all again in even more loving detail. Never has one creator made so much money out of having literally one story idea.

Caliber also produced a 'Gallery' with pin-ups by various artists. Image reprinted most of the Caliber and London Night material in 'Classics'. 'Dreams' reprints the 'Color Special' with 'Dreams of the Dead', and 'Images' reprints the first three Image issues. 'The Ghost Play' is produced in mixed media (including photographs of a timorously posed model) and is, frankly, atrocious. There are, finally, four issues of 'Reflections' (1998-2002), which contain pinups, sketches, work in progress and commentary.~FJ

KABUKI AGENTS

Image: *8 issue limited series ('Scarab') 1999-2001*

Kabuki agent Scarab relates her life story from sassy teen to deadly assassin. It works far better than regular issues of *Kabuki* because David Mack only writes, meaning his wretched storytelling isn't an issue for once, enabling what plot there is to shine through. The artist is Rick Mays, whose rapid blossoming after a shaky start is a joy to behold, although he slips near to Mack layouts for the final issues. Fans of *Kabuki* will be pleased that at least one mystery is cleared up here, but there's really no way in for the novice reader.~FP

KAFKA

Renegade: *6 issue miniseries 1987*

A modern thriller, *Kafka* is an ambitious work with experimental elements to both story and art. Steven T. Seagle's script is full of silences and gaps that need attention and Stefano Gaudiano's art-style owes much to Hugo Pratt, and though expressive is somewhat uncontrolled and inexperienced. The story concerns a criminal who undergoes experimental treatment at the hands of the CIA before being given a new identity after testifying against some terrorists. Overall, a well-written, thoughtful attempt to bring European sensibilities to American comics.~NF

KAKTUS VALLEY

Fantagraphics: *1 issue 1990*

Bizarre and quite frankly rather poor collection of material from people who could do much better. The intention appears to have been to produce a comic for children, but it's doubtful children came near this, and those who did surely wouldn't like the scratchy artwork from the two most notable contributors, Gary Panter and Mark Beyer.~WJ

KALGAN (the Golden)

Harrier: *1 issue 1988*

Veteran comic book artist Ron Tiner's art on this title looks as stiff and stilted as the story, adapted from an E.C. Tubb short, about a strange space pirate who has paid a terrible price for his immortality. And what might that price be, you ask? Well, what do immortal characters always whine on about? Not so much SF Classic as the cover proclaims, more SF also ran.~FJ

KAMANDI

DC: *59 issues 1972-1978, 6 issue miniseries 1993*

This was Jack Kirby's most successful series for DC. He'd moved there amid great fanfare in the early 1970s, having made the largest contribution to the foundations for Marvel's lasting success. He immediately set to work on a grand saga encompassing four titles. Within two years every portion was cancelled or neutered, yet this, the simplest of his titles, outlasted everything else he created for DC by some considerable distance.

An unspecified great disaster (known as The Great Disaster) had rendered Earth a barren wasteland. In introducing this concept Kirby went one better than

The Planet of the Apes and bestowed sentience on a selection of the animals still populating the world. Others were mutated into huge and frightening versions of their previous forms. Most humans have been reduced to the state of animals, with Kamandi apparently the sole human to retain his intellect. This is due to his avoiding all contamination through having being raised in a bunker, Command D, from which he also derived his name. He wanders the globe, usually with a trio of mutated humans led by Ben Boxer, and the intelligent dog, Dr Canus, encountering different mutated animals. There's the possibility of danger with every step, and Kirby's inventive mind creates an astounding array of life-threatening situations. While it goes without saying that Kirby supplies a fine portion of action (at an unusually frenetic pace) the old master is surprisingly adept at conveying the tender and wistful moments, making Kamandi more than just another fantasy comic. Kirby drags the reader along from adventure to adventure, with simple plots – like helping an intelligent dolphin across land to water (21) – taking an issue once Kirby has unleashed the assorted menaces. Mood is an important factor, as is mystery, with Kirby only dropping the first hints as to what The Great Disaster was in 16.

Kirby left with 40 and the tradition was adequately maintained by Gerry Conway and Chic Stone. Towards the end of his run Kirby seemed to be losing interest, providing skimpier and skimpier plots, and Conway beefed up the stories. Another of Kirby's creations, Omac, dropped by in 50, but Kamandi's unlikely saviour was writer Jack C. Harris. Harris took over the series with 52 and proceeded to raise it to its pinnacle. Many have tried, but few creators have managed to better a Kirby idea at DC, but Harris' plotting was excellent, and the art of Dick Ayers and Alfredo Alcala matched the plots. Harris even introduced a subtle humour to Kamandi in the form of dog versions of Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson. The title was cancelled during a period of major cutbacks during 1978, and was certainly one of the sadder losses.

Kamandi was revived in 1993, bearing, in the new continuity-conscious atmosphere, an 'Elseworlds' label, thus indicating it wasn't to be considered part of the now rigid DC company-wide continuity. Writer Tom Veitch takes Kirby's disaster concept one step further and elaborates on his plots, giving Kamandi a possible origin (remember the 'Elseworlds' label). He's raised by a cybernetic mother, then sent on a quest to find the person responsible for the devastated Earth: Superman. On his journey he engages some unlikely allies and is pursued by Ben Boxer, no longer a friend, and his bio-mechs. It's a decent stab at the post-holocaust Earth, nicely illustrated by Frank Gomez and Mike Barriero, and the saga is continued in the *Superman* 'At Earth's End 'one-shot.~HY

Recommended: 1-6, 12-16, 21-23, 26-29, 52-59

KAMIKAZE 1946

Antarctic: *6 issue miniseries 2000-2001*

Ted Nomura's Families of Altered Wars switches theatre of operations to focus on Japan, telling tales of the alternate reality wherein the appearance of a counter-earth orbiting opposite ours leads to an extra-dimensional invasion and the extension of World War II by a year. Nomura's weaving of varied strands into a grand epic has received much praise, and if you're an aficionado there's thrills a-plenty, but there's nothing new added to progress the greater story. Japanese war philosophies of glorious destruction and the belief that all warriors are born to die are interestingly presented. Competent, and engaging, but definitely not the place for new readers to begin.~WW

The Legend of KAMUI

Eclipse: *38 issues 1987-1990**

A translation of Sanpei Shirato's ninja epic. Avenging sons, copyright wrangles over sword-techniques, and constantly shifting alliances. Many solemn quotes along the "War is hell" line, yet it's a restful issue if the count of severed limbs and heads is below twenty. It obviously has its fans, mostly martial arts enthusiasts to judge by the letter column, but the general reader is likely to find it unrewarding.~FC

KANE

Dancing Elephant: *31 issues 1993-2001*

Paul Grist's self-published detective comic is a class act. The story opens with the eponymous detective Kane returning to duty after the investigation of his killing a corrupt partner. Amid a climate of ill feeling the abrupt, confrontational detective makes no attempt to regain the confidence of his disgruntled colleagues, instead plunging into his work with near-maniacal fervour. The comic ably combines ongoing plotlines with satisfying individual cases as it slowly builds up a picture of life in the imaginary city of New Eden. The atmosphere is reminiscent of *Hill Street Blues*, unsurprising since Grist is a big fan who puts in a lot of little references for aficionados of the *Hill* to enjoy. Brutal murders are mixed with absurd criminal activities, including the superb silent-chase sequence in 5 as Kane's young partner Page hunts a man in a pink bunny suit.

Grist develops character slowly within the main thrust of the storyline, rarely showing scenes outside the world of work. His 'hero', Kane, barely appears for the middle issues of the run as police and mayoral policy clash when politicians want to make a show of how they've cleaned up the inner city against police advice. This leads to sniper attacks and an armed siege where the tension is cut through with moments of comedy. The annoying mayor gets his comeuppance in 22 when he winds up tied to the back of a monomaniacal hitman. The hitman is too punch drunk and set on a quest to rescue his first love that when he escapes the baddies he thinks the Mayor's pleas for release are some inner voice talking to him, a moment that mixes pathos with hilarity and a few nods to Frank Miller. Grist's sharp, minimal black and white artwork echoes Kane's brutal world-view. Keep your wits about you when reading: Grist uses some clever tricks to indicate flashbacks, fantasies and different narrators, which have befuddled people trying to skim through. Issues to 16 are now available as books, with more collections planned, and although on temporary hiatus, Grist intends to publish further Kane stories as individual books.~FJ

Recommended: 5, 6, 22

KAOS MOON

Caliber: *4 issues 1996-1997**

David Boller's very appealing clean and detailed art is the highlight, but by no means the sole virtue of this story about psychic investigator Katja Zakov. She's inhabited by inner personalities who project an astral protector, Kaos Moon, and is investigating the disappearance of odd skulls. There's a wealth of background about the cast in text features, enabling plenty of interesting stories, but sales seemingly only warranted four issues. Nonetheless, *Kaos Moon* should appeal to the *X-Files* audience. Katja is next seen in *Burning Circle*.~FP

KAPTAIN KEEN and Kompany

Vortex: *6 issues 1986-1988*

Bill White's Kaptain Keen is an impossibly large-jawed, clean-cut, generic superhero accompanied by a silent moose sidekick in an alternate version of Bullwinkle and Dudley Doright. It's the 'and Kompany' bit of the title that's the better strip, though, with Gary Fields' cigar-smoking, heavy-drinking and copiously swearing porcine superhero Superswine raising more smiles. White and Fields are both talented cartoonists, but it's chuckles and grins to be found here rather than belly laughs. Superswine later had his own title.~FP

KARATE KID

DC: *15 issues 1976-1978*

Strange attempt to cash-in on the mid-1970s kung-fu craze. Legion of Super-Heroes martial arts master Karate Kid becomes insecure with his role as a 'normal' human among superhumans (some of whom were the likes of Bouncing Boy and Matter-Eater Lad!) and exiles himself to the primitive twentieth century to 'find' himself. Regular *LSH* scribe Paul Levitz set up the first issue, then fled, leaving the next nine to the presumably pseudonymous Barry Jameson, and Ric Estrada's scratchy artwork hindered the first eleven issues. With 12 a new team made a conscientious attempt at a new direction, but it was too late. Immediate plot threads were cleared up in *Kamandi* 58, and long-term storylines were tied up in *The Brave and the Bold* 199.~HS

KATO

Now: *4 issue miniseries 1991-1992, 2 issue microseries 1992*

Green Hornet's companion steps out alone. In the Now continuity, this is the 1960s Kato, who made a series of Hong Kong action movies (in a nod to Bruce Lee, who portrayed the character on TV) after his American escapades. It's now the 1990s, and Mike Baron writes both series. The first takes Kato back to China where the monastery at which he was taught is under fire from government troops, and the second has him playing bodyguard to an obnoxious rock star under threat of assassination. Both are standard action adventure, with the more compact Val Mayerik-drawn second series, titled Kato II, better than the first, drawn by Brent Anderson.~WJ

KATY KEENE

Archie: *62 issues, 6 Annuals 1949-1961*
Red Circle: *33 issues, 1 Special 1983-1990*

Subtitled "The pin-up Queen", brunette model and actress Katy was created by Bill Woggon as a back-up for the Archie title Wilbur in 1945. Identical to any number of other leggy-girl comedy strips, her gimmick of reader participation catapulted her to stardom and numerous spin-off titles. Readers submitted their suggestions for costumes in the hope of seeing their names in print, designs arrived by the sackful, and Katy Keene has been imitated by hundreds of girl-targeted strips since. Woggon's ornate and decorative art style apart, Katy's stories had little to offer, being very lightweight romantic comedies in which she was squired by a succession of doll-like boyfriends. The occasional twist was Katy's chubby, bespectacled sister throwing a spanner in the works. Yup, *Katy* made *Millie the Model* read like Chekhov in comparison.

Unlike other girl strips, *Katy* never made even a token concession to the passing years. Her style remained resolutely 1946 right until the bitter end. Her fans knew what they liked, though, and they liked it a lot. Most of the time you could hardly follow the story for captions crediting 'contributing designers'. Under the Red Circle imprint Archie tried to update Katy for the 1980s, but despite some gorgeous artwork from Barb Rausch (a first-generation Katy fan) the series didn't gel. Reverting to reprints of the classic material with the occasional new strip, the title enjoyed a moderately successful run.~HS

KA-ZAR

Marvel: *Series one 3 issues 1970-1971, series two 20 issues 1974-1977, series three 34 issues ('The Savage') 1981-1984, Graphic Novel ('Guns of the Savage Land') 1990, one-shot ('Sibling Rivalry') 1997, one-shot ('Ka-Zar of the Savage Land') 1997, series four 20 issues 1997-1998*

Not only did Marvel have four goes at a title starring their blond, low-rent Tarzan and his pet sabre-tooth Zabu, he also starred in the first twenty issues of *Astonishing Tales*. First time around the series reprinted Ka-Zar stories (pronounced Kay-sar, true believers) from the original *X-Men* and early issues of *Daredevil*, including a run-in with Spider-Man. Yes, Ka-Zar was one of the many lame-brains J. Jonah Jameson persuaded to beat up the wall-crawler. There are also all new back-ups featuring Hercules (1) and the Angel (2-3). The second series, set in Ka-Zar's Antarctic jungle home The Savage Land, suffered from an ever-shifting creative roll call. After a less than distinguished start under Don Heck, John Buscema and a selection of inkers turned him into a peroxide Conan, and Russ Heath drew beautiful scenery but uninspired action in 8. At the end of the run writer Doug Moench made efforts to involve readers in a multi-issue plot more complex than the usual 'wizard sets monster on Ka-Zar, Ka-Zar kills monster' fare audiences had been suffering, aided by Val Mayerik's sensitive but warty artwork. Mayerik looked much more at home in the 'Tales of Zabu' backup in the third series, where he hardly drew any human beings. The title was cancelled mid-fight, the storyline being finished off as a footnote when the X-Men visit the Savage Land in issue 114 of their own title.

Chuck Dixon and Tim Truman's attempt to breath some life into the character is just mad, and drawn by Richard Villagran in an overwrought, over-coloured style. The 'Guns of the Savage Land' graphic novel has Ka-Zar banished and feral in his English castle, almost raping his wife Shanna when she comes to visit to report strange goings on in Africa, where some mercenaries, who want to exploit its resources, have discovered another entrance to the Savage Land.

When reviving *Kazar* yet again, third-series writer Bruce Jones swiftly introduced new characters and a new origin for the Savage Land, and lost the hyphen. Most significantly, however, he had Kazar act like a grown-up. You know something's good when 1 opens with the muscular Lord Plunder questioning the point of his existence. Jones develops the plot swiftly but the many fights and revelations are merely dressing for the stormy and very adult relationship that springs up between Kazar and his sometime companion Shanna the She Devil. With Brent Anderson handling the pencils and co-plotting 1-15, including an epic Dante's Inferno storyline, Kazar enjoyed a golden period. With 16 Ron Frenz took over and, while entertaining and often whimsical, the stories thereafter were never quite so involving, no matter how much Jones tried to wring the readers' hearts as Kazar and Shanna suffered trauma after trauma. For the fourth outing the theme was jungle tales of marital harmony as Kazar and Shanna married and produced a sprog – yet another heartstring for plotters to tug on. This series climaxed as an ancient race of warrior women, the Bhadwuans from Atlantis, turned up and claimed the Savage Land as part of their heritage. This predictably led to quite a lot of fighting drawn in a really ugly, angular fashion.~FJ

Recommended: Series three 2, 10-12

Mr. Monster's Gal Friday KELLY

Image: *3 issues 2000*

You don't want to bother yourself worrying about whether they have spilled Mr Monster's growth serum on his dried werewolves, or trodden on a gangster cockroach, or the silly Alan Moore script and beautiful Alex Toth pin-up in 3. The nub here is surely: Which do you like best? Kelly's classic movie star shape, the matronly breast of incompetent harridan temp Babs, or the chubby milkmaid charms of Kelly's hapless niece Mary Monster?~GK

KELVIN MACE

Vortex: *2 issues 1985-1986*

Irresponsible and violent P.I. played deadpan by Ty Templeton and Klaus Schoenefeld, but loaded with gags. Schoenefeld was an excellent artist, but died before a third issue.~FP

THE KENTS

DC: *12 issue limited series 1997-1998**

Presumably in order to commercialise his history-heavy Western John Ostrander ties it around Clark Kent's 19th century ancestors, with the Superman logo very much to the fore on covers. The history unfolds through family letters uncovered by Pa Kent, who fills gaps with research. Brothers Nathanial and Jeb Kent move from Boston to Kansas in 1854, a period of frontier justice, civil war and bitter recriminations. Having researched extensively, boy, does Ostrander let the reader know it, with seemingly no detail omitted, and no character too recondite to mention. It all bogs down the essence of the story, which distils to the conflict between the brothers, 19th century Zeligs, encountering almost every Western legend of actual note or DC continuity. Artists Tim Truman and Michael Bair (1-8) and Tom Mandrake (9-12) hold their end up, and the merit far outweighs the meretricious, but *The Kents* is very hard going at times.~FP

KEYHOLE

Millennium: *4 issues 1996-1997*
Top Shelf: *2 issues (5-6) 1998*

Interesting mix of travelogue, autobiography, self-inspection, observation, a daft superhero, and, bizarrely, true tales of financiers from Dean Haspiel and Josh Neufeld. Both artists improve throughout the run and their combined broad tastes ensure this selection is worth a look. The shift to Top Shelf sees a reduction in format to slightly smaller than traditional comic size, and 5 is the best issue, as Haspiel details the origin of his scars and Neufeld relates an edifying trip to Thailand. The financial tales are available collected as *Titans of Finance*, while the brutal Billy Dogma also has a collection.~WJ

Recommended: 5

KICKERS, INC.

Marvel: *12 issues 1986-1987*

An intensifier process gives four members of a football team (plus one spouse) increased strength. They decide to use their powers for good by setting up a foundation (with tax-exempt status, natch) and thus *Kickers, Inc.* is born. Various assignments come through the foundation, mixed in with football games and politics, and it's all thoroughly boring and pointless. The creative team kept changing from issue to issue, but none of them managed to breathe life into the idea.~FC

KID BLASTOFF

Slave Labor: *One-shot 1996*

Very basic adventure about a dumb jock chosen to be a superhero and the smart girl who keeps getting him out of trouble when he realises there's more to it than looking good in tights. By Evan Dorkin and Sarah Dyer, this untaxing stuff originally appeared in *Disney Adventures* the year before.~FJ

KID CANNIBAL

Eternity: *4 issue miniseries 1991-1992*

Sadly the wit of the cover tagline "He came. He Saw. He Ate... Everything" is largely internally absent as *Kid Cannibal* adheres strictly to the teenage horror movie template in which the beautiful and sassy heroine survives as all around her are consumed. If you're a straight to video horror movie fan you might want to investigate, otherwise don't bother.~FP

Western Action Starring KID CODY and The COMANCHE KID

Atlas: *1 issue 1975*

A cliché-ridden story starring Kid Cody, Gunfighter, was backed up by an equally fatuous tale of the Comanche Kid, a white boy brought up by Comanches. Both featured prominently on Atlas' house ads, but such was their lack of appeal they only ever appeared the once. "Comics Are Entertainment", proclaimed those ads. This wasn't, despite Doug Wildey art on the lead.~APS

KID COLT, Outlaw

Marvel: *229 issues, 3 Giant-Size 1948-1968 (1-139), 1969-1979 (140-229)*

As the legend above many stories had it "... years ago Kid Colt killed an outlaw in self-defence! But being young and foolish, he fled, instead of staying to stand trial! Since then he has spent his life trying to atone for his mistake!"Through the decades the comic never strayed far from this premise. Early issues were drawn by the likes of Syd Shores before Jack Keller became regular penciller in 25, a position he held for the next two decades. While Marvel almost threw in the towel, then revolutionised the medium, Keller's solid, but unremittingly pedestrian style remained the same. By contrast the various one-off back-up strips produced most of the interest with artists like Al Williamson (57-60, 66, 88, 89), Reed Crandall (64, 65) and Gene Colan (110, 114) acquitting themselves well. For much of the time Keller was paired with writer Stan Lee, and he made the occasional attempt to introduce a bit of the Marvel style in the 1960s. 110, for instance, introduced Iron Mask, an armour wearing bandit who went on to become something of a nemesis to the Kid, despite being as menacing as a dustbin. 116 featured Dr Danger and the Invincible Gunman, but since the former's terrifying power was being able to throw his voice it's no wonder the fans didn't clamour to see him again. Before cancellation with 139 Keller was replaced with Dick Ayers and Vince Colletta, and Lee with Gary Freidrich, but to little effect. While the cancellation was unsurprising, the revival 18 months later was astounding. Particularly as it lasted another decade reprinting stories that were anachronistic even when originally drawn. That, though, is the enigma of *Kid Colt*. It was the only Marvel comic to be published from the 1940s almost to the dawn of the 1980s, in Keller it boasted their longest serving artist on a single title, and the Kid himself was their most successful Western character. He would also star in *Gunsmoke Western*, *Two-Gun Western*, *All Western Winners*, and augment Two-Gun Kid and even the Avengers, and was always dull.~DAR

KID DEATH & FLUFFY

Event: *One-shot ('Spring Break Special') 1996, one-shot ('Legends of...') 1997*

Unfunny gross-out-fest featuring small psychotic boy with guns and his cyborg killer dog. A comic with little to recommend it.~DB

KID ETERNITY

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1991*
DC/Vertigo: *16 issues 1993-1994*

The original Kid Eternity was an adolescent boy who could conjure up historic figures by shouting the word "Eternity"and was accompanied by a benign old spirit called Mr Keeper. His adventures were whimsical fun, light and innocent, making him, therefore, prime material for the late 1980s trend at DC to recreate any character they could as a grimmer, grittier, more horrible version of the old. Kid Eternity fared better than some. The miniseries, written by Grant Morrison and drawn by Duncan Fegredo, keeps the character's origin – taken to heaven by mistake, sent back to Earth with fantastic powers to compensate – more or less intact. Except that it wasn't heaven he was taken to but hell, and the historical figures he summoned were actually demons (as was Mr Keeper) who just thought they were olden-days heroes. At the start of the miniseries, he's been trapped in hell for the last thirty years, as a result of which he's grown his hair, started wearing dark glasses and swears a lot. He enlists the help of a drunken and dying stand-up comedian to accompany him to hell, free Mr Keeper and set the world to Karmic rights by breeding the next generation of "ascended children". In other words, it's pretentious twaddle. It's better, though, than the continuing series by Ann Nocenti, largely drawn by Sean Phillips, which just tries to be pretentious, falls far short of the mark and doesn't even have the advantage of being nicely drawn. Do yourself a favour and stay well away.~JC

KID'N'PLAY

Marvel: *9 issues 1992*

Rappers Kid'n'Play star in a retelling of their rise to stardom written as if a TV sit-com. Sharply observed by Dwight Coye, with pleasing art from Chuck Frazier and Ron Boyd, it's very much a timepiece, though. Look back and laugh at the hilariously outmoded street talk, styles and behaviour. 2's morality play rather disturbingly equates dope and alcohol with the road to perdition.~FP

KID SUPREME

Image: *3 issues 1996*

Based on Superboy, this is a sometimes amusing series by Dan Fraga. Poor Kid Supreme just wants to lead a normal life, but then one of his teachers turns into a lizard and Kid has to fight him, and after that more murdering super-baddies turn up. Fraga's cutesy art has all the hallmarks of an early era Image superhero title, i.e, small waists and enormous chests, and you should see the women! It works well as a masturbation aid for 13 year old boys and those who don't get out a lot. It's a shame about the lame plots, especially some of the unnecessary black humour in 3, which let down the whole fun aspect of the series. 4 was published as part of *Asylum* 9.~HY

KID TERRIFIC

Image: *1 issue 1999*

Cute black and white comic about a small boy with superpowers, who spends his nights protecting Earth, on this occasion, from a rogue moon whose planet has left him for Stella, a binary star. This comic has a lovely child-like quality, and it's a shame there was only one issue. Escapist fun.~DB

KIEF LLAMA

Fantagraphics: *6 issues ('Xeno-Tech') 1988-1989*
Oni Press: *One-shot ('Gas War') 1999*

Human woman Keif Llama is a low-level government operative at some unspecified time in the future when humanity has mingled with hundreds of alien races. That aspect accrues Matt Howarth some credit for imagination, as his species slime, ooze, float and stomp off the page. His plots are heavily science based, often requiring explanation clogging a story, and they're at the expense of developing Llama beyond a vehicle for the stories. Every issue can be read individually and at least one is worth sampling if you're at all interested in science-fiction.~FP

KILGORE

Renegade: *4 issues 1987*

The idea of taking Sgt Bilko, planting him in World War II, restoring his hair and adding a Ronald Colman-style moustache is a pointless one, and Kilgore never develops enough character to progress from it. The concept is so obviously appropriated, and it falls way short of the material that inspired it, although there's a commendable variety of stories within the setting. Kilgore as army wheeler-dealer works best in 2's Hollywood sequences, although the best issue is 4, heavily Bogart-influenced and less dependent on Kilgore's character.~WJ

KILLER

Eclipse: *One-shot 1985*

Collecting some of Tim Truman's pre-*Grimjack* work, *Killer* contains two stories produced for gaming magazines and one collaboration with the legendary Gardner Fox. The latter is a red-blooded sword-and-sorcery adventure with monsters and beautiful women in distress. For Truman completists only.~NF

KILLER FLY

Slave Labor: *3 issue miniseries 1995*

A dwarf clown in an unknown and, one suspects, unknowable circus falls in love with the violent knife-thrower's wife and tries to save her from her husband by spiriting her away, with the help of a mild-seeming boy who, when angered, turns into a giant fly. However, this unlikely trio soon discover that the freedom offered by escaping from a world in which they're reduced to ciphers is transient. It sounds preposterous, but this story has more in common with David Lynch at his strangest (and indeed Moebius' partner in crime Jodorowsky) than many comics one could name. Chris Butler writes with a fierce intensity and rare understanding of human nature. Artist Chris Hogg matches him frame for frame with bold, twisted graphics. An excellent combination: Angela Carter meets José Muñoz.~FJ
Recommended: 1-3

KILLER PRINCESSES

Oni Press: *2 issues + 2001 to date*

Faith, Hope and Charity live in a sorority on campus, whilst also being lethal assassins. They're tricked into a trap whilst a mysterious opponent invades their house looking for the location of the Sorority's island headquarters. This is an odd mix of spies and comedy from writer Gail Simone, as our dumb, pampered heroines actually appear to be too stupid to live. Lea Hernandez' sketchy artwork is occasionally ill defined, but otherwise meets the pace and tone of the script. Billed as a three issue miniseries, the final issue has yet to be published.~NF

KILLING STROKE

Eternity: *4 issue miniseries 1991*

Mediocre collection of short horror tales from British creators, although the surreal and inspired 'Floppity Bunny's Hellish Nightmare Visions' by Molly Eyre and D'Israeli (3) is worth seeking out.~WW

KILLPOWER, The Early Years

Marvel UK: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

The none-too-smart musclebound hitman and Genetix rumble back and forth through past and future, encountering Pharaoh Rama Tut, the Punisher and a mutant-populated wasteland. Pointless stuff.~WJ

KILLRAVEN

Marvel: *One-shot 2001, 6 issue miniseries 2002-2003*

In the one-shot Joseph Michael Linsner delivers a homage, turning in one of those quiet solo interlude stories that occasionally ran in Killraven's *Amazing Adventures* series, with Killraven awakening a girl from suspended animation. It's drawn in Linsner's usual stilted, but lush style, lacking much other than close-ups and figures. The miniseries is that strangest of beasts, a re-telling. Writer/artist Alan Davis has taken the original characters and some of the original story and re-modelled them into a new take on the tale of futuristic gladiator Killraven, his band of freemen and their battle against invading Martians. Davis and inker Mark Farmer have fashioned an accomplished and fearsomely polished superhero strip, but in the process some of the original's subtlety and intensity has been lost. Original writer Don McGregor may have been somewhat verbose, but his *Killraven* had an inventiveness and humanity that Davis' less sophisticated superheroics simply cannot match. So ultimately this must rank as a disappointment.~DAR

KILLRAZOR

Image: *1 issue 1995*

Martial art expert, Razor leaves his mystical sect of assassins. Well, the others can't have that, can they? Certainly not, so off they go to kill him. Unfortunately for them they don't count on protruding and expandable blades emerging from Razor's arms. Naturally he sees off all his ex-buddies, aided and abetted by his new anvil-shaped chum and beautiful girlfriend with large tits. What more could you possibly ask for from an all-action Image title? Well a decent plot and good storytelling would be a start.~HY

KILROY IS HERE

Caliber: *One-shot (0) 1994, one-shot ('Revelations') 1995, one-shot ('The Short Stories') 1995, series one 10 issues 1995-1996, one-shot ('Daemonstorm') 1997, series two 1 issue 1998*

Kilroy appeared in assorted Caliber anthologies (collected in 'Short Stories') as an enigmatic protector of the oppressed throughout the 20th century. The first series fleshes him out as a gloomy immortal hunted by heaven and hell, and it all devolves into something rather silly by 5 (mistakenly numbered 4 on the cover). Having dealt with that, though, writer Joe Pruett turns his attention to the then recent events in Yugoslavia and produces the best Kilroy story in 6-8. Using one of humanity's more shameful moments of recent years as a backdrop could be construed as offensive, but Pruett weaves Kilroy into them in passionate fashion, never

trivialising and never insensitive. Main artists Ken Meyer Jr and Mike Perkins are also commendably restrained. Sadly, the trick isn't repeated with Phil Hester drawing Kilroy in Somalia for 10. 'Daemonstorm' ties into the series of the same name, which runs through other Caliber titles. Perkins is on form, but the comic is tosh. Pruett starts the second series intriguingly with Kilroy experiencing a breakdown, but it was never concluded.~WJ
Recommended: 6-8

KIMBER Prince of the Feylons

Antarctic: *2 issues 1992*

So taken was Gregory Lane with the lead character of a strip shown by Japanese artist Mitsuda Hirishito during a school visit, that years later he asked to produce American stories starring Kimber. He's an elf-cat hybrid with a destiny earning him powerful enemies from the future. Lane's art is very promising without being quite the finished article, and his story blends elements of *Star Wars* with elf fantasy for an okay read if you like that sort of thing. Planned as eight issues, only two appeared.~FP

KIN

Image: *6 issue miniseries 2000**

A wounded Neanderthal, Bob, is found by Alaskan park ranger, Elsbeth Leaky, ensnaring her in the intrigues of a secret government agency hunting for the advanced technology that Bob's people have developed through the ages. Bob and Elsbeth are aided by a rogue agent, Trey, whilst her father sets off on his own mission to locate his now officially missing daughter. Creator, Gary Frank, throws lots of familiar elements into this James Bond-like action adventure, but it's tautly scripted and drawn and won't disappoint fans of the genre.~NF

THE KINDRED

Image/WildStorm: *4 issue miniseries 1994*

Back in the days when Team 7 was a story still waiting to be told, this miniseries reunited three of the surviving members (Lynch, Grifter and Backlash) and was produced by Jim Lee, Brandon Choi, Brett Booth and Sean Ruffner – a WildStorm hall of fame roll-call. Jack Lynch and Alicia Turner are kidnapped by a mysterious group calling themselves The Kindred and Backlash is recruited to rescue them, with Grifter tagging along for the ride. The trail leads to Caballito, an island populated by evolved sentient animals, The Kindred, who were created as a result of test trials for the Gen-factor, the source of Team 7's powers. The creatures want revenge for the way they have been treated, and the team are left to fight their way free. Not as good as the real *Team 7* stories that followed, but it was, at the time, a welcome taster and a competent action tale.~JC

KING LEONARDO and His Short Subjects

Dell: *3 One-shots 1961-1962*
Gold Key: *4 issues 1962-1963*

Based on a TV cartoon that ran between 1960 and 1962, invented by Mandrake artist Fred Fredericks, the Dell one-shots have no number and are issues of their ongoing *Four Color* series. Leonardo is a lion who is also the amiable monarch of the cartoon kingdom of Bongo Congo. He and his aide, a skunk named Odie Cologne, have their hands full with Biggie Rat's constant plots to dethrone Leo and replace him with his rather dim brother Itchy. Charming and witty, it's truly a cartoon strip among cartoon strips.~SW

THE KING OF PERSIA

Accordian Press: *One-shot 1996*

Bizarre fairy tale book by Walt Holcombe. The King of Persia (the most un-regal being imaginable) falls in love, but his true love falls ill. To cure her he must obtain an emerald from a secret land and so on. Holcombe's cartooning is delightful and expressive and there's a joy in the incongruous whimsical elements he includes in his panels. Overall, though, the seemingly stream-of-consciousness nature of the story renders it too quirky.~WJ

KING ZOMBIE

Caliber: *2 issues 1998*

A continuation of the *Deadworld* stories, wherein a mysterious calamity kills most of the world's population only to resurrect them as mindless flesh-eating zombies. King Zombie is a rarity in that he has retained his intellect and is well on the way to becoming the master of the world, if he can only stamp out all the magicians and living human resistance units. Tom Sniegoski and Jacen Burrows flounder in an uncomfortable and unwieldy meshing of science fiction and supernatural thriller, which substitutes gore for plot and action for character.~WW

THE KINGDOM

DC: *2 issue miniseries 1999*

Mark Waid's sequel to the dark future universe introduced in *Kingdom Come* is most notable for the introduction of 'Hypertime' – DC's latest excuse to explain away the lingering continuity screw-ups left over from *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. Simply put, time works in such a way that any number of alternative timelines can exist simultaneously, enabling anything to happen anywhere, whether a logical sequence of events preceded it or not. In other words, it's a hack's dream excuse. Pre-Crisis, nothing ever needed to be this complicated. Never mind though because *The Kingdom* is entertaining enough, with competent pencils from Mike Zeck. The two issues do stand alone, although they bookend a series of one-shot spin-offs focussing on individual characters affected by the events: Kid Flash, Nightstar, Offspring, Planet Krypton and Son of the Bat. All are worth a look; *Offspring*, with art by Frank Quitely, is the best of the bunch.~JC

KINGDOM COME

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1996**

Approximately twenty years into the future of the DC Universe, the world is a much bleaker place. Superman has turned his back on the human race to live in seclusion, and most of his generation of heroes followed his example and retired. But the new generation of 'heroes' is an ever-increasing threat to the survival of the world. Largely deprived of opposition, the surviving villains having retired or fled, they spend their days in violent conflict with each other, heedless of the harm done to civilians. When one such incident causes a nuclear accident that wipes out the state of Kansas, Wonder Woman forces Superman to emerge from retirement and lead the older heroes against their own rebellious offspring. This is not a simple battle of the generations, though; Wonder Woman has her own agenda, of which Superman is unaware, and Batman may get caught in the crossfire between them. Astonishingly, this fully painted series lived up to much of the hype. Alex Ross and Mark Waid's story is complex and intriguing, although sharing many sparking points with the Squadron Supreme limited series. The reader is left guessing about characters' motives just long enough, the characterisation of the lead triumvirate is strong, and there are endless fascinating bits of side business and subplots – often expressed wordlessly in the background of panels – achieving a satisfyingly multi-layered feeling. More importantly, one feels genuine shock at some of the final conflict, and the ending doesn't seem anticlimactic, which is the major flaw of so many intended 'blockbusters'. The lavish and detailed artwork by Ross withstands the inevitable comparisons to *Marvels* with credit. *Kingdom Come* knows its limitations: it doesn't aspire to be *Watchmen* or *The Dark Knight Returns*. It's mainstream superheroics, and proud of it, but it's probably one of the finest examples of mainstream superheroics ever.~HS
Recommended: 1-4

KINGDOM OF THE WICKED

Caliber: *4 issue miniseries 1996-1997**

Quality spin on the old theme of writers becoming trapped in their own creations. Chris Grahame is a successful children's book writer who suffers from persistent headaches and eventually blackouts. He is increasingly

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* Available in a collected edition

drawn, in his dreams, back to the fairytale city of Castrovalva, a fancy he'd created as a lonely child, but grim, bloody reality has tainted his city. He must uncover the secret of and defeat the Great Dictator to save his own life in the city and the real world. An excellent exploration of the mechanics of myth and the responsibility of creation by Ian Edginton and the always excellent D'Israeli.~WW
Recommended: 1-4

KINGS IN DISGUISE

Kitchen Sink: *6 issue miniseries 1988**

A young teenager runs away from home during the depression of the 1930s intending to find his father. What he finds instead is an education in the company of an eccentric hobo dying of tuberculosis. Freddie Bloch witnesses the desperation and intolerance of humanity, and the lengths to which those with power will go to protect what they have, however little it might be. Writer James Vance and artist Dan Burr vividly evoke an unhappy period in American history, yet Vance is knowing enough to leaven the unrelenting hardship with comic moments as the naïve Freddie grows into an adult. The collection also includes material from *Dark Horse Presents* 42.~FP
Recommended: 1-6

Robert E. Howard's KINGS OF THE NIGHT

Dark Horse: *2 issue microseries 1990*

Bran Mak Morn unites the warring British tribes against the Romans by promising they shall be led by an independent king. And guess what, the legendary King of Atlantis (presumably not named because Marvel still have the comics licence for Kull) is pulled through time. And he's just in time for the second issue's big battle. Dull, dull, dull.~WJ

KISS

Dark Horse: *4 issues* + 2002 to date*

After the pretentious tedium of *Psycho Circus* any *Kiss* comic that actually focussed on the band members was guaranteed success, and so it's proved. Here the glam-metal grandads are cast as the superheroes their make-up aspired to, once legendary, now retired and separated, as writer Joe Casey draws liberally from the group's history. Of course they must be reunited, and so they are at the end of 3. But there's a surprise about one of them in 4! It's mindless old tosh.~WJ

KISS Psycho Circus

Image: *31 issues 1997-2000*

Spawned by the mighty Todd McFarlane during a pissing competition with Gene Simmons, the most repulsive man, if mere man he truly be, in rock, this awesome comic is so true to the spirit of America and the world's most exciting showband it makes your balls hurt! In a way, it's true to say, as he would say himself, that Todd just took the band's logo and look and changed a lot. Ace, Paul and Peter were Space Ace, Star Child and Cat Man, and were changed to Celestial, Starbearer and King of Beasts. Gene gets to stay as the Demon, having won the pissing contest. The Godlike versions of the band inhabit the scarred bodies of sad clowns and other performers in the travelling circus that visits, lo, towns as small as yours or mine, taking under their wings hurt confused kids like any of us. While they look kind of demonic, they are only actually interested in punishing the truly wicked. Brian Holguin's scripts are intelligently filled with secret references to Kiss song titles and other poetry literature. Also there are good visual in-jokes such as children playing with Spawn toys. Angel Medina's eye-bulging pencils are a great tribute to Michael Golden, who even drew the first few covers himself. One of the funny things is that the whole comic is anti-drugs, but if you'd ever taken drugs you would probably think that it was a really druggy comic, full of mindblowing M. C. Escher type stuff. There is no sex until 18 when the new artist, Clayton Crain, takes over, paying great tribute to Berni Wrightson. Thereafter it is nearly all sex, or at least a lot of arses and tits, even getting on the cover by 30, and no "adults only" warning! Kewl! Except when it's really creepy and about child molestation. 1-12 were reprinted in five magazines also featuring articles and lots of ads for merchandise, but neglecting to complete the 'Destroyer' story. Don't worry, though because three trade paperbacks cover up to 19. That's mostly without sex, remember.~GK

KISS & TELL

Burbank Studios: *3 issues, 2 mini comics (1½, 2½) 1995-1996*
Sirius: *1 issue 1997*

Eclectic autobiographical comic detailing the horrors of romance and other relationships as related by Patricia Breen and a number of artists. Subjects range from the demise of *Elfquest* comics, the narrative merit of blows to the testicles, Nuclear terror and obnoxious teachers, but the real gem is the powerfully moving story of Breen's troubled school days in the Catholic educational system from 3. The only problem is the woefully substandard art, mostly perpetrated by Breen's best friend Gene McDonald. The Sirius issue expands the concept into anthology mysteries and short stories with creator Breen and various artists. 'The Pathological Pennsylvanian Python', drawn by Ethan Van Sciver, is a spooky childhood fable, as is the excellent 'Dis' of the Spiderwoman, or Harlot's Web', with art by Walter Crane. 'The Scorpion and the Raincoat' is a charming chiller by Breen and Arthur Mahlon, but the cream of the crop is 'Shell to Pay – the Portrait of a Young Turtle as an Artist' by Patty and Walter, which won the 1996 Pittsburgh 24-Hour Comic Contest. Impressive and enjoyable.~WW

KISS OF DEATH

Acme: *2 issues 1986*

Adaptations of horror stories and some original material, all drawn by John Watkiss in fine contrasting black and white. It's dark and moody stuff, though the writing is occasionally overwrought, and Gene Colan is an obvious artistic influence at times. Originally planned as three issues, a one-shot publication titled *The Last Kiss* concluded matters.~FP

KISSING CHAOS

Oni Press: *8 issue limited series 2001-2002**

This has a decent plot about the silent Angela, romantically besotted with Damien, who also knows Raevyn. All three are running away from something, in Damien's case a murder, and the story plays out to a well set-up conclusion. Unfortunately, a modicum of plot drags on far too long without the variety and characterisation to render it absorbing. Arthur Dela Cruz is a good artist, reminiscent of Sam Kieth, but renders his story largely as eight issues of talking heads, and his choice of greytoned art adds to the claustrophobic effect. The collection features one new segment, and several short pieces involving the cast gathered from anthologies, but none add anything.~FP

KISSYFUR

DC: *One-shot 1989*

This is based on what appears to have been a junior cartoon version of *Pogo*, with the saccharine title indicating the worst of 1980s animation produced when the censorship department ruled. The comic, though, deals with some unhappy topics in telling a simple story with some very nice cartooning by Liz Rathke. Any young child should enjoy this.~WJ

KITCHEN SINK/TUNDRA Graphic Novels

It's not until they're considered as a list in their entirety that one realises that, volume for volume, Kitchen Sink's graphic novels, both originated and acquisitions, matched the quality of those from any other publisher one cares to select from around the world. Furthermore, with few exceptions, most notably the inherited Skin, each of them is accessible to and suitable for anyone of adolescent age and up. The cornerstones of the line were the works of Will Eisner, who transferred the rights to DC with Kitchen Sink's demise. A pioneer in popularising the graphic novel (a term he apparently coined) in the USA with *A Contract With God*, over

* Available in a collected edition

the past twenty years he's continued to produce thought-provoking stories. There are similar themes running throughout his works, most emphatically an optimism about life, the way in which people interact in cities, and a possibly over-sentimental view of the past, but in making a reader care about basically decent human beings he's the Frank Capra of comics. Anyone starting to read Eisner with even one of his lesser works would probably be charmed and captivated. His inordinately expressive artwork shimmers with movement and characterisation, and they're fine starting points for the non-comic-reading public.

Eisner's best story is *Dropsie Avenue*, reworking an idea used to lesser effect in *The Building*, that of taking a metropolitan area and charting its progression over a century. It's as if Eisner was unsatisfied with the previous attempt and decided to correct the faults. Incorporating themes of racism and integration, human greed and urban planning, along the way it also tells some fine stories. It pushes all the right emotional buttons, and the ending ought to bring a lump to the throat of all but the most cynical. *The Building* covers very similar territory in a far less successful manner, although it's still immensely readable due to Eisner's deft characterisation. *A Life Force*, originally serialised in *Will Eisner's Quarterly*, is an even earlier work covering much the same ground, even using Dropsie Avenue as its setting. The incorporation of newspaper clippings and correspondence, and some odd storytelling sequences, render it far less satisfactory. Try other Eisner first and come back for *A Life Force*. *New York* expands the horizons of Eisner's observations beyond a neighbourhood to aspects of the city in the present day. Told largely in one- to three-page, often silent vignettes, with wry punchlines, Eisner's evocations of the minutiae of city life charm and captivate. They're not as satisfying, though, as his longer work. *City People Notebook* utilises previously unpublished research sketches, many of them produced for *New York*, and Eisner works them into short strips. There's the same bittiness, although the art is top-notch.

The Dreamer is a slim autobiographical recollection, detailing the early days of comics in the 1930s. It has an appeal beyond that to comics historians, as Eisner details his early days as a comic artist, from the struggling hopeful to the man ready to make a career jump. He's caustic in detailing the shoddy goings-on, and while the identity of many figures is transparent, there's a level of enjoyment to be had in guessing who others might be. *To the Heart of the Storm* is similarly autobiographical, but a work of far greater depth. As a young man travels to join the troops in the early days of the USA's involvement in World War II the sights he passes on the train prompt recollections of family history. Very episodic and less sentimental than many of Eisner's other works, it also confronts racism far more overtly than his other material. *Life on Another Planet* was Eisner's second attempt at a graphic novel. Originally serialised in ill-advised eccentric fashion in Eisner's *Spirit* magazine, it works far better collected. It takes as a theme the first signal from outer space, and the panic and other reactions it engenders. Lacking the subtlety of later work and decidedly trivial in places, it's a contradictory affair by also being far more knowing and darker than any of his other work, and markedly distrustful of authority and big finance.

A Contract With God was Eisner's first graphic novel, originally published in the mid-1978 by Baronet, but later part of Kitchen Sink's line. For a twenty-five year old step into the unknown it remains an affecting and powerful work, although the storytelling is occasionally clumsy and unrefined as Eisner stretches into a new format. It's a snapshot collection, remembered best for the title chapter, but the most affecting chapter is entirely uncharacteristic for Eisner, detailing the downfall of an unpopular and lonely building superintendent in a totally unsentimental fashion. *Invisible People* is a similar look at the lives of individuals, weaving very different but equally compelling stories about three undistinguished individuals faced with a crisis in their lives and the choice they make. Eisner's final Kitchen Sink graphic novel was *Family Matters*. Seemingly a deliberate exercise in answering critics who find his outlook too sentimental, it's a bleak tale of a family gathering for the first time in years, and their unsavoury pasts being stripped back in turn. Although at times an excellent character study, the against the grain relentless nastiness renders it transparently contrived, and it's an awkward piece.

Artist Michael Ploog was heavily influenced by Eisner, and his adaptation of Frank Baum's Life and *Adventures of Santa Claus* is a career peak. Richly and stunningly rendered, elves, goblins and giants have never looked so appealing. Anyone not charmed by this has no further reason to live. And the same applies to anyone who can't laugh at Harvey Kurtzman's *Jungle Book*. Originally published in the 1950s, post his editorship of *Mad*, Kurtzman turns an even more venomous pen towards TV detectives, magazine publishing, Westerns and the Southern states, where an ability to read is enough to prompt a lynching. For many it was his last sustained triumph, and his 1980s collaborations with Sarah Downs, *Betsy's Buddies*, collected from *Playboy*, are far less satisfying. Carol Lay's collection *Now Endsville* is a skewed look at life with a strong fantasy element. She has a delightful cartooning style, and the mixture of caprice and observation in the 'Story Minute' is wonderful. In twelve panels, they're short modern fairy-tales, and largely unpredictable to boot. On the extended strips, though, she's not as deft, with the quirky ideas obstructing plots, but not strong enough to compensate. The title story in particular drags long before the end, but 'Invisible City', part ecological fantasy and part whimsy, is far stronger. Lay's second collection is better. There's a larger selection of 'Story Minute' strips, and the title strip, 'Joy Ride', is excellent, hanging on the idea of fat people being able to hire the personality of others to trim their bodies. Her third, *Strip Joint*, is all 'Story Minute' strips, and equally good.

James Robinson and Phil Elliott's *Illegal Alien* is a charming story concerning a dead American gangster being possessed by an alien, who then travels to Britain to stay with relations of the body he's inhabiting. They're pleased to find him a seemingly reformed character, and he transforms their lives, most particularly that of the adolescent Dino. It's a successful evocation of 1960s Britain and exciting and suspenseful to boot. Successful period evocation also applies to Jack Jackson's *Lost Cause*. Subtitled 'The True Story of John Wesley Hardin', it's actually far wider in scope, recounting a complex feud that initiated Hardin's notoriety in mid 19th century Texas. Hardin only comes to the fore two-thirds of the way through. Jackson's research was comprehensive, but the minutae of detail crammed into the narrative (often in the form of naming bit players), and tracking a multitude of characters makes the story difficult to follow at times. As historical reference it's a series of incidents lacking a compelling plot, and while very worthy is unlikely to find a wide audience.

The Acid Bath Case, is a mannered and surreal story of people murdered in their bathtubs. The eccentric art of Kellie Strom is ill matched with Stephen Walsh's writing, which in turn strives too hard to shock seemingly just for the sake of it. Also strained is David Chelsea's *Welcome to the Zone*, a Manhattan populated by mutants going about their business for the day. Utilising an enormous cast it's part satire, part fantasy and altogether a disappointment, as is Erez Yakin's *Silent City*, a series of appallingly muddily printed black and white toned illustrations telling a preposterously simple story of state brutality. One feels every sympathy for Yakin apparently having to live through such conditions, but this dull narrative doesn't disturb or stimulate in the manner intended. A far better European graphic novel is *Armed and Dangerous*, a sleazy and sweaty 1950s crime thriller from Mezzo and Pirus drawn in an odd hybrid style that combines elements of Charles Burns and Steranko among others. Hawks of the Sea is of minor historical interest for being a very early newspaper adventure feature by Will Eisner, but had it been by anyone else it wouldn't rate a second glance, let alone a lavish hardcover reprint.

As Tundra was merged into Kitchen Sink, so were that company's graphic novels. Those bearing the Heavy Metal imprint are allocated a separate entry in this book, but more powerful than any of them was *Skin*. It's the story of a thalidomide skinhead. Brutal and offensive, writer Peter Milligan pulls no punches in a passionate script, without salving political correctness. Martin hates the world and decides to extract vengeance on the company responsible for his affliction in the only manner he knows. Artist Brendan McCarthy matches the brutality of the script, creating an escalating mood by forgoing panel borders, and Carol Swain's well-considered colouring is also vital to the atmosphere. Tundra also brought *Hugo Tate*, Nick Abadzis' comics road movie. It's an introspective look at America as Hugo accompanies a gun-toting hard man on a delivery across the USA. His growth as a person is signified by the strange method of an increasingly rendered face, but it's an engrossing and rewarding read. Bo Hampton's adaptation of the Washington Irving story *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* is beautifully painted, but unlikely to thrill anyone today.~FP

Recommended: *A Contract With God, The Dreamer, Dropsie Avenue, Hugo Tate, Illegal Alien, Invisible People, Joy Ride, Jungle Book, The Life and Adventures of Santa Claus, Skin, Strip Joint, To the Heart of the Storm*

3 Little KITTENS

Broadsword Comics: *3 issue miniseries ('Purrr-fect Weapons') 2002*

Jaguara, Catress and Kitty Pop are the popular crime-fighters, the Kittens, funded by wealthy television star, Juliet. In this introductory series, a new anti-terrorist group, The Omega Stars, and a failed recruit to the Kittens, Latex Red and her Satanic Cheerleaders of Doom, try to compete with the Kittens for the public's attention, causing mayhem along the way. With dialogue commenting on his sacking from *Catwoman* and critics of his big-breasted women, this is a perfectly okay tale of comedy superheroes from creator, Jim Balent, but it's not going to win any awards for political correctness or characterisation.~NF

KITTY PRYDE

Marvel: *6 issue miniseries ('Kitty Pryde and Wolverine') 1984-1985, 3 issue miniseries ('Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.') 1997-1998*

The first series prompts the thought "Whose idea was it to employ Al Milgrom as an artist?" Chris Claremont overwrites and Milgrom does what we might euphemistically call draw, as Kitty Pryde discovers her dad's involved with some evil Japanese gangsters. She presumes he's been strong-armed by the Yakuza. Setting off to deal with the matter without the X-Men's help, she's possessed by a demon ronin called Ogun or, as Wolverine puts it when he's recovered from Ogun's attempts to kill him, "by magic, or some form of psi-powers, he imprinted his psyche onto yours, created a sort of psychic clone of himself inside your skull". So now you know. Having failed to drive Ogun out on her own, she goes back to the US to enlist Professor X's help, much to Wolvie's disgust. When is it weakness to turn to your friends, and when is it wisdom? Claremont knows the answer and he's sure as hell going to make sure we do too by the end of this over-emotional nonsense. So complex had the Marvel universe become by the late 1990s that the second miniseries required a foldout cover on which to synopsise the background to the story before readers could be expected to understand it. This is perplexing because almost nothing happens. Kitty Pryde has to join S.H.I.E.L.D. because their computer system only recognises her voice due to a "glitch", and neither side is very happy about the situation. Larry Hama and Jesus Redondo do an entirely average job on a very thin idea. So scant is the plot that most of the pages are static, with occasional bursts of histrionics from unlikely characters to fill them up.~FJ

KNIGHT WATCHMAN

Caliber: *2 issues 1994-1995*
Image: *4 issue miniseries 1998**

A spin-off from *Big Bang Comics*, this is Tom King's version of Batman. Here written by Gary Carlson and Chris Ecker, the Watchman is forced out of retirement when his partner, Galahad, is injured and the villainous, Pink Flamingo appears to be gaining complete control of Midway City. Ben Torres' artwork is only just his own, owing as much as it does to Frank Miller's, more *Sin City* than *Dark Knight*, perhaps, but that might be the lack of colour. Very much a homage lacking a real sense of its own identity beyond its origins, but tough and endearing. Image 1 and 2 reprint the unfinished Caliber series with additional material.~NF

KNIGHTHAWK

Windjammer: *6 issues 1995*

Originally planned as a Continuity title, this shares all the trademarks of that company's titles: superb artwork coupled with unreadable stories. For what it's worth, Knighthawk himself is a sort of cross between Batman and the Angel, but the stories never rise above perfunctory, and the dialogue is quite appalling. This is offset, however, by the breath-taking art of Ernesto Infante (aided by Continuity founder Neal Adams), who manages to combine exquisite figurework with incredible dynamism. Interestingly, Knighthawk's alter ego is named after famed romance artist J. Scott Pike. What can it all mean...?~DAR

P. Sky Owens' KNIGHTMARE

Antarctic: *6 issues 1994-1995*

The sometimes confusing and often discursive story of top martial artist Gerrold Keyes, picked by a dying mogul to inherit his former superhero career as Knightmare. He's assisted by the daughter of his benefactor, who in turn experiences costumed adventures, and realises he has a pivotal destiny. A strange mixture of horror and comedy superheroics, there is an appeal here, particularly as Owens' art demonstrably improves issue by issue, increasingly influenced by Adam Hughes. 6 has a finish of sorts, but the promised conclusion in another title never seems to have appeared.~WJ

KNIGHTMARE

Image/Extreme: *5 issues 1995*

He was Mafia muscle, but then married and started thinking it was time to get out, at which point his boss sent a hit squad after his family. So now he's made it his life's mission to destroy the Mafia. He knows that it is a mission as insane and deluded as that of Don Quixote, his childhood hero, and in recognition of this he's based his masked costume on medieval armour and named his motorbike after DQ's horse. The Don Quixote theme is well handled by writer Robert Loren Fleming, who manages to introduce some imagination and humanity in the spaces left in Rob Liefeld's plotlines of Soviet warheads, Yakuza and demons. Still, it's a grisly, blood-spattered read, except for the scene in 3 where a hand is cut off with barely a drop spilled. Now that would have been a story: "How I made it in the Mafia despite having negative blood pressure." The artists (too numerous to name) are probably responsible for that particular stupidity, since they never display signs of intelligence elsewhere in the work.~FC

KNIGHTS OF PENDRAGON

Marvel UK: *18 issues 1990-1991*

Building on characters created by Alan Moore and Alan Davis in the ground-breaking Marvel UK comics of the early to mid-1980s, and by Roger Stern and John Byrne in *Captain America* 247-255, Dan Abnett and John Tomlinson attempted to create a very English corner of the Marvel Universe with Gary Erskine's first art. Combining the mystical threats with fairly heavy-handed environmental propaganda hindered what had the potential to be a cracker of a series. From the declaration on the inside front cover that the comic was printed on tree-friendly Scangloss paper onwards, the project was a bit too preachy to be fun and too unsophisticated to be taken as serious political comment. In short, it tried too hard to be relevant, ending up as the kind of story teenagers consider profound, but which leaves anyone else gagging.~JC

KNIGHTS OF THE DINNER TABLE

Alderac Group: *3 issues 1994-1995*
Kenzer & Co: *71 issues + (4-74) 1995 to date*

You've got to hand it to Jolly Blackburn. He found his niche and has stuck to it doggedly. The Knights of the Dinner Table are a group of five role-playing game enthusiasts, and the strips are largely conversations that occur during their game meetings. This enables Blackburn to utilise photocopies for the art, hence an admirably frequent schedule, if dull looking comic. While the strips have widespread appeal within the gaming community, they're not easily understood by anyone not of that persuasion. Occasions when the topics under discussion drop back into real life show that some of the many writers have a good grasp of the conventions of the humour strip, but this very much for the converted only. The scarce early issues now sell for over $200, but they are available three to an issue in ongoing compilations titled 'Bundle of Trouble', ten of which have been published to date, all including new material. Another compilation series of four issues to date, 'Tales from the Vault', gathers strips that originally ran in gaming magazines, primarily *Shadis, Dragon* and *Ritters*. A further series, *Knights of the Dinner Table Illustrated*, is a series of comics adapting the adventures discussed around the table in the original strips. To the non-gamer these are more interesting, and to fans there's the added bonus of seeing the series' regulars acting in character.~WJ

KNIGHTS ON BROADWAY

Broadway: *3 issues 1996*

Intended as a five-issue miniseries, this was cut off abruptly by the company's collapse. It's the story of Tamara Bryn Neil, the smartest girl in the world, who can see the future. Unfortunately, there is no future, unless she can save the world. But how does a toddler, even a brilliant one, save the world when her parents think frilly party frocks and cuddly toys are more appropriate to her than soldering irons and arc welders? This series skilfully illustrates the helplessness of a child, however gifted, in the face of parental opposition. Tam is appealing and vivid, as are her terrified and terrifying mother (whose actions, though deplorable, are understandable) and the formidable Diana Hopkins, Tam's nanny, and her only believer. Oh, there are also some perfunctory apocalyptic battle scenes, set in Tam's future and starring the Knights of the title, but they're easily skipped over.~HS

Everette Hartsoe's KNIGHTSHIFT

London Night Studios: *3 issues 1996-1997*

The Hellborne (the Morbid Angel, the Shadow Viper, Arizona and the Knightcross) travel to Hell to face Lord Anvil, and are joined in 3 by Poizon for no discernible reason. The first issue comes with a glossy cover. Rubbish.~NF

Operation: KNIGHTSTRIKE

Image/Extreme: *9 issues 1995-1996*

US supersoldiers battle evil Soviets and sadistic scientists in this lively and jingoistic Rob Liefeld creation, replete with the usual giant guns, muscles and explosions.~GK

KNOCKABOUT

Knockabout: *14 issues 1980-1987*

Knockabout began in modest fashion with an un-numbered British-style equivalent of the American underground anthology. It's long on enthusiasm, but desperately low on structure and plot, a problem affecting 1-6, all comic-sized issues. The best is 4, published as a fundraiser for one of Knockabout's sadly all-too-frequent appearances in court under the archaic provisions of Britain's Obscene Publications Act. That Knockabout won every case dIdn't appear to deter the authorities. By 4 Hunt Emerson had developed into an accomplished cartoonist, and his piece lampooning the ridiculous aspects of Britain's obscenity laws is the highlight, despite contributions from Gilbert Shelton, Robert Crumb and S. Clay Wilson. From this point Emerson's pieces throughout the run are delightful, whether dealing with the hapless Max Zillion, saxophone player extraordinaire, yet always ripped off, or Calculus Cat, he of the permafixed grin forever plagued by his television. Other notable contributors to early issues include Steve Bell, with pointed political satire, Cliff Harper, also contributing political strips, and Graham 'Pokketz' Higgins, whose excellent art was never quite matched with a decent script. Special mention must go to Mike Matthews, whose disturbing mix of sex and violence was obviously EC-influenced, but which contained material that would make even EC artists blanch. There's no 7 per se. Another court appearance necessitated the fundraising *Knockabout Trial Special* in its place. It must be the only publication in which you'll find the precise linework of Brian Bolland and the visceral stylings of Savage Pencil between the same covers. Other notable contributors include Phil Elliott and a text piece from Alan Moore, along with *Knockabout* regulars Bell, Harper, Matthews, and the inevitable Emerson. Despite good intentions it's very much a hotchpotch, although Pokketz' adaptation of a song, 'Drunken Uncle John', is a pleasant surprise.

With 8 *Knockabout* transformed into a large-sized paperback volume, each issue themed, which was probably conceived to add a needed structure to the comic without actually imposing editorial interference on the creators. Emerson continued to astound, never more so than with his contribution to 8's theme of 'Hell on Earth'. It's a Max Zillion strip in which Max signs a contract with the devil, including an astonishing four-page sequence detailing the ills of the world today in ghastly, thought-provoking clarity, yet still unmistakably in Emerson's style. There are at least two of his strips every time from 7, almost all gems. 8 contained the last of Bob Moulder's well-researched tales of historical obscurities, always interesting, but out of place among otherwise humorous content. By 10 *Knockabout* has settled into the formula for the final few volumes. Each contains some strips on the theme, a section reprinting old underground strips, part of Max's serialised *Peter Pank* (a punk version of *Peter Pan*, an odd idea that soon wears thin), and a section of non-themed comic strips. The latter category always included Emerson, along with a decent selection of Gilbert Shelton spread across all his characters, although the Freak Brothers and Fat Freddy's Cat dominated. Matthews continued to be an oddball contributor, Pete Rigg's strips hit the right humorous tone and Graham Higgins, whose art became ever better, managed some halfway decent scripts with Jack Alarum, eighteenth-century footpad, in 12 and 13.

Beyond Emerson and Shelton, the classics portion of every volume is almost always the most interesting. Kim Deitch's weirdness is in 10, there's Dave Sheridan in 11, an all too short Greg Irons spotlight in 12, Justin Green in 13, and Ted Richards' Dopin' Dan and 'The Forty Year Old Hippie' in 14. 14 also introduces the bizarre Edika, whose story of domestic strife is certainly unique. Beyond 14 *Knockabout* continued themed volumes, but issued them instead as collections. See below.~FP

Recommended: 8, 12-14

KNOCKABOUT Graphic Novels And Collections

Most Knockabout graphic novels are the work of Hunt Emerson, and rightly so. Due perhaps to an exaggerated bigfoot cartooning style he doesn't receive recognition commensurate with his talent, and should be revered as a national treasure. *The Big Book of Everything* collects Emerson's work from his earliest days in arts-collective publications to the assured and confident early-1980s strips for Knockabout (the only work anyone really needs from those issues). As well as detailing his progress over ten years, it's also hilariously funny, but later collection, *Rapid Reflexes* is even better. By the early 1980s Emerson could confidently lay down the most amazing and imaginative pages seen from a British comic artist since Ken Reid's 1960s heyday. His writing had developed to such an extent that almost every panel is a gag instead of leading up to one, although *Rapid Reflexes* also contains collaborations, and was more structured than previously. There's also a *Calculus Cat* volume and *Jazz Funnies*, collecting the downbeat strips starring Max Zillion, saxophonist. The former reworks the same theme (the pernicious influence of television – laudably produced by a man not possessing one) to good effect, but the strips are best sampled individually, as repetition dulls the effect. Max Zillion is a more individual and expressive strip, and also patchier. While some episodes are astounding, particularly that of Max loosing the demons of hell onto Earth, there's also a fair amount of meandering space-fillers.

Emerson's ability to fill a page with inventive visual gags is even more apparent in his graphic novels. *Casanova's Last Stand* is his best. From the double entendre title to the final expiration it's excellent. It's based in part on Casanova's memoirs: the great lover is recounting past exploits as he plots one final grand seduction. There's both sympathy and relish to the fore in the graphic-novel equivalent of the British seaside-postcard tradition. The version of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* reproduces the Coleridge poem, accompanied by Emerson's visual interpretations and asides. It's his only colour work, and the influence of *Krazy Kat* is greater here than elsewhere, but does the poem retain a contemporary appeal, even as depicted by Emerson? One suspects the choice of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as Emerson's first graphic novel was not without a nod to the travails of his publisher, often in court on obscenity charges (and always acquitted). It's excellent, populated with an extraordinarily characterised cast and plenty of jokes, and Emerson manages to make a largely tedious novel (despite its notoriety) immensely readable. He also illustrates *Hard To Swallow*, the stand-up comedy routines of John Dowie, but it's an awkward mix, with the patter devoid of the personality live delivery offers and unsteadily fused to the art.

Outrageous *Tales From The Old Testament* was a side-swipe at Knockabout's court cases, highlighting the number of astounding, intolerant, violent and possibly obscene stories to be found in the Bible. Knockabout regulars Emerson, Rigg, and a stellar cast including Dave Gibbons (on a decidedly unsalacious Sodom and Gomorrah), Dave McKean, Kim Deitch, and combinations of Alan Moore and Hunt Emerson, and Neil Gaiman and Mike Matthews (whose scenes of carnage and degradation have to be seen to be believed) participate. Graham Higgins turns in a nice Samson, and overall it's a good chuckle, but not as amusing as the title might suggest, and in sum disappointing. *Seven Deadly Sins* is just that, each rendered as a tale, lovingly illustrated in comedic fashion. Emerson, Gaiman, Gibbons, Steve Gibson, Higgins, Matthews and Moore return, joined by Lew Stringer and Bryan Talbot for the best Knockabout collection. The pairings of creators is imaginative – each makes an effort – and there are few duff pages. Attention should be drawn to Jeremy Banks and Davy Francis' 'Anger'. Both are top cartoonists, consistently producing very funny material, and neither receives the recognition they are due. A tenuous thread connects *Seven Ages of Women*, issued to make the point that women cartoonists are marginalised, leaving talented female comic creators without a regular outlet for their work. There's no denying each of the contributors is a talented artist, but there's more to comics, and the cluttered layouts and storytelling of several are potentially off-putting when some editing might have made for a still better package. That said, on balance *Seven Ages of Women* hits the mark, with 'The Lover' by Julie Hollings, and Jackie Smith's 'Old Age', being standouts.

Knockabout's first graphic novel was Ralph Edney's *The Adventures of Lazarus Lamb*. Downbeat and uninspired, life disintegrates around Lazarus, but he still has the option of selling his soul. While a prescient treatise on what the 1980s would become to many, it's rambling and offers more laughs in throwaway asides than the main text. Finally there's *Thrrp!* Oh dear. Leo Baxendale is to British humour comics of the 1950s and 1960s what Jack Kirby was to American superhero comics of that era, having revitalised them. Sadly, Baxendale suffered similarly from exploitation, and while it's assumed that the terms of a secret out-of-court agreement granted him some restitution for characters still appearing and much merchandised, it can't have compensated for several decades of wait. He'd continued producing innovative children's strips throughout the 1960s and 1970s, his style metamorphosing all the time. By the late 1980s it had evolved to the point where Baxendale was drawing astonishing amorphous figures that almost wobbled on the page. Sadly, the writing was little more than a series of fart jokes extended over forty-eight pages. Whether he was making a point, or had lost the plot, *Thrrp!* was a decidedly unsatisfactory read. One *Fat Freddy's Cat* volume was also produced, and several *Fabulous Furry Brothers* collections, all dealt with under individual entries.~FP

Recommended: *Casanova's Last Stand, Lady Chatterley's Lover, Rapid Reflexes, Seven Deadly Sins*

KNUCKLES THE MALEVOLENT NUN

Fantagraphics: *2 issues 1991*

Knuckles graduated to her own short-lived title in 1991. Cornelius Stone and Roger Langridge's sacrilegious humour relies on surreal non-sequiturs and notes in the margins, peaking with outrageous outbursts of slapstick violence. The shorter pieces, haunting in their insanity, work best. The ongoing storyline, in which Knuckles' guardian angel (a penguin) and her pet fly attempt to rescue her from hell with the help of a hippy Jesus, strains the humour in places. If you like your fun cerebral but zany, get to know "God's hand grenade".~FJ

KOBALT

DC/Milestone: *16 issues 1994-1995*

For years, the non-powered vigilante Kobalt has terrorised the lowlife of Dakota City by maintaining a reputation as a "secret defender". Naïve young Richard Page daydreams of becoming a superhero. When Richard's dad, trying to scare him out of the idea, cashes in a favour and forces Kobalt to train Richard as an apprentice, hilarious consequences ensue. Or, at least they might have. But mostly not. Writer John Rozum never really develops Kobalt beyond the 'grim avenger' stereotype, and his current and former sidekicks, whether idealistic (Page), amorous (Clover), or twisted and homicidal (Harvest), are all more interesting than he is. Arvell Jones illustrates, competently but not in a manner to make one's pulse race with excitement. A stellar exception is issue 7, guest-illustrated by Jamal Igle, focusing on Page's adventures at high school – the same one Static attends – when a situation develops which demands the attention of both young heroes. Funny and astute, it makes you rather less appreciative of the rest of the run than you might have been. The series' end coincides with the end of both Kobalt and Page's heroic careers. They are operating out of their depth, and in an unexpectedly realistic conclusion to the book, that fact is brought brutally home to them.~HS

Recommended: 7

KOBRA

DC: *7 issues 1976-1977*

An interesting series about Siamese twins surgically separated at birth. One grew up to be a nice young man, but the other, Kobra, became leader of the evil cult that raised him back when evil cults in comics weren't a dime a dozen. Originated by Jack Kirby and carried through confidently by Martin Pasko, the plotline naturally concentrated on the brothers opposing each other. An unexpected twist actually had the good brother dying! The saga continued in *5 Star Super-Hero Spectacular*, and Kobra has been a recurring DC villain since.~HY

KONA, Monarch of Monster Isle

Dell: *21 issues 1962-1967*

Monster Isle is situated in a cavern beneath the sea bed, and contains a wide and varied form of indigenous wildlife, from giant insects to giant animals. Kona, cock of the yard, has his hands full protecting a group of adventurers from the isle's inhabitants. Giant insects and animals were the theme as further strange creatures turned up when the crew abandoned Monster Isle for the surface world. Sam Glanzman drew this bizarre series, and the oddly-written early issues are out-and-out tracts of survival philosophy for the most part. An acquired taste, with the early issues being the best.~SW

KONG

DC: *5 issues 1975-1976*

Along with DC's fantasy line came this attempt to upgrade the image of boring old caveman stories. This blond cro-magnon's strip is only noteworthy for Alfredo Alcala's nice art, the scripts never daring to rise above run of the mill.~FP

KONGA

Charlton: *23 issues 1960-1965*

Giant rampaging-ape comics. Steve Ditko adapts the 1961 movie for the first issue, in which nutty science transforms a chimp into a giant gorilla, and continues the good mindless fun until 16. Thereafter it's the appallingly lacklustre efforts of Bill Montes and Ernie Bache that see the title to cancellation.~WJ

KONNY & CZU

Antarctic: *4 issues 1995*

Konny is a floating shellfish, perhaps a winkle, whilst Czu is a neurotic caterpillar-like creature. They trade throughout known space as Harvest Ventures. The humourous and vaguely surreal adventures of these cosmic door to door salesmen are by creator Matt Howarth and collaborator D.M. Kister who bring no small amount of charm in these short stories, but the patience required to make head or tail of them sometimes outstretches the reward. The comics equivalent of celery.~SW

Edgar Rice Burroughs KORAK, Son of Tarzan

DC: *14 issues (46-59) 1972-1975*

Inherited from Gold Key, and continuing their numbering, there seemed to be a genuine pride at DC in ensuring that this licensed title showed up its ordinary predecessors (although the very early Russ Manning-created issues had been noteworthy). Editor Joe Kubert and writer Robert Kanigher deliberately differentiated *Korak* from their *Tarzan* work by adding a fantasy element to the stories, and it worked, as did Korak's 'origin' in 49. 46 has some nice Frank Thorne art, and Murphy Anderson drew a lovely Korak in 52-56, but later issues by Rudy Florese don't quite match them. The back-up strips were also well conceived and excellently executed, particularly the Carson of Venus feature by Len Wein and Mike Kaluta in 46-56. The title changed to *Tarzan Family* with 60, and Korak continued there.~HY

Recommended: 46-56

KORG, 70,000BC

Charlton: *9 issues 1975-1976*

Licensed from the Hanna-Barbera TV cartoon, this portrayal of a Neanderthal cave family dealing with the onset of an ice age features some of writer/artist Pat Boyette's best ever comics work. The subject matter really suited Boyette's rugged style, see 3's superb splash page for example. The simple language allowed for a strong functional narration that is the backbone of the series. Korg, his brother Bok, his wife Mara and their three children encounter giants, monsters and many other tribulations. They also befriend an early bowman in 2 and the beautiful Zoni in 5. Korg & Bok are lured away from their hunting in 9 and begin an adventure that takes them to ancient Atlantis. The rest of the adventure, sadly, never saw print. This is an above-average caveman comic if you like that sort of thing.~SW

KOSMIC CAT Activity Book

Image: *One-shot 1999*

The 'cute' comic relief from Deity is given an unusual spin-off, being as it's exactly what it says on the cover, and so owes more to the traditional British summer special than American comics. The puzzles and activities are hardly mind-expanding, but will probably provide a spell of peace for the comic reader with pre-pubescent siblings or children. The strips will be a little beyond their understanding, mind.~WJ

KRAZY KAT

Dell: *5 issues 1951-1952*
Gold Key: *1 issue 1964*
Eclipse/Turtle Island Foundation: *9 volumes (Krazy & Ignatz) 1988-1992*
Remco: *2 Volumes 1990-1991*
Fantagraphics: *2 volumes (Krazy & Ignatz) + 2002 to date*

Krazy is a cat of ambiguous gender in love with a mouse, Ignatz. Unfortunately, Ignatz despises Krazy and expresses this by throwing bricks at his/her head. Krazy in turn interprets this as a sign of Ignatz' love and cannot understand why Officer Pup tries to protect him/her from being hit by locking Ignatz in prison whenever he catches him with a brick. Beyond this bare bones situation lies the finest comic strip in existence. Creator George Herriman's skill with pen and word is consistently amazing. His location, Cokonino County, evokes the great American landscapes of the Grand Canyon, Monument Valley and New Mexico, yet there's a surreal element to the whole that creates a constantly shifting 'reality' where all sorts of odd things can happen. There's a large supporting cast that includes Kolin Kelly (millionaire brick merchant), Gooseberry Sprig (The Duck Duke), Mme Kwakk-Wakk, Joe Stork ("purveyor of progeny to prince and proletariat") and Gonzalo Gopher amongst others, but the basic triangle is always at the heart of each strip.

The books concentrate on reprinting the colour Sunday pages rather than the separate daily continuities, some of which can be found in *Comics Revue Magazine*. Each Eclipse volume includes a whole year's worth of strips, taking us from 1916 to 1924. The Remco volumes, subtitled 'The Komplete Kolor Krazy Kat', cover 1935 to part way through 1937. Remco decided to publish the Sunday pages in hardback editions (prompting a colour section in Eclipse's 7) but went out of business before finishing their projected seven volumes. Eclipse, too, had problems (and a rival publisher didn't help them, given that the colour Sundays, which they hadn't reached in continuity, had the greatest commercial potential) and didn't complete their projected series either. Fantagraphics have picked up where Eclipse left off with each volume covering two years of the strip (1925-1926 and 1927-1928 so far).

The Dell comics were only based on the newspaper strip. The storylines and artwork owe more to *Bugs Bunny* or *Tom and Jerry* than to Herriman, with the original situation only really referenced through the bricks that Ignatz seems obsessed with (insisting that Krazy paint bricks rather than flowers in 2) and that Krazy only sometimes seems to take pleasure in. Dell continued the strip with several issues in the *Four Color* series and the Gold Key issue is a reprint of Dell material.

Herriman's Krazy Kat is a constant reminder that comics as a medium can have literary value. His poetry and visionary graphics represent a peak of creativity which, while it has been rivalled, has never been surpassed.~NF

Recommended: Eclipse 1-9, Remco 1-2, Fantagraphics 1-2

KREY

Gauntlet Comics: *2 issues 1992*

The text of *Ivanhoe* and Robert E. Howard's *Kull* are plundered to tell the tale of a human raised by post-Apocalyptic mutants. He becomes their mightily thewed champion in the barbaric and oppressive human kingdoms. Good looking but vapid sword and sandals fare. Heavy metal mavens only.~WW

KRUSTY Comics

Bongo: *3 issues 1995*

Uncharacteristic lapse into mediocrity from Bongo's *Simpsons*-related line. Krusty is Springfield's surly celebrity

TV clown, always on the lookout for a fast buck. In this instance there's the opportunity to build a theme park as cheaply as possible on a nuclear waste dump, with predictable consequences. The plot is thin, the jokes are threadbare and the eccentric layouts dreadful. The title's good, though. Maybe The Levellers can use it.~FP

THE KRYPTON CHRONICLES

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1981*

This explored the history of Krypton, using Superman's ancestors as a focal point. Luckily they were all achievers in their chosen fields. Strangely though, the ancestors were dealt with in reverse chronological order, with the first of the El family appearing last in the series. Perhaps a bit confusing, but a must for Superman buffs.~HY

KULL and the Barbarians

Marvel: *3 issues 1975*

Short-lived black and white magazine, launched on the strength of *Savage Sword of Conan*'s popularity, featuring various characters created by Robert E. Howard. There's Atlantean warrior King Kull, Conan's sometimes paramour Red Sonja, and obsessive Puritan Solomon Kane. Few of the stories, some written by Roy Thomas, others by Doug Moench, often working from Thomas' plots, shine. 1 is a disappointing black and white reprint of *Kull the Conqueror* 1 and is probably the most polished piece on offer. Otherwise the art, by the likes of Pablo Marcos, looks rushed. Howard Chaykin's work on Red Sonja is loose and spirited, but looks as though it was intended for colour. Better material featuring these characters appeared in *Savage Sword* itself.~FJ

KULL the Conqueror

Marvel: *29 issues 1971-1978, 2 issue microseries 1982-1983, series two 10 issues 1983-1985*

Kull's the best Robert E. Howard hero after Conan, and God knows every Howard hero or heroine's had their own comic at some point. Set in a pre-Cataclysmic age, Kull's a proto-Conan, driven from his barbarian tribe for an act of weakness. The story starts when he seizes the throne of decadent Valusia in a bloody coup. Unlike Conan, Kull has to stay at home and worry about affairs of state. The main difference, though, is that Kull wears a vest. The first series, written chiefly by Gerry Conway, does little to differentiate between the characters. Kull's always going off to rid his people of some menace, and giant worms, octopodes, were-creatures and evil sorcerers loom large. If you've read all your *Conan*s until they're falling to pieces, this is the next logical title, with some tasty, clean art from John and Marie Severin in issues 2-10. The microseries is really two specials, one by Alan Zelenetz and John Buscema, the other by Doug Moench and John Bolton. Both writers are determined to make use of Kull's regal position. Zelenetz has him activate a curse while digging the foundations of a new civic centre (his choice of words, not mine), while Moench involves him in a politically expedient marriage and a gang of werewolves. John Bolton adds a delicacy to the art rarely seen since Barry Windsor-Smith's début on *Conan*.

Zelenetz obviously won the toss and gets to write the second series, which attracted richer artistic pickings, including Charles Vess, Bolton and Bill Sienkiewicz. He concentrates on political plots, develops stories around supporting characters, and has Kull spend as much time pondering the uneasy allegiance of his adopted subjects as he does hacking into eldritch monsters. Declining public interest in hefty men in fur boxer shorts killed the title after ten issues.~FJ

Richard Dragon, KUNG FU FIGHTER

DC: *18 issues 1975-1977*

Denny O'Neil's Richard Dragon creation was published far too late to make a good impression with early-1970s martial-arts fans. While the series never attained black-belt status, it did get off to a reasonable start with fairly decent stories and art (Jim Starlin 2, Jack Kirby 3, Wally Wood 4-8), but rapidly declined into mediocrity with O'Neil and regular artist Ric Estrada possibly at their worst. Supporting characters included the stereotyped black fighter, Bronze Tiger, who was later redeemed in the excellent *Suicide Squad* , and a female sword-swinging expert Lady Shiva – and she certainly did. Richard Dragon later became a major player in O'Neil's *Question* series.~HY

KURTZMAN KOMIX

Kitchen Sink: *One-shot 1976*

Harvey Kurtzman is one of comics' great stylists, but his genius was expressed in dribs and drabs in late-1940s throwaway comics before it was recognised at EC. This title collects assorted shorts from that period, all drawn in the inimitable Kurtzman gag style. Pot-Shot Pete is an inept sheriff, Sheldon is a one-page feature about a plain nasty tyke. *Hey Look!* experiments with the comics format in often surreal fashion. The *Hey Look!* paperback collects all this material and plenty more besides and is heartily recommended.~FP

Recommended

LA COSA NOSTROID

Fireman Press: *9 issue limited series 1996-1998*

Spin-off from *Scud the Disposable Assassin*, this series documents the rise and rise of mafia boss, Tony Tastey, and his attempt to kill all his enemies. It's also the story of Joe Cortese and his girlfriend, Alice, who ends up as Tony's wife. A black, violent comedy full of corruption and giant transforming robots, but it's not half as clever, funny or visually attractive as it needs to be.~NF

LA PACIFICA

Paradox Press: *3 issue miniseries 1995*

A pocket-sized-book mystery novel in three parts. *La Pacifica* motel is the site of a seemingly unprovoked mass shooting by a Vietnam vet. The only survivor of the massacre is co-owner Don Cooper, and once recovered he finds himself inexplicably compelled to investigate the circumstances of the vet's breakdown. The only lead is a woman, who moved to Las Vegas following the massacre. Shortly thereafter events repeat themselves, and she's again involved before moving on. Joel Rose and Amos Poe write a good imitation Hitchcock movie concerning a gradual obsession, including enough well-placed asides to divert the attention. Turkish-born artist Tayyar Ozkan complements a fine script with an astoundingly convincing evocation of the USA, both rural and urban. A very satisfying read.~FP

Recommended: 1-3

LA PERDIDA

Fantagraphics: *2 issues + 2001 to date*

Jessica Abel uses her experiences of living in Mexico to construct a story of Carla, a naïve American arriving in Mexico City. Translated, the title means "loss", although other than money paid for this, so far the relevance is not apparent. Neither is the meaning of the prologue in 1, which suggests dramatic moments ahead. The sooner the better, actually, just as one hopes the cast aren't based on Abel's own acquaintances as they're portrayed as arseholes to a man. At over forty pages an issue there's a lot of arseholes, and a lot of extraneous detail for a story that needs to get a bloody move on. The art is also problematical, with almost unwavering three-quarter figure viewpoint layouts and lots of superfluous lines and dark pages. Instead of disguising the deficiencies in figurework Abel is fully aware of, it draws attention to them, and she'd be far better off working in a less detailed style. There is the sense of striving for something, but a major payoff is required in short order to relieve the tedium.~FP

THE LAB

Astonish: *One-shot 2001*

Possibly the best completely computer-created comic to date. Not that the computer wrote it. That was the work of Scott Christian Sava, and he concocted a gag-packed tale about a trainee in a product-testing environment unlikely to pass the safety certificate. The art serves the story, rather than being the point of it, and it's stylish and funny, although one of the leads very much resembles Nick Park's Grommit. Get it sooner rather than later because the inevitability is that in five years it'll look hopelessly primitive.~WJ

LAB RATS

DC: *8 issues 2002-2003*

Six teenagers are taking part in an experimental programme. Essentially they're expendable guinea pigs when it comes to a military virtual reality machine (1), a Wonderland full of genetically engineered creatures out of fairy tales (2-3), a time machine that leads to a meeting with Superman (4-6) and a trip through hyperspace (7-8). John Byrne gives the traditional kid group a twist by crossing *Challengers of the Unknown* with *Suicide Squad*, but fails to make any of his characters interesting (admittedly not easy for the two killed within the first two storylines). The standard of drawing is still high, but the concept is unconvincing.~NF

LABMAN

Image: *1 issue 1996*

Based on Rudy Coby's TV series in which he plays the crime-fighting magician Labman. This tells the origin of Labman, including his discovery of four-legged chickens while he's held captive by shapely villainess The Hourglass. Drawn by Andy Suriano like a stylised cartoon, the strips are poorly paced and lack the wit they so desperately strive for. A proposed series never materialised.~NF

LABOR FORCE

Blackthorne: *4 issue miniseries 1986-1987*

Released at the height of the black and white comic glut, this execrable title was shoddily written by Greg Swan (who has the cheek to call himself "a methodical, careful creative talent" in a first-issue text piece), and crudely drawn by future Malibu Ultraverse penciller David Ammerman. Labor Force are a superhero team who operate as a business venture. They have a marketing consultant, and an accountant who watches the team's budget. Rather than use this promising premise as the springboard for a timely satire on 1980s money culture, Swan and Ammerman rush straight into a series of moronic superhero adventures that would be more at home in an amateur fanzine than in a supposedly professional comic.~AL

Hellblazer Special LADY CONSTANTINE

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 2003*

This is set just before the French Revolution and features John's ancestor, Johanna Constantine, first introduced in Sandman. She seeks to regain the title her parents were stripped of as the Secret Service of King George III hires her to "acquire" a mystic box that can unmake the world. The task is complicated not just by rival governments seeking to possess it, but also by the deadly schemes of the cosmically suicidal, immortal witch, Lady Blacked and her deadly homunculi. It's a cracking old-fashioned, supernatural adventure romp from Andy Dinggle and Goran Sudzuka that also features the 18th Century Swamp Thing.

LADY CRIME

AC: *One-shot 1992*

A misleading title given that only one of the three stories here originally featured Lady Crime. Her 1940s series appeared in *Kerry Drake Comics*, where she steered impressionable people into criminal situations, as a result of which they would inevitably pay a terrible price. 'Murder for Pennies' here is from 8, 1948. 'The Aristocrat of Crime' (from *Down With Crime*) and 'Underground to Oblivion' (featuring Hitler) both have Lady Crime figures added to panels to provide narration. The excuse is a way of grouping several old Bob Powell strips together, but apart from that and curiosity about pre-code crime comics, the strips have dated badly.~NF

LADY DEATH

Chaos!: *3 issue miniseries 1994*, 4 issue miniseries ('Between Heaven and Hell') 1995* 4 issue miniseries ('The Odyssey') 1996*, 6 issue miniseries ('The Crucible') 1996-1997*, one-shot ('Death Becomes Her') 1997, one-shot ('Dragon Wars') 1998, one-shot ('Retribution') 1998, 16 issues 1998-1999, one-shot (Lady Death/Vampirella) 1999, 4 issue miniseries ('The Rapture') 1999-2000*, 3 issue miniseries ('Judgment War') 2000, one-shot ('vs Purgatori') 2000, 3 issue miniseries ('Dark Millennium') 2000, one-shot ('Untold Tales') 2000, 4 issue miniseries ('Tribulation') 2000, one-shot ('Love Bites') 2001, one-shot ('River of Fear') 2001, 4 issue miniseries ('Alive') 2001, one-shot (Lady Death/Bad Kitty) 2001, one-shot ('Mischief Might) 2001, one-shot (Lady Death/Chastity) 2001, 4 issue miniseries ('Last Rites') 2001-2002, one-shot ('Heartbreaker') 2002, one-shot (Lady Death/Jade) 2002, one-shot (Lady Death/Bedlam) 2002, 4 issue miniseries ('The Gauntlet') 2002, 2 issue microseries ('The Goddess Returns') 2002, one-shot ('Reimagined') 2002, 3 issues ('Dark Alliance') 2002*

For most of its existence a more witless and moronic comic it would be difficult to find. Débuting as Evil Ernie's object of veneration in his series, Lady Death is a pallid personification of the netherworld replete in ludicrous bra, stockings and panties, thus resembling an underwear catalogue model, not a single-minded demoness wanting to eradicate all life on Earth. The first miniseries, later referred to as 'The Reckoning' details how an innocent 15th-century teen is transformed into Lady Death. It sets the tone for the remainder, full of pitchfork-wielding villagers, burnings at the stake, and ludicrous dialogue bringing to mind the typical Hammer horror film. That's to rate this drivel too highly, though. Creators Brian Pulido and Steven Hughes deem any but the most basic story superfluous, provided there's plenty of posing and tottering about in fetish gear. The plots for the second, third and fourth series run as follows: Lady Death, seemingly invincible at the start, is brought to near breaking point before summoning the last vestiges of her strength to grasp victory from despair.

The ongoing series began in the same wretched manner, with David Quinn writing from 5, and the end of 'Judgment War' leaves Lady Death in charge of Hell. Beyond that it's business as usual with little plot, and no possible means of commercial exploitation unexploited, with team-ups, pin-up comics and merchandise galore, not forgetting those premium priced editions to really milk the suckers. 'Alive' is a quantum improvement. It has decent art from Ivan Reis, still tailored towards underwear and pin-up shots, and Lady Death is restored to Earth, but as a 21st century adult. From 'Last Rites' on John Ostrander writes the miniseries, and if not sparkling, coupled with Reis' art the comics at least attain a veneer of professionalism. For those really into Chaos! characters, Ostrander teams most in 'Dark Alliance', but the final chapters were not published as Chaos! folded.~FP

LADY DEMON

Chaos!: *3 issue miniseries 2000*

Grimly substandard tale as yet another Chaos! supernatural she-demon becomes human. Lady Demon inhabits a mortal woman, is involved with Covert Ops and the Mafia and then has to battle her own burgeoning humanity. Utter rubbish.~WW

Neil Gaiman's LADY JUSTICE

Tekno: *11 issues 1995-1996*
Big Entertainment: *9 issues 1996*

The spirit of Justice empowers young women who've been wronged by men (usually with some sort of crime involved) and, while now blindfolded, they exact bloody revenge for these wrongs. In each storyline a new woman becomes Lady Justice. The best thing about this series is the covers, all but the last by Daniel Brereton, who also supplies the final storyline 'Woman About Town' (6-8), the best of the series. What's gone before is rather simplistic and uninvolving and though Brereton really tries to make something of it, by now it's way too late.~NF

LADY PENDRAGON

Maximum Press: *1 issue 1996*
Image: *4 issue miniseries (1-3, 0) 1998-1999, one-shot 1999, 10 issues 1999-2000, one-shot (Merlin) 2000, 2 issue microseries 2000*

A germ of a decent story hides in this mesh of sixth century battles and modern day ramifications. In the miniseries it's buried within clumsy expository pontification, exploitative semi-nude poses and poor pacing. In the years following Arthur's death Guinevere has inherited Excalibur, and in the present day electrical technology has been supplanted by magic, the chaos wiping out much of humanity at a stroke, and simultaneously awakening mythical beasts and deities. Luckily Merlin has returned to tutor Jennifer Drake, and there are enough theories beloved of *X-Files* fans to shore up plots. The ongoing series introduces a priestess from a 23rd century matriarchal colony on Mars, and Matt Hawkins' writing has marginally improved, although artist John Stinsman still loves his pin-up pages. Every issue has a plethora of variant covers, collected in the Gallery Edition, the 1999 one-shot reprints the Maximum Press issue, the 2000 one-shot focuses on Merlin, the microseries is a poor *More Than Mortal* crossover, and the third issue of the ongoing series debuts Alley Cat.~FP

LADY RAWHIDE

Topps: *1 Special 1995, 5 issue miniseries 1995-1996*, 5 issues 1996-1997*
Image: *5 issues 1999**

An offshoot of *Zorro*, this scantily-clad woman rides around adventuring in a costume that, in real life in the 1800s, would have caused her to be arrested on sight. Mayhew and Palmiotti's artwork is pleasant, and Don McGregor's prose, despite the total lack of any artistic credibility in this project, is as purple as ever. Particularly amusing are his lengthy rationalisations in the text pages as to why he's working on this rubbish in the first place. The miniseries was sufficiently successful to provoke an ongoing series, with art, initially, by the Esteban Maroto studios. Sigh. Weren't most of the readers old enough to purchase real pornography if they needed it? The interest soon wore off, and the 'ongoing' series fizzled out after being forced to take the ignominious step down from colour to black and white. The special reprinted the character's early appearances as a guest-star in *Zorro*, and the Image series reprinted the Topps 'ongoing' series.~HS

LADY SUPREME

Image/Extreme: *2 issues 1996*

Having tempted Terry Moore to write superheroes on the strength of his supposed understanding of female characters, Liefeld lets him loose on *Lady Supreme*. As far as these things go it's an average dopey superhero strip in which Lady Supreme learns that her mother is Glory. They have a good old mother/daughter chat and then do a bit of fighting. Next time Liefeld wants someone who particularly understands women he should remember that about 50% of the world's population is better qualified than Terry Moore. Prematurely cancelled, more Lady Supreme appeared in *Asylum* 10.~NF

LADYTRON

WildStorm: *One-shot 2000*

Ladytron is Maxine Manchester, a member of the Wildcats. This effectively serves as her origin, explaining her life before she joined the team, as her maker, Dr Khaz, sends her to retrieve Stanley, another of his experiments in techno-organics. It's ugly, hateful and senseless.~NF

LAFF-A-LYMPICS

Marvel: *13 issues 1978-1979*

In the late 7190s Marvel tried to build a children's line based on the cartoons of the Hanna-Barbera Studios. This was one of the longest running titles, but that's probably because it featured so many cartoon characters rather than because it was any good. The basic premise is to team up lots of familiar characters and have them compete against each other. Scooby Doo, Yogi Bear and Mumbley are the team captains and given that Mumbley's team includes Dread Baron and the Creepleys you know which team's going to cheat but never win. Mark Evanier does his best with the premise but it's tough going.~NF

LAFFIN' GAS

Blackthorne: *12 issues 1986-1987*

Taking a different theme or target each issue, a regular bunch of cartoonists turn in short stories. Beginning in decidedly lacklustre fashion, the quality curve is upward throughout. Best of the bunch is 10, the anti-censorship issue.~FP

LANCE BARNES: POST NUKE DICK

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

A variation on the hard-boiled -detective theme sets Lance Barnes in a post-nuclear world, the twist being that he set off the missile that began World War III. Accompanied by his one-legged companion Peg (geddit?), Barnes wanders across the USA encountering the comic remains of humanity. Writer Stefan Petrucha turns in consistently witty dialogue, matched by artist Barry Crain's visual whimsy. The fourth issue, satirising state administration and confronting Barnes, is the best sample.~WJ

The LAND

Caliber: *1 issue 1999*

Adequate fantasy tale of two enemies washed ashore on the mysterious island called The Land, who must put aside their differences to defeat the forces of an evil magician. Donald Marquez creates this spin-off from *The Realm*.~WW

LAND OF NOD

Black Eye: *One-shot ('Treasury') 1994, 3 issues 1996-1997*

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1998, One-shot ('Rockabye Book') 1999*

'Treasury' collects all Land of Nod stories from Jay Stephens' previous publications including *Sin Comics*, and also has some new material. The series then introduces Space Ape Number 8, Jetcat and Tutenstein in successive issues, expanding their stories in the Dark Horse series. Melanie McCay is superhero Jetcat in whose world 'The Land of Nod' is a children's cartoon, as is 'Space Ape Number Eight' (an automatically better cartoon according to Melanie's friend Tod, because it's "broadcast live from dimension seventy-one in the year twenty-twenty-seven"). Space Ape and Jetcat are stranded together in his dimension before falling in love, with the final issue seeing the rescue of Space Ape by the Space Ape Brigade, the excavation of the renegade Space Ape Thirteen and the near capture of Tutenstein by Creepy Finkley Crawdad.

Jay Stephens' delightful series works on a number of levels, whether it be parody of science fiction and horror strips, lighted-hearted superheroics or dark children's fairytales. His art is normally clean with thick black linework but the Tutenstein chapters use more of a charcoal effect. The 'Rockabye Book' collects the main storyline from all seven issues.~NF

Recommended: Black Eye 1-3, Dark Horse 1-4

LAND OF O

Top Shelf: *One-shot 2002*

At first there's some thought that these deeply revolting and profoundly disturbing stories are some kind of allegory about childhood troubles, but as the parade of despair continues, any deeper levels dissipate. Some will be attracted by Michael Stack's sordid world of casual cruelty and bleak sense of humour, but most will be repulsed.~FP

LASER ERASER AND PRESSBUTTON

Eclipse: *6 issues 1985-1986*

Following Eclipse's reprints of the Laser Eraser adventures from *Warrior*, this series features new stories of pan-galactic assassination, all written by Steve Moore under the pseudonym Pedro Henry. Many stories revolve around space-opera clichés such as a mind-parasite invading the Laser Eraser's mind and forcing her to land on the planet, where it's trapped, or the telepathic assassination target who switches Pressbutton's circuits to keep him in a state of constant orgasm, finally defeated with the help of Zirk, a sexually obsessed telepathic blob that floats around on a flying platform. The scripts are sharp but rather dated. Towards the end of the series Moore started to work on the lead characters, inserting sexual jealousy into what had previously been portrayed as a light-hearted relationship. Although Steve Dillon is associated with the strip he only drew the first issue. David Lloyd looks uncomfortable on the second, while Jerry Paris and Garry Leach (who did the covers for 1, 2 and 6) run riot on the alien parasite story in 3. Jim Baikie's 'Twilight World', reprinted from *Warrior*, appears as back-up in 1-4, and a Cam Kennedy-illustrated tale about Laser Eraser's mum fills up the last two.~FJ

LASSIE

Dell: *62 issues 1950-1962*

Gold Key: *8 issues (63-70) 1963 (63-66), 1966-1967 (67-69), 1969 (70)*

As a rule, fans don't usually go for comics about dogs and, since *Lassie* has more than a few doggish elements to it, few have added this to their 'wants' list. But they are wrong! Admittedly, early issues are drab affairs, but afterwards Lassie contains some of the most handsome art ever to grace a comic. For its first few years, the comic centred on trouble-prone newly-weds, Rocky and Gerry, travelling the globe in search of natural disasters from which Lassie could extricate them in the nick of time. From 39 on, the fickle dog attaches itself to young Timmy and family for a series of smaller scale domestic scrapes, based on MGM's TV show. After a terrific Jerry Robinson-drawn sojourn in Africa (60-62), Lassie dumps the kid and becomes queen of the outdoors with forest ranger Corey Stuart. The scripts are all professional enough but there is little to quicken the pulse. However, in addition to Robinson, artists Matt Baker (20-22), Ralph Mayo (23-29, 32), Bob Forgione (30, 31, 33-44), Bob Fujitani (45-59), Warren Tufts (63-66) and Dan Spiegle (67-70) produced uniformly gorgeous drawings. Quite how an unassuming title like *Lassie* inspired such artistry is one of comics' great mysteries, but from 20 on, art lovers cannot go wrong.~DAR

The LAST AMERICAN

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1990-1991*

The stunning, almost cubist art of Mike McMahon instantly characterises this story of Ulysses S. Pilgrim, put into suspended animation as nuclear war ravages the globe in 1999, and revived twenty years later. Accompanied by three robots, Able, Baker and Charlie, Pilgrim sets out on his quest to discover if anyone else has survived global warfare and if so, how he can contact them. That being the mission, there's little point in a first-issue resolution, resulting in a very bleak series as Pilgrim trundles through a countrywide wasteland in his army vehicle.

Wagner and Grant's writing was unlike anything they attempted before, being resolutely downbeat, with few humorous touches, one being Charlie's speech-patterns, which stem from over-indulgence in television broadcasts. It contrasts well with Pilgrim's stiff formality and mood swings. Having made a leap into new territory, Wagner and Grant throw the doors open wide, particularly on the fantasy musical sequence in 2, in which a skeletal Uncle Sam leads his fellow skeletons on a song-and-dance tour through devastated New York. Musicals in comics is a trick Wagner and Grant have attempted before with less success, but here it's played to perfection, with McMahon's choreography outstanding. It's tragic, then, that somehow the pages have been printed in the wrong order. McMahon's art throughout almost looks as if he's carved his characters rather than painted them, and the

resolutely dark and gloomy palette he uses to indicate the perpetual fall-out cloud covering the USA is masterful. It speaks volumes for the talent of all three that isolation has never looked so splendid.~FP
Recommended: 1-4

LAST DANGEROUS CHRISTMAS

Aeon: *one-shot 1997*

Produced as a benefit for abused and neglected children, this anthology has a high standard of artwork and an interesting mix of Christmas stories, covering topics as diverse as elves, cinema, science-fiction and street gangs. Creators include Kaja Foglio, Sarah E. Byam, Shepherd Hendrix and David Lee Ingersoll while Matt Howarth provides a typically malevolent story of Those Annoying Post Bros. The most interesting strip, however, is by David Lasky with his critical and cultural analysis of the film *It's A Wonderful Life*.~NF

LAST GASP Comix & Stories

Last Gasp: *5 issues 1994-1997*

Most of the most tedious staples of the underground, such as deformity, wanton or perverted sex, confessions, psychedelic whimsy, pious political belly-aching, and gibberish, are on show in these amateurish anthologies. It's all been done better before elsewhere. There are exceptions, thankfully. Danny Hellman is a brilliantly slick artist wasted on the porn comedy here and Mats Stromberg's 'Edgar Wanker' in 3 and Sam Henderson's 'Enema Jack From Hackensack' in 5 raise a laugh.~GK

The LAST GENERATION

Black Tie Studio: *5 issues 1986-1989*

Ambitious fantasy tale of a disparate band of post-apocalyptic adventurers including a talking Bear and Wolf both from cultures similar to North American Plains Indians, a winged human girl and a mysterious, amnesiac cyborg who gather together to solve the mystery of what actually happened to Earth. Bill Bryer, Mitch Faust and David Porch start well and improve, but the finite series was never completed, which is a pity.~WW

The LAST ONE

DC/Vertigo: *6 issue miniseries 1993-1994*

An enigmatic person purporting to be an ancient sorcerer roams the streets of the city, selecting certain of the homeless and the hopeless, and trying to awaken them to the possibilities still open to them. A strangely compelling series, much less woolly than J.M. DeMatteis' usual fare. Yes, there are enigmas here, but you get the impression they're due to planning, rather than incompetent writing, and Dan Sweetman's illustrations have a pleasing luminous quality.~HS

Tomorrow Man & Knight Hunter LAST RITES

Antarctic: *6 issues 1994-1995*

Amatuerish superhero story that in the days before black and white independent comics wouldn't have even qualified as decent portfolio samples. There's neither the writing or artistic talent here, so it's just as well the plot is also sub-par.~WJ

LAST SHOT

Image: *One-shot (Last Shot First Draw) 2001, 4 issues 2001-2002*

Revolver bounty-hunts in order to pay off the expense of having guns built into his hands, and roams a desolate land not unlike the American West in a meat wagon driven by his sappy buddy Corbit. In the one-shot Rev wins a gunfight by shooting his bullet-dodging opponent with a concealed gun. Kinda goes against the basic principles of a gunfight. In the main series a girl called L3N stows away on the wagon. Rev reluctantly decides to act as her bodyguard on the way to Nolem – for his own reasons. This guarantees a gunfight every issue.

Long Vo's artwork is well-realised with the colouring providing solidity, background detail and mood just where it should, but the script is just functional. The assembled creators presume to call this a "medieval punk western". What they mean is they did no period research, dodged drawing any horses and made the guns and other hardware as jazzy as they pleased (ie: made them up). This video game mentality doesn't apply well to static pages, but the comic is undeniably exciting if you don't bother to think too hard.~SW

Magna-Man The LAST SUPERHERO

Comics Interview: *3 issue miniseries 1988*

Anne Vetter is ordered to complete a thesis on Magna-Man by the Executive Council of Earth, which is trying to find a reason to banish him as it's also conspiring with the invasion forces of the alien V'ihruss. Dwight Jon Zimmerman's plot that superheroes were created solely to protect against these aliens, but have all been disgraced and eliminated except for the first, Magna-Man, is somewhat illogical in concept, but well-thought out otherwise and cleanly drawn by Willie Peppers and Don Hillsman.~NF

LAUGH IN THE DARK

Last Gasp: *1 issue 1971*

Largely uninspired underground anthology in which the contributors fail to improve on the horror clichés they are satirising, although S. Clay Wilson is in familiar offensive territory. The best work by a country mile is Justin Green's ponderings on how the film *Them* affected his life, and those who've acquired the taste for Kim Deitch should like his contribution.~WJ

LAUNDRYLAND

Fantagraphics: *4 issue miniseries 1990-1992*

Literally a soap opera, set in and around a laundromat run by the unbelievably cutesy Natalie, Richard Forg and Ian Jeans' mundane miniseries fails to deliver much in the way of humour or human insight. The predictable script isn't helped by Jeans' slapdash artwork and lettering.~AL

The L.A.W. Living Assault Weapons

DC: *6 issue miniseries 1999-2000*

To great acclaim, penciller Dick Giordano once edited the cast united here while writer (and inker) Bob Layton first came to prominence publishing *Charlton Portfolio* about them. This should have been a dream assignment, but it's dreary and disappointing. Giordano's pages are uncharacteristically cluttered, and Layton's plot is forced by unlikely motivation as each character must face a past mistake. As for the premise of uniting the 1960s Charlton heroes, Captain Atom and Peacemaker are all but makeweights, Nightshade is unaccountably transformed, Thunderbolt is not invited to the party, while Blue Beetle and the Question are decently handled. Although not cover featured, Sarge Steel plays a large part, and the best aspect of the story is the return of an enigmatic Judomaster, rarely seen since the 1960s.~FP

LAWDOG

Marvel/Epic: *10 issues 1993-1994, one-shot (Lawdog Vs Grimrod) 1994*

Woefully derivative and OTT tale from Chuck Dixon and Flint Henry of a resurrected pacifist (a combination of *Dirty Harry*, Alan Alda and *Judge Dredd*) compelled to patrol the highways between dimensions slaughtering anyone/thing that is where it shouldn't be. Along the way he picks up a blonde bimbo whom he neglects to kill, loses her, meets homicidal psychopath Jugger Grimrod from *Alien Legion*, and brings down the extra dimensional organisation that controls him. Anyone caught in the wrong universe gets a brainful of hot lead, which is an apt recommendation for anyone caught reading this rubbish.~WW

LAZARUS CHURCHYARD

Tundra: *1 issue 1992*
Image: *1 volume ('The Final Cut') 2001*

Warren Ellis' grizzled cyberpunk hero was given very few outings. Planned as the first issue of a miniseries, 1 collects six short stories produced for British adult anthology *Blast!*, but offers no new material. The Image collection includes material in the Tundra comic, but also pulls together appearances from elsewhere. The heavily painted art by D'Israeli is worth a look.~FJ

LAZARUS 5

DC: *5 issue miniseries 2000*

Stylish spin on the paranormal detective genre set on a parallel world where supernatural outbreaks and disasters are combated by a mysterious group of heroes called the Inquisitors, whose point team are five agents who've been brought back from the dead. Dan Jolley and Dusty Abell weave an engrossing tale that successfully balances suspense and action.~WW

LCD Lowest Common Denominator

Fogel Comix/LCD: *1 issue 2000*

In these days of 'ugly' animation on kids TV, Vertigo and Max comics peppered with sex and swearing, and Robert Crumb collected in hardback books, and sold throughout the free world, it's comforting to find people who'll go that extra distance to ensure offence. It was Kieron Dwyer who self-published minicomics under this title, but this also features Hilary Barta, and Johnny Ryan. Outside an Ivan Brunetti comic you won't anything this jaw-droppingly scatalogical.~FP

THE LEAGUE OF EXTRAORDINARY GENTLEMEN

ABC: *6 issue miniseries 1999*, 4 issues + 2002 to date*

Why are all sequential art periodicals not of this standard? Mr Alan Moore in arguably his best endeavour since *Watchmen* offers us adventures occurring in the late 19th century. Five unlikely adventurers, Mr Allan Quatermain, Captain Nemo, Mr Hawley Griffen, Dr Henry Jekyll and Edward Hyde and additionally Miss Mina Murray are recruited by the enigmatic Mr Campion Bond under orders from the mysterious 'M' to retrieve the purloined floating metal, cavorite from the clutches of an evil-doer. Some of those mentioned will indeed sound familiar to the readers of lowbrow fiction. Miss Murray was once Mrs Harker and never removes her scarf, while Mr Griffen is only infrequently visible. In a masterful stroke of genius Mr Moore has insinuated literary characters of past into an intricate plot of dastardly intrigue. The series is also cluttered with a multitude of supporting characters, notorious and famed as well as obscure. The fate of that pure American girl, Polyanna is practically beyond comprehension. Those of a dilatory persuasion may idle away hours researching such characters. Those of higher literary sensibilities may just enjoy the presentation. Credit for the success must also be apportioned to Mr Moore's colleague, the magnificent Mr Kevin O'Neill, a veritable master of the comic arts. His unique style verges on the grotesque, and is the perfect accompaniment to a tale that requires detail with a dash of villainy and humour. The unsung hero hereabouts is surely Mr Benedict DiMagmaliw whose appropriately selected hues complement Mr O'Neill's illustrations to perfection. After saving East London from devastation in the first adventure story, our heroes return for a second challenge to save London from Martians! Will they succeed in defeating these vile aliens (and we don't mean Americans here), when one of their number turns to treason, the traitorous swine! The second diversion is, as yet, incomplete, but its predecessor is gathered in both softcover and hardcover editions. A message for Messrs Moore and O'Neill: Bravo, gentlemen, bravo!~HY

Recommended: Series one 1-6, series two 1-4

LEATHER AND LACE

Aircel: *25 issues, 1989-1991*

At a time when his *Ripper* comic was being lambasted for racism, the loathsome Barry Blair's other 'creative' input was full of unpleasant overtones of paedophilia. Most of the characters, although supposedly adults, resembled pre-pubescent children, usually clad – as the title suggests – in bondage gear and erotic underwear. Issues were sealed in plastic bags, and Blair also produced tamer versions of each issue for newsstand distribution. Guess which version sold best... ~JC

Tales from the LEATHER NUN

Last Gasp: *One-shot 1973*

A great title, that this underground anthology almost inevitably doesn't quite do justice to. Still, it does contain several morally reprehensible tales by the likes of Crumb, Spain and Jaxon, and a very nicely drawn lead story by the under-rated Dave Sheridan.~DAR

LEATHER TALES

Antipodes Publishing: *3 issues 2000-2001, one Volume 2001*

Killer Kara is trying to retire, and Chastity is an 'owned' woman, trying to escape her abusive past. On the run, the two become targets for the mob, crooked policemen and Kara's old employers, who may or may not want her back alive. Within its genre setting, this is ambitious storytelling, concerned as much with the women's love for each other and the danger in what they're doing as with the action-packed gun-play. Creator, Steve Malley's artwork is unsophisticated, though it improves throughout, but the characters are interestingly delineated and the whole makes for an enjoyable read. The series ended prematurely but is completed in the single volume.~NF

LEATHERBOY

Eros: *3 issue miniseries 1994*

Hardcore porn about a gay superhero who somehow manages to be less well drawn, less interesting and less erotic than artist / writer Craig Maynard's slice of life strips.~HS

LEAVE IT TO CHANCE

Image/Homage: *11 issues 1996-1998*
Homage: *1 issue (12) 1999*
Image: *1 issue (13) 2002*

Chance Falconer is the daughter of the world's greatest magic user, and heir apparent to his power and secrets. The trouble is, her dad doesn't want to know, because it's too dangerous for a girl. While the loss of her mother, and his own human appearance, in a previous adventure goes some way to excusing Papa Falconer, young Chance is naturally unenthused by this Neanderthal attitude and goes adventuring on her own initiative. She's soon embroiled with dragons, shamans, goblins and spectres of the night, all standard urban furnishings of her city, as well as the more usual kidnappers and corrupt cops. Old World magic in a big city environment, with humour, charm and wit, *Leave it to Chance* is an engaging tour de force from James Robinson, lovingly illustrated by Paul Smith. It could have been that breakthrough hit which appealed to both genders and all generations, but for one thing. The comic never comes out! After an initially regular schedule, it slipped later and later and finally ground to a stop in 1998. Issue 12 did dribble out in 1999, much to everyone's surprise, and was not very rapidly followed by an extra-length 13 in the last days of 2002. 13 resolved all dangling storylines and brought things to a resolution, while still leaving openings for future adventures, but no further issues have been solicited for publication. Despite various repackagings of the existing issues in paperbacks and hardcovers, in an attempt to keep her before the public, it looks like the adventures of Chance Falconer may have finally ground to a halt. A very great shame.~HS

Recommended: 1-13

LEFT-FIELD FUNNIES

Apex Novelties: *1 issue 1972*

Cartoonist Bobby London's style is taken straight from Segar's *Popeye*, but he applies it to distinctly hippy style stories of sexual politics, dope and revolution in his Merton strips, occupying half the issue. They're all very dated these days, but the art's great and if you've ever wondered about the sex lives of *Popeye*'s cast this is the nearest you'll get. Fellow contributors Gary Hallgren, Gary King, Willy Murphy and Ted Richards (with a short Dopin' Dan strip) have a knockabout agenda for their material, and it stands up far better, particularly Hallgren's contribution, which is passably Cliff Sterrett in places. The highlight of the issue, though, is Shary Flenniken's delightful 'Trots and Bonnie'. Again influenced by older cartoonists, in this case largely Wilhelm Busch, it's a simple, disjointed, quirky piece. Never mind the stories: scan the art, and you should be delighted.~WJ

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* Available in a collected edition

LEGACY

Antarctic: *6 issues 1999-2001**

Fred Perry churns out a run-of-the mill mystic adventure of modern kids who inherit the powers and prowess of dead heroes in an eternal struggle to defeat an extradimensional demon invader. For manga devotees and Gameboy owners only.~WW

LEGEND LORE: Tales from the Realm

Arrow: *2 issue microseries 1988*
Caliber: *8 issues 1995-1996, 4 issue miniseries ('Realm Wars') 1996, 4 issue miniseries ('Wrath of the Dragon') 1996-1997*

In *The Realm,* four kids from Earth are transported to a Tolkien-esque world. In *Legend Lore* the non-human characters take centre stage as the Realms of Azoth and Drohm find themselves moving ever -closer to war. The story, and the art by Guy Davis are delivered with a light touch, which make it enjoyable enough. At Caliber the heroes are re-united to combat a wave of war madness that swiftly draws the kingdoms of Drohm and Carahill closer to Armageddon. Although visually quite strong, the deftness of touch and light approach have been sacrificed to the testosterone-soaked 1990s. For die-hard fantasy fans only. In the miniseries Silverfawn, Dominic and company fight a losing battle as Lady Falla's war madness consumes the entire Realm, and that Realm is The Realm of the Dull and Clichéd.~WW

LEGEND OF LARIAN

Lion Publishing: *2 volumes ('The Shadows Edge', 'The Cutting Edge') 1992*

Intrigue and power-politics in the mystical land of Larian as Madlin, a bounty hunting Man/Elf halfbreed becomes involved with a scheme to place a blind beggar girl on the throne. Beautifully painted graphic novels from Jeff Anderson, but the stilted, heavily evangelical scripts from Terry Murray are a chore to read.~WW

THE LEGEND OF MOTHER SARAH

Dark Horse: *8 issue limited series 1995*, 7 issue limited series ('City of the Children') 1996, 9 issue limited series ('City of the Angels') 1996-1997*

Written by Katsuhiro Otomo, and exquisitely drawn by Takumi Nagayasu, the first series is among the best Manga yet to be translated into English. Humanity deserted a ruined planet for life in satellites, but some have returned to brave harsh conditions and military rule. Sarah has been separated from her three children, and wanders the desolate planet from isolated community to isolated community searching for them. It's very much in the tradition of the Japanese ronin stories or a Clint Eastwood Western, a simple story stylishly told, with the stranger in town setting events in motion that change everyone's lives. It surpasses Otomo's best-known work, *Akira*, by virtue of its meticulous planning and lack of padding. It has to be started with 1 for full effect, though, as the mood and pace are excellently considered. That Otomo and Nagayasu have the confidence to begin the conclusion in 7 and continue it for a further twenty-five pages is astounding. Nagayasu effortlessly apes Otomo's style, possibly because as a former assistant he contributed heavily to that style. There's the same delicacy of line and effective layouts, and the occasional misproportioned figure is largely lost. In it's collected version this story is retitled 'Tunnel Town'.

'City of the Children' concerns a town ruled by teenagers. Living by points of Communist ideology, they also hold a belief that anyone over forty is partially responsible for the barren state of the planet, and therefore should be made to work off a debt. This takes the form of unearthing an underground radioactive waste dump. As previously, Sarah's arrival sparks changes, and she's once again forced to fight for her life. The familiar structure, less original plot and greater reliance on a series of conflicts dilutes the effect if one has read the first series, and an insight into Sarah's current situation in 2 doesn't compensate. 'City of the Angels', though is far better, despite the familiar structure and sees Sarah reunited with a daughter after a decade, during which she's fallen under the thrall of a former brothel keeper turned head nun, Mother Teres. The action takes place in a frontline town overseen by a sadistic commander, with the stresses between military necessity, religious mania and virtue leading to a stunning finale.~WJ

Recommended: Series one 1-8, City of the Angels 1-9

LEGEND OF THE SAGE

Chaos!: *3 issue miniseries 2001*

Brian Augustyn and Romano Molenaar tell the tale of a lady librarian chosen by supernatural forces to defend the Earth from invading sorcerous forces. You've seen it, you've done it and you've very likely already thrown away the t-shirt.~WW

LEGENDS

DC: *6 issue miniseries 1986-1987**

Having discovered with *Crisis on Infinite Earths* that a series involving all their characters and tying into numerous titles was a sales success, DC quickly concocted a follow-up. It nominally explored the idea of what their characters meant to the world around them, but the need to focus on a large cast results in unsatisfactorily small sequences with each character, and resulting events are depicted in shorthand fashion, thus ensuring the underlying ideas never gel. The constant commentary from Darkseid and the Phantom Stranger is irritating and the method of bringing people to their senses is straight from cliché-land. On the positive side, John Byrne's art is never less than professional, but it's scant compensation, and the series was used to launch *Suicide Squad*, and new *Justice League* and *Flash* titles.~FP

LEGENDS OF CAMELOT

Caliber: *6 issues 1997*

A series of themed single issues ('Excalibur', 'Merlin', 'Quest For Honor', 'The Enchanted Lady', 'Sir Balin' and 'The Dolorous Stroke') that seeks to strip away the mythic nature of the Arthurian legend. This is achieved by treating the hero as a lost Celtic ruler from the dark ages rather than as a pre-destined Heavenly Warrior. Different teams handle each issue with mixed results as the strictures of "keeping it real" end up being largely ignored. For jaded Arthurians only.~WW

LEGENDS of the DC Universe

DC: *41 issues, 2 80-Page Giants, 1 Special 1998-2001*

Very much the missed opportunity. Reasoning that out of continuity Batman stories, largely set early in his career, had proved an artistic and commercial success, why not apply the same principle to other DC characters? Superman in 1-3 by James Robinson, Val Semeiks and Paul Neary sets the tone from the off. Not that it's bad; in fact it's among the better stories here, presenting the previously unrevealed origin of the villain Ultra-Humanite, but offers nothing not available in the regular Superman titles. By and large 'average' is the watchword here. Stepping above that line, Kevin Nowlan's inking contributes to two good early efforts over Dave Taylor (6) and Terry Dodson pencils. Both are written by Kelly Puckett, who effectively conveys Robin's awe in first meeting Superman (6), and difficult moments in Batgirl's early career (10-11) and they prove a simple story well told can better any amount of bombast. Unless, of course, that bombast is provided by Steve Rude performing his best Jack Kirby imitation for a double-sized Mark Evanier story starring Jimmy Olsen in 14. There's another Kirby homage from Jose Ladronn in 22-23, set in a world created from re-runs of late night horror TV. In 7-9 Greg Land illustrates Denny O'Neil's revisionist version of Green Arrow developing a conscience during a puzzlingly veiled Vietnam war and first meeting with Green Lantern. It's stretched over three issues, and is, well, average. So are 26-27 with Aquaman as Steve Englehart writes a sidetrack into his classic Joker-fish tale from *Detective* 475, and perhaps fittingly 28 and 29, the final comics Gil Kane pencilled, are the first teaming of the characters for which he's best known, Green Lantern and the Atom. Steven Grant's plot contains a good surprise, but is otherwise ordinary, featuring a tiresome villain Grant also uses in GL stories occupying 19-20 and 37-38. There's an overlong dull prelude to the Hal Jordan Spectre series in 33-36, and anyone who remembers the 1960s Atom series fondly will probably enjoy the final two issues.

Both 80-page Giants are decent comics, putting most of the regular run to shame. The highlight of the first is a Peter David story about the Titanic starring the Spectre, with Steve Ditko pencils swamped by Kevin Nowlan inks. It also has Dave Gibbons drawing the 1960s Doom Patrol, a good Chronos framing sequence by John Francis Moore and Paul Guinan, and Marv Wolfman and George Pérez reuniting on the Teen Titans. The second has Art Adams drawing The Challengers of the Unknown, a good Legion of Super-Heroes story by Paul Levitz and Stuart Immonen, and D. Curtis Johnson and Phil Winslade on Wonder Woman. The best here, though, is a story of someone taunting Darkseid by Walt Simonson and Klaus Janson. Don't look at the contents page until after you've read it for the best enjoyment. Wolfman revisits an earlier triumph in the special, providing an insert chapter of Crisis on Infinite Earths, dealt with in the entry for that title.~WJ

Judge Dredd: LEGENDS OF THE LAW

DC: *13 issues 1994-1995*

DC's new Dredd material upped the page count from seven to twenty-two, but didn't add any more plot. Regular Dredd writers John Wagner and Alan Grant repeat their all-singing all-dancing villain in 1-4, and not unexpectedly manage the best mixture of humour and action. The best actual story, though, is written by John Byrne with art from Tommy Lee Edwards and Gary Martin in 8-10. You'll figure out where the plot is going long before the end, but at least there is a plot, and an interesting idea at that. With the failure of the Dredd movie this and its companion title were dropped with all due despatch.~FP

L.E.G.I.O.N.

DC: *70 issues, 5 Annuals 1989-1994*

The acronym stands for Licensed Extra Governmental Interstellar Operatives Network, an organisation launched by the son of Superman's enemy Brainiac, the green-skinned Vril Dox. As with the 30th-century Legion of Super-Heroes, with which this is only superficially connected, he gathers 20th-century residents of assorted planets who've developed superpowers to cope with conditions on their worlds. There's a shapeshifting Durlan, Larissa Mallor, able to project areas of darkness, and as this is a title written by Keith Giffen and Alan Grant it's not long until intergalactic wildman Lobo turns up. Their sense of humour comes through early with the leader of a drug ring named Kanis Biz.

Dox is a well-conceived character. His ambition is to set up an interplanetary police force, and he will stop at little to follow his aim through, feeling the end justifies the means. He's a brutal commander, often in conflict with his operatives and everyone else, a good example being 2. He manages to free his homeworld from the grip of the ruling computer tyrants, and in doing so nearly trashes the entire planet, an irrelevancy to him as the people are now free.

Dox is also strong-willed enough to control Lobo, by foul means if not fair, and they make a demonic duo. From the early days this is a good action-adventure series, possibly over-violent, but with a lot of black humour, and well illustrated by Barry Kitson. The abrasive relationships between the cast also make for interesting reading, with the writers still able to spring surprises even when characters seem familiar. The transformation of Stealth is an interesting case with an unpredictable outcome, resulting in Dox almost dying in 7. In 9 the mysterious Durlan disappears, to be replaced by a female with amnesia. She's actually the 30th-century's Phantom Girl, now named Phase.

From 13 Alan Grant is the sole writer, and in 16 he introduces the superstrong Lar Gand, later to step into his own series as Valor, and returns Captain Comet, one of DC's 1950s space heroes. With telepathic powers he was considered a man of the future, and left to explore space. The basic decency of this pair is thrown into the turbulent mix, with Lobo being a particular cause for concern. There's a death in 19, and 23 reveals the fate of the displaced Durlan, drawn by guest artist Richard Piers Rayner. In 28 Stealth gives birth to her son, who'll play an important part in the series for several reasons. Captain Marvel and Lobo go head-to-head in 31, and in a smooth transition from 40 Kitson starts writing the title as well. Alan Grant returns for 51, in which Lobo is stuck on a remote asteroid along with team-mate Telepath and a prisoner. To pass the time they recount their pasts, which makes for humorous and gruesome reading.

From 52 Mark Waid scripts from Kitson's plots, working well with him, particularly in 59 and 60, where they spotlight Phase's homeworld. Waid flies solo on the black-humoured 56, featuring a villain very similar to Bouncing Boy of the Legion of Super-Heroes. Arnie Jorgensen is the penciller from 49, and his dynamic artwork doesn't quite match Kitson's storytelling abilities. Tom Peyer (calling himself 'Tennessee') writes from 61, and his primary plot concerns Stealth's son Lyrl, who's developed advanced intelligence for a baby. Lyrl has an agenda of his own, involving taking over L.E.G.I.O.N., manipulating events to ensure his succession. The series thereafter continues as *R.E.B.E.L.S.* The annual that stands out is the fifth, with a number of alternative versions of the team. There's a 007 takeoff for Lobo, and a two-pager by Tom Peyer and old Batman artist Dick Sprang. Anyone who doesn't have a chuckle at it has lost their sense of humour. *L.E.G.I.O.N.* was well plotted, richly characterised and nicely illustrated throughout its run, but never gained the attention it deserved.~HY

Recommended: 4-6, 12, 13, 23, 26, 51, 56, 66, Annual 5

THE LEGION

DC: *13 issues + 2001 to date*

Following the events of *Legion Lost*, the displaced members of the Legion of Super-Heroes return to the 31st century to discover much has changed in their absence. 1-8 are in effect one long story with a familiar DC villain implementing plans for accelerated evolution, and enough seeds for following events are planted to see the Legion through the next year at the current rate of progress. Writers Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning are dab hands at characterising the large cast, and their plots engage, although are dragged out a little too long. Olivier Coipel's pencils remain problematical, with poor figures and, at times, incomprehensible storytelling. He's obviously talented, so you wish he'd concentrate on mastering the basics before experimenting. Overall, though, this is a decent stab at some very popular characters.~FP

LEGION LOST

DC: *12 issues 2000-2001*

Following the events of the 'Legion of the Damned' in *Legionnaires* and *Legion of Super-Heroes*, several Legionnaires are stranded on the far side of the galaxy, with no way home.

Yes, it's Legion: Voyager, as our plucky half-a-team gather their resources, encounter strange new life-forms, and go through traumatic changes, all of which seem pretty familiar. After all, it's a predicament other Legionnaires found themselves in twice in the 1960s, and got themselves out of in one issue each time, leaving space for a back-up story and Super-Turtle! However, it is curiously satisfying to those for whom the post-*Zero Hour* 'Twinkie Legion' rapidly palled. Writers Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning have an insight into the essential personalities of our heroes, which grants them considerable indulgence while putting the team through some pretty shocking events. Not all our protagonists leave the series alive, or unscarred, and the main antagonist's identity remains a hot-button topic with fans even now. It's a great shame that main artist Olivier Coipel had to learn on the job, as his muddy etiolated figure work initially does the series no favours. While he adapts rapidly, his storytelling remains occasionally oblique, but his craftsmanship matures tremendously by the title's end. So, not original, then, but bloody well done, and kick-starting the *Legion* into a viable property again rather than the niche cult it had been for several years.~HS

LEGION OF MONSTERS

Marvel: *One-shot 1975*

This black and white title was conceived to fill the gap after the mass cancellation of Marvel's horror-magazine line. Consequently it features the likes of Frankenstein and the Manphibian (from *Monsters Unleashed*), and a deliciously gruesome Gerry Conway short 'The Flies', drawn with relish by Paul Kirchner and Ralph Reese. The highlight, however, was another chapter of Roy Thomas and Dick Giordano's *Dracula* adaptation, continued from the pages of *Dracula Lives*, unsurprisingly. It remained sadly unfinished. A nice package.~DAR

Recommended

LEGION OF STUPID HEROES

Alternate Concepts: *4 issues, 1 Special 1997-1998*

Unbelievably limp superhero parody. How limp is it? The local Sub-Mariner analogue is very fat. He's called Tubs-Mariner. That's the single best joke in the entire series. The Special, Legion of Stupid Knights, has exactly the same characters, and even worse jokes, set in mediaeval times. Primary artist Chas Gillen might have an engaging style, if he was working on something – anything – other than this.~HS.

The LEGION OF SUBSTITUTE HEROES

DC: *One-shot 1985*

In the convoluted Legion Of Super-Heroes history a number of folk who'd been rejected for membership in the first team banded together to form The Legion of Substitute Heroes. They featured such luminaries as Stone Boy, who could turn into a statue, Infectious Lass, able to infect people with diseases, and Color Kid, able to change colours, and here to change gender as well. Unbelievably, there was a time when these characters were taken seriously, but thankfully not here. Then regular *Legion* creators Paul Levitz and Keith Giffen highlight the ridiculous aspects of this motley crew, producing a good few giggles along the way, the humour accentuated by Giffen drawing in the style used for the parent title.~WJ

LEGION OF SUPER-HEROES

DC: *Series one 4 issues 1973, series two 55 issues (259-313), 3 Annuals 1980-1984, series three 63 issues, 4 Annuals 1984-1989, series four 125 issues, 7 Annuals, 2 Secret Files 1989-2000*

Introduced as one-shot characters for Superboy in *Adventure Comics* 247, something about a team of 30th-century teenage superheroes appealed to the readership, who demanded their return – frequently. They progressed to their own strip in Adventure, and the first Legion series reprinted four mid-1960s adventures to judge their commercial viability. It worked, as later that year *Superboy* became *Superboy and the Legion of Super-Heroes.* Seven years later they booted the boy of steel out of his comic entirely, and the second run continues the numbering of that title, with 259's cover having Superboy flying off bidding a fond farewell to the Legion. He was the lucky one being able to escape from this dreadful comic. Writer Gerry Conway turned out inane sub-1960s-style plots involving evil space circuses and escaped genies, and artwise things deteriorated when Jimmy Janes replaced a below-par Joe Staton from 263. Roy Thomas' writing from 277 was only slightly better, concentrating on developing a character only previously ever seen as a statue. The one bright spot in this run is one of the most beautifully illustrated *Legion* comics ever. Former artist James Sherman returned for 262 and inking his pencils produced a gorgeous result that even made the Conway story bearable. Thankfully it was all change with 284, as writer Paul Levitz returned with new penciller Pat Broderick. From the very ends of the cosmos you could hear champagne bottles popping. Levitz again provided decent plots with excellent characterisation. He knew the personalities of the entire cast and how they interacted. Broderick, while never a very fluid artist, was far more dramatic than his immediate predecessors, but it was the back-ups, illustrated by Keith Giffen, that attracted more attention. When he graduated to the lead stories with 287 a new era for the Legion arrived. Giffen developed great designs and imagery that suited a futuristic series, and he and Levitz created an epic with 'The Great Darkness Saga' (290-294*), with a 20th-century villain plaguing the future. Throughout the action Levitz fleshed out the various Legionnaires beautifully, putting their powers to good use.

300 was a special occasion, a giant-sized epic featuring art from past and present Legion artists including Curt Swan, Dave Cockrum and James Sherman. The future of the Legion, established in *Adventure* 354, had obstructed the progress of various characters, and in 300 it was finally laid to rest. 305 was another notable issue, concluding a long-running plot involving one Legionnaire being an impostor. The 'Prophet and Omen' story in 307-310 with its backdrop of impending doom disappoints, but Giffen uses the opportunity to evolve his art still further with the aid of inker Larry Mahlstedt. All annuals from this period are also notable. The first introduced new characters, the second featured a Legion wedding illustrated by Dave Gibbons, while the third, in 1984, featured the birth of someone who would eventually prompt dire consequences for the Legion.

With 314 *Tales of the Legion of Super-Heroes* continued the numbering, reprinting the stories from the Legion's next series from 325 to 364. The new series was printed on high-quality paper, enabling readers to opt for the pricier new version or wait for a year and get the story at the standard price. The arrangement lasted over three years. This series began in exciting fashion with an all-action affair featuring the Legion's evil counterpart, The Legion of Super-Villains, and ending with the death of a Legionnaire in 5. Steve Lightle pencils from 3 and while not as abstract as Giffen, he is an excellent storyteller. 7-8 feature a crossover with *DC Presents* 80 starring Superman, while 11-12 have Legion founders, Cosmic Boy, Saturn Girl and Lightning Lad, deciding to leave. This paves the way for new characters in 14, including the first ever non-humanoids and the mysteriously masked Sensor Girl, who is apparently an old character. There was much speculation as to her identity, and the truth was eventually revealed in a storyline featuring a new-look Fatal Five (one of the Legion's most deadliest adversaries) ending in 26. Meanwhile the able Greg LaRoque pencils from 15, while 22 drops hints of a possible lesbian relationship between two of the cast.

31 features an untold tale starring some of the dead Legionnaires, and Levitz pulls off another epic in 32-35, where villain Universo once more uses his brainwashing abilities to gain power. He imprisons the four Legionnaires he considers threaten him the most, and the story of how they escape and win the day is a real treat. Perhaps Levitz's greatest inspiration was in resolving the continuity problems engendered by the necessary removal of Superboy. In 1986's relaunched *Superman*'s continuity he'd never been Superboy, and in 37-38 it's established that the Legion's Superboy existed in a parallel universe. The Legion's 30th anniversary in 45 is a spotlight on the life and times of Lightning Lad, and Levitz hits gold again when he begins 'Conspiracy' in 46. A number of Legionnaires conspire, against Legion code, to confront and destroy recurring threat, the Time Trapper. This comes to a head in 50, drawn by Keith Giffen. He'd not lost his touch, marking his return by redesigning all the Legionnaires in 54. Fatal Five villainess, the Emerald Empress is the cause of a magnificent battle in 57-58, and 59 offers another untold tale of some dead Legionnaires, while 'Magic Wars' in 60-63 ends the series on a high note. Science is failing, with magic becoming a dominant force, and although they're reunited by the end of 63, the Legionnaires don't know what's in store for them. The annual was the second, in which Curt Swan returns to pencil a story revealing the strange connection between married Legionnaires Saturn Girl and Lightning Lad, and Validus,

brutal monster member of the Fatal Five. Throughout the series Levitz proved a master plotter, juggling various storylines and utilising every character perfectly.

The fourth series jumped five years for a dramatic new look instituted by Keith Giffen, who was joined by two new writers, Tom and Mary Bierbaum. A lot happened during the five years, and the pieces are gradually revealed. The Legion disbanded, Earth's government fell under the control of hostile aliens, some Legionnaires went missing, some presumably died, some fought each other, and some old-time fans were outraged. The classic Legion of young colourful characters was gone, replaced by adults in a turbulent, unsettled world. It may not have been to everyone's liking, but it demanded attention as an extremely well paced, and well plotted saga. The first few issues slowly introduce the old cast as the Legion begins to regroup, and in 4-5 the Legion's history is rewritten (the latter being an outstanding issue), with new characters now major players in old Legion adventures. This series was grittier than ever before, but not without great humourous moments, typified by the reintroduction of the largely neglected Matter-Eater Lad in 11. His ability to eat anything was previously taken too seriously, but here the absurdity of the character is explored in a witty but respectful fashion. 12 has the Legion back in full force, but there are still mysteries about the title, not least what's happened to some of the previous cast. More gradually return, along with more information as to what occurred during the five years. 20 certainly offers new insights, but 21-24 should be avoided: Al Gordon's 'Quiet Darkness' story isn't known as "Quiet Dullness" in fan circles without good reason. Matters improve in 25 as the Legion of the 1960s *Adventure Comics* days are reintroduced! These young Legionnaires become a resistance force against Earthgov, even enlisting the aid of their old adversary, Universo. Jason Pearson is now pencilling, but it's Colleen Doran and Curt Swan who illustrate the landmark 31 in which the female lover of Element Lad reverts back to a man! Surely a first, this question of sexuality is carefully handled. The war with the Dominators comes to a close with 35, and something unique happens to the Earth in 38. This is Giffen's swansong, as thereafter the Bierbaums write and there's a new penciller Stuart Immonen, although it's guest-penciller Chris Sprouse who redesigns the youthful Legionnaires in 42 before they move into their own title. The Bierbaums meanwhile lead the adult Legion into epic battle with old foe Mordru in 43-48, featuring lots of dead DC characters. They end their run in great form on 50, and are replaced by the series colourist, Tom McCraw, who tries, but was outclassed by his predecessors. His best effort re-runs an old plot of the Legion being outlawed.

60 instigated another change, this time ending an era while crossing into both *Legionnaires* and *Valor*, while 61 tied in with *Zero Hour*. The next issue, numbered 0, was back to basics, with the Legion now only existing as youngsters. The formation started again from scratch with the three founding members, Cosmic Boy, Saturn Girl and Livewire (the former Lightning Lad). Experienced writer Mark Waid arrived to assist McCraw, and the combination worked, producing entertaining tales, helped from 62 by artist Lee Moder. Tom Peyer joined the writing team with 70, and while there's a feel of re-running history repeating, alterations lessen the predictability. One Legionnaire even comes back as a snake! This incarnation can be categorised as 'fun', but its bright appearance concealed gruesome interludes such as a planet's entire population being murdered in 71. The new Superboy makes an appearance as his title crosses over with 74, and stories regularly run into *Legionnaires* during this period. A big change comes with 85, as a number of Legionnaires are thrust back through time to the 20th century, permitting interaction with guest-stars including the Metal Men, Deadman and Impulse.

This, however, went on too long with forgettable stories ignoring a key concept of the Legion being many characters, which disappears by splitting them, effectively, into two teams. After the first Legion wedding in this new continuity, the Legion are reunited in 100, featuring contributions from Paul Levitz, Alan Davis and Walt Simonson to name a few. Unfortunately bringing back everyone to the 30th century didn't help the quality. Peyer and McCraw introduced annoying new characters and artists Jason Armstrong and Scott Kolins were miscast.

The Dark Circle storyline in 106-108 (crossing into *Legionnaires*) isn't without merit, but a new low is reached with 114 with the introduction of the Bizarro Legion. At least writers Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning end the series on a high. Along with artist Olivier Coipel whose unique style needs getting used to, they provide a grim'n'gritty Legion of the Damned tale in 122-123 (again crossing over with *Legionnaires*). 125 ends the series on a cliffhanger leading into the *Legion Lost* series. Of the seven annuals, the best are 1 and 3, revealing secrets about the old Legion.~HY

Recommended: Series two 262, 289-294, 298, 300-305, Annual 1, series three 1-5, 7-9, 24-26, 32-35, 45, 50, 57-63, series four 1-7, 10, 20, 24-26, 31, 45-46, 59-61, Annuals 1, 3

Tales of THE LEGION OF SUPER-HEROES

DC: *37 issues (314-350), 2 Annuals (4-5) 1984-1987*

This continued the numbering of the second *Legion of Super-Heroes* title. The Legion moved into a new series printed on high-quality paper, and those stories were printed a year later in this cheaper title, starting with 326. Before that there were twelve new issues to complement the main series. Most stories were written by co-plotters Paul Levitz and Keith Giffen (with occasional assist from Mindy Newell), with some really nice art by Terry Shoemaker and Karl Kesel in 314-319. They emphasised the teenaged look of the characters, and Dan Jurgens carried on the pencilling admirably from 320. The opportunity was used to highlight a few characters in most issues, though not always successfully, as 321-323 show. Regular Legion adversaries the Dark Circle were featured in 314-315 and again to end the series in 324-325.~HY

THE LEGION OF THE NIGHT

Marvel: *2 issues 1991*

Fin Fang Foom. A depraved religious cult. Steve Gerber, Whilce Portacio and Scott Williams. Demons, sex and a modern-day witch. All sounds rather exciting, doesn't it? Sadly, it isn't. It's a formulaic old horror plot padded out to ninety-six pages with some mystical mumbo-jumbo.~FP

LEGION SCIENCE POLICE

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1998*

Peculiar spin-off from the *Legion of Super-Heroes*, in which a team of 30th Century Police Officers are given experimental 'power rings' that make them into super-beings complete with the associated angst and head-trips. By David Michelinie and Paul Ryan, it's coherent and competent – more so than the *Legion* books were at the time – but the whole thing has an air of "so what?" about it.~HS

LEGION WORLDS

DC: *6 issue miniseries 2001*

Bridging the gap between *Legion Lost* and a new ongoing title, regular writers Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning present a series of single-issue tales that fill in what occupied the rest of the Legion while their team-mates were lost in space. Achieving a near-perfect balance between fond reverence for continuity and the courage to make changes, D'n'A deliver a series of touching and entertaining vignettes that build up a valuable picture of the diverse galaxy in which their heroes live. The series also gives individual, and often B-list, members of the huge regular cast a rare chance to monopolise the spotlight.~JC

Recommended: 2

LEGIONNAIRES

DC: *83 issues (0, 1-81, 1,000,000), 3 Annuals 1993-2000*

1-19 chronicle the adventures of a bunch of super powered futuristic teenagers who may be the clones of the thirty-something members of the Legion of Super-Heroes, or may not. They protect New Earth, a collection of domed cities linked in space, which is all that remains of our planet in the 30th century after aeons of ecological abuse. The first several issues written by Tom and Mary Bierbaum and exquisitely illustrated by Chris Sprouse are a bouncy, fun read; entertaining adventures of neophyte superheroes. Sadly, after fill-in art by Adam Hughes (7) and Colleen Doran (8) the schedules continued to slip, and Sprouse was forced to give up the title. From 20, reference must be made to *Zero Hour*, DC's time-warping 1994 crossover series. It was deemed that *Legionnaires* and its parent title *Legion of Super-Heroes* required readers to have too much prior knowledge of previous continuity, therefore putting off potential new readers. So, with 0 (Oct 1994), everything was labelled 'never happened', and 20 up crossed over and alternated with issues of *Legion of Super-Heroes*, both titles detailing the ongoing saga of empowered teenagers in spandex patrolling the galaxy. Falling uneasily between two stools, the competent but unchallenging 'Legion Lite', as it came to be unfortunately known, failed to appeal to large numbers of new readers, and continued to alienate the old. Reluctant to cancel a long-running second-tier property, DC continued to turn out the series to an underwhelmed audience. From 41, *Legionnaires* and *LSH* split into separate storylines, with the half of the team in *LSH* becoming stranded in the 20th Century (as it was then) and interacting with DC's present-day superstars. This pulled up the sales on *LSH* sharply, and had a slight knock-on effect on *Legionnaires*, but when the teams were reunited in their correct time frame interest flagged again in both titles. Another relaunch seemed called for, and with 79-80 came the 'Legion of the Damned' (crossing over with *LSH* 122-123), in which the Legion's world suddenly became a much darker place. Earth is conquered by the Blight, an all-consuming menace, and only a few survivors hide amidst the ruins of Metropolis, hunted by their former comrades and allies. New writers Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning with neophyte illustrator Olivier Coipel gave the series a maturity it lacked for too long, crystallising the idealism and determination that has been at the heart of the Legion concept during its strongest periods.

While the new creators were feeling their way at this stage, the contrast between the 'Archie Legion' and the team of committed adventurers is marked. The events of 'the follow-up Widening Rifts' (81, *LSH* 124-125) lead directly into the *Legion Lost* series.~HS

Recommended: 1-7

LEGIONNAIRES 3

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1986*

The founding members of The Legion of Super-Heroes, retired from active service, face their greatest challenges from the Time Trapper and their own unresolved issues about their lives. Some logical flaws – if these folks are retired from heroics why are they still wearing their action costumes? – but a better than average *LSH* miniseries.~HS

LEGS

Image: *One-shot 1999*

An easygoing rites of passage fable from Sam Kieth. A car mechanic's son explores the ghost town that appears when a local lake is drained. There he discovers a bizarre synthesis of dinosaur, mole and supercharged engine parts that he christens Legs. The creature runs as fast as a rocket and the kid learns a valuable lesson about the immature driver's hunger for speed. A cyberpunk bedtime story chock-full of quirky charm.~SW

LEMME OUTA HERE!

Print Mint: *One-shot 1978*

Anthology in which a top line-up of underground cartoonists post recollections of their childhood. Despite the presence of Justin Green, Kim Deitch and Robert Crumb, it's Bill Griffith who steals the show, asking 'Is There Life After Levittown?' It's a resonant recollection of childhood mischief and adolescent alienation. Crumb's two-pager is charming, and Aline Kominsky's pages are, as always, a curious mixture of compulsive text and off-putting art. Her story of a holiday camp is curiously spliced with what seems to be an entirely different eight-pager about early dating experiences. Patchy, but certainly worth a look for the better material.~WJ

Legend of LEMNEAR

CPM: *18 issues 1998-1999*

Lemnear and her childhood companion, Mesh, discover they're Champions of Light, destined to oppose the Dark, in this run of the mill fantasy adventure. Varohl has been absorbing the evil of the world in preparation for a showdown with Lemnear who must fight her way to him through his generals and army of monsters. Kinji Yoshimoto does try hard to keep the script fresh and unpredictable, whilst artist, Satoshi Urushihara uses a lot of zip-a-tone to complement his sharp, fluid pencils. The one thing that can actually be guaranteed, however, is that Lemnear and the other female characters will lose their clothes at every opportunity.~NF

LEMON CUSTARD

Caliber: *1 issue 1997*

Tart comments from Mark Badger on why the experience of working for mainstream comics has curdled, aided by caprice from Steven DeStefano and Gerard Jones. Very self-indulgent, but nicely drawn.~WJ

THE LEMON KIDS

Alternative Comics: *1 issue 1999*

The twin Lemon Kids are contracted to a candy company for corporate advertising. The company abuses them by making them participate in professional wrestling, or fill out the director's tax returns. Steve Weissman's stories present a world where tricycle racing is a major spectator sport, and he exaggerates the fears and cruelty of childhood from an adult perspective. There are funny moments, and any of Weissman's work is worth seeing, but overall he'seen better elsewhere.~FP

LENORE

Slave Labor: *9 issues + 1998-2000 (1-8), 2002 (9) to date*

Lenore is a cute little dead girl whose presence is normally life threatening, sometimes due to maliciousness on her part, sometimes due to an indefinable inability not to kill things. Supporting characters (usually dead, if they're in more than one issue), include Ragamuffin, eternal vampire scourge and Mr Gosh, a persistent suitor, who doesn't understand that being repeatedly killed is a rejection. After Death arrived to take Lenore back to Hell in 8, the title was on hiatus for a couple of years, but more issues are now promised. Roman Dirge's creation is very black and often very funny indeed. His twisted, misshapen figures, with their huge, round-eyed heads on small, thin bodies, seem unreal and yet are precisely drawn, adding to the strangeness of the reading experience. 1-8 have been collected in 'Noogies!' and 'Wedgies!'~NF

Recommended: 1-9

LENSMAN

Eternity: *6 issue miniseries 1990*, 5 issue miniseries ('Galactic Patrol') 1990*, 7 issue limited series ('War of the Galaxies') 1990-1991**

This title starts as an adaptation of the Japanese animated movie before progressing to adaptations of the succeeding (and contradictory) Japanese TV series, all the while attempting to bridge the vast chasm between the source material and its origins, the *Lensman* novels of E.E. Doc Smith. All the potential reader needs to know about the plot is that it's space warfare, although there's a sourcebook in a collectors edition version of the initial miniseries first issue. The entirety is enjoyable in a dopey untaxing fashion, and there's some nice art from Tim Eldred when he's not rushed. 'War of the Galaxies' is, in effect three separate stories occupying 1-3, 4-5, and 6-7.~WJ

LEOPOLD & BRINK

Faultline: *3 issues 1997-1998*

Definitely the oddity, *Leopold & Brink* encompasses two seemingly unconnected narrative strands. A female monkey accompanied by an intriguingly designed robotic assistant has the capacity for time travel. Entirely separately and in the present day a genetic scientist's government funding is withdrawn, and she finds solace within her supportive community. Christopher Fink's art appeals in an expressive and sketchy manner, while the whimsy of his characters masks philosophical intent. It's also backed up with informative features on one of the many cultural and historical references included. This won't be to all tastes, but that it's incomplete shouldn't restrict enjoyment of what there is, and a series of graphic novels is planned.~FP

LES LIAISONS DELICIEUSES

Eros: *6 issue miniseries 1990-1991*

A pair of beautiful women in a strange great house welcome a series of lovers, often dressed in masks and costumes. At the end of each encounter the lovers are killed, either by their successors or by the women. Gender is obscured by satin and brocade, new amours take the guise of the men they have just killed. Richard Forg builds an indulgent, sensual world of black and white images without using words, paying particular attention to body language and facial expression, but clearly drawing at speed. The dashed-off quality of the drawings gives a feeling of tumultuous passion, even if the odd panel is clumsy. He's been looking at Manara, that's for sure, but brings an edge of roughness, and more than a hint of danger, to the scenarios.~FJ

Recommended: 1, 3

LETHAL

Image: *1 issue 1996*

Lethal is an armoured, G-stringed, sword-wielding bad girl who has been banished to a future where there is no violence, and it's driving her crazy. Her solution is to steal a time machine and return to her normal, deadly world. The comic was cancelled after 1, with half of the next instalment appearing in *Asylum* 11 but it never actually concluded, which comes as no surprise because it's awful.~WW

LETHARGIC LAD

Crusade: *3 issue miniseries 1996, 1 issue (Lethargic Lad Adventures) 1997*

Destination Entertainment: *14 issues 1997-1998*

Lethargic Comics International: *9 issues + 1998 to date*

Parody comic that initially combined juvenile art with ancient jokes to poke good natured (at least one assumes it's good natured) fun at classic comic moments. Practice and the sheer volume of issues eventually resulted in better-drawn pages, but creator Greg Hyland's obvious love and knowledge of comics just doesn't translate into funny gags. Long running back-up strip "Him" (as in "oh no, its...") by Steve Remen, however, telling the misadventures of a generic Adam West-boy scout style heroic crusader and his sometime boy sidekick, is a little gem, and the run from issues 1-14 can be found in a collection called *Him*.~WW

LET'S HIT THE ROAD

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1998*

Rich Tommaso tells an autobiographical tale of a road trip that takes him through adolescence and out the other side of friendship in a story that doesn't say very much, but does it awfully well. Noteworthy eye candy.~WW

LEVEL X

Caliber: *2 issues 1997*

A group of dream research patients are trapped in an ever-changing dreamscape when the computer controlling the experiment begins to achieve its own sentience. It's an engaging treatment of an old plot.~WW

The Book of LEVIATHAN

The Overlook Press: *1 volume 2000*

Leviathan (Levi) is the faceless baby son of Naomi and Aesop Klug. He has a sister, Rebecca, a cat, Cat, and a rabbit doll. Though his 'real' speech hasn't passed "dep", which, loosely translated, can be taken to mean anything, Levi's conversations with Cat are the basis for this erudite fantasy. This collection of Peter Blegvad's Independent on Sunday newspaper strip is a sampling only, but displays the scope of the strip. Amongst the longer adventures are an eight-part search for Levi's parents, a six-part trip to Hell and a four-part story about a father who sold his son to the devil. Blegvad uses Levi's innocence and ignorance to question everything, using philosophical, scientific and literary texts as the starting point for his elaborate word plays. Language and learning are the major themes, but it's not dry and unreadable, because Blegvad ensures there's plenty to raise a smile, and his often detailed cartooning is full of added visual surprises.~NF

Recommended

LEX LUTHOR

DC: *One-shot (The Unauthorised Biography) 1989, 4 issue miniseries (Superman's Nemesis) 1999, one-shot (Lex 2000) 2000*

The 1989 one-shot written by James Hudnall is what it says on the cover, with Luthor probed by an alcoholic journalist and Clark Kent accused of murder. It's a decent, if predictable tale well drawn by Eduardo Barreto. The miniseries has an oddly 1960s feel about it, and concentrates on Luthor as assailed businessman, facing sabotage and an implacable rival, but it all rather disintegrates once the revelations come. In 2000 DC had Luthor elected President of their version of the USA, and the one-shot that year gathers reaction from assorted people. It's strictly peripheral stuff, largely written by Jeph Loeb. The best segment is two pages buried at the back detailing a conversation between Lana Lang and Superman.~WJ

The LIBERATOR

Malibu: *6 issues 1987-1988*

An unnecessarily complicatedly told liberal tale of World War II supersoldiers growing old. One gets cancer and loses his wife to another, they criticise covert US involvement in Central America, blah, blah... It's crudely drawn and barely edited.~GK

LIBERTY MEADOWS

Insight Studios: *26 issues, 1 Special ('Wedding Album') 1998-2002*

Image: *3 issues + (27-29) 2002 to date*

This collects Frank Cho's beautiful and notorious newspaper strip, often for the first time in uncensored form. It centres on über dweeb Frank's unrequited love for the voluptuous Brandy, and on the all too human creatures in the *Liberty Meadows* animal sanctuary. Cho manages the hard task of marrying the funny animal art of Walt Kelly with the pinup brilliance of Adam Hughes, and each issue is a treat for the eyes. Cho has a masterful gift for pacing and is undeniably one of the most gifted cartoonists of his generation, although his bawdy, scatalogical sense of humour made him the scourge of newspaper editors. The all-new 'Wedding Album' is a major disappointment, albeit a pretty one, but the move to Image coincides with a new landscape format comic.~DAR

THE LIBERTY PROJECT

Eclipse: *8 issues 1987-1988*

A project set up to rehabilitate superpowered criminals is an interesting idea. Beyond that, this is the usual group of bickering teens, although the ending to the final issue is unintentionally hilarious. For a similar idea well executed, see *Suicide Squad*.~FP

THE LIBRARIAN

Fantagraphics: *1 issue 1992*

A receptionist in a library falls in love with the head of the manuscripts department, discovers some unpleasant things about him, and then plays her part in guiding him back to mental and spiritual health. The art and mood are deliberately naïve, but if there is an underlying point, it remains elusive.~FC

It's Only a Matter of LIFE AND DEATH

Fantagraphics: *1 issue 1990*

A collection of Peter Kuper material ranging from travel diaries through a wordless allegory of the banking system to a version of *La Ronde* starring a dollar bill. Kuper's strips are more thoughtful than most, and this is a fine selection.~WJ
Recommended

LIFE IN HELL

Deborah Kaplan & Associates: *2 Volumes 1984-1985*
Pantheon Books/Virgin Books: *2 Volumes 1988-1989*
Harper Perennial: *2 Volumes 1991-1992*

Matt Groening once earned a crust actually drawing the material to which his name was appended, and very funny it is too. *Life in Hell* was a weekly square strip syndicated to less mainstream newspapers in the USA, and Groening used it to ruminate on the pitfalls of life and relationships via his alter-ego the set-upon one eared rabbit Binky. He occasionally took potshots at American culture, and occasionally threw-in fake ads for bizarre products or franchises, the latter always with fez-adorned gay couple Akbar and Jeff as proprietors. The first two collections *Love is Hell* and *Work is Hell* were originally published in packaged vinyl album size, before being reissued by Pantheon (in the USA) and Virgin (in the UK) with extra pages in the smaller format adopted for the remainder of the series. By the time of the strips collected in the Harper books, *The Road to Hell* and *How to go to Hell*, Groening's mind was increasingly on *The Simpsons*. More and more strips were reliant on a single illustration photocopied and repeated or marginally altered from panel to panel, and the humour evaporated altogether at times. If you enjoy The Simpsons, you should really find these books.~FP
Recommended: *Akbar & Jeff's Guide to Life, Childhood is Hell, Love is Hell, Work is Hell*

LIFE IS CHEAP

Dee Vee: *One-shot 1998*

Artist Tony Single and writer Marcus Moore sit around and talk about death and attitudes thereto. It's charmingly handled with each throwing a few barbs at the other, and making salient and amusing points. The whole is nicely offset by a back-up strip detailing a waitress' trip through other snippets of conversation to serve the pair. All in all, a success.~WJ

THE LIFE OF CHRIST

Marvel: *1 issue 1993*

Marvel present a radical origin of a new superhero by starting with his birth. The guy's name is Jesus, and my guess is that the angels who keep turning up give him superpowers, and the guy John, who's born a few months before, will be his arch-enemy. We'll never really know, though, because this was cancelled after one issue.~FP

LIFE OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

Marvel: *One-shot 1983*

Reputedly one of Marvel's best-selling comics ever, one wonders where the idea of doing a Popeography came from. Probably the same source that suggested *The Life of Christ*, published the same year, perplexingly in February, rather than at Christmas. Short on action, unless you get all excited about Papal Bulls.~FJ

LIFE QUEST

Caliber: *6 issues 1997-1999*

Christian parable set at the end of Earth's history as an isolated farmer uses his young daughter and their four mutant farmhands to smuggle seeds of hope to a beleaguered and enslaved populace preparing for the coming of the messianic and mysterious Seed King. A familiar tale, gently told and beautifully illustrated by Matt Vander Pol.~WW

LIFE,THE UNIVERSE AND EVERYTHING

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1996*

Sequel to *Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, as Neil Vokes replaces Steve Leialoha on pencils. Adapts the pre-penultimate, third book of the *Hitch-Hiker's* trilogy in an unevenly edited form that contains many passages which simply seemed like a good idea at the time.~APS

LIFE UNDER SANCTIONS

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1994*

It's doubtful anybody outside the area really understands the reasons for the conflict that tore Yugoslavia apart. Here Serbian cartoonist Aleksandar Zograf tries to make sense of what occurred on a day-to-day basis, and the world's reactions to it, eventually evoking a memorable image of a land without Mickey or Donald as Disney uphold the international embargo.~WJ
Recommended

LIGHT

Print Mint: *One-shot 1971*

The loosest of visual narratives ties together this collection of art from Greg Irons. The theme is 'War is Hell', and the collection of psychedelic and gory (often simultaneously) images makes the point emphatically. Irons was an accomplished draughtsman and his expressive, fluid line is enhanced here by a dazzling use of colour. Those interested in a story better look elsewhere, but for art fans this is a wonderful collection. And Nixon, Agnew and Reagan appear for good measure. Of course.~DAR

THE LIGHT AND DARKNESS WAR

Marvel/Epic: *6 issue miniseries 1988-1989*

A Vietnam veteran experiences flashbacks and hallucinations, causing him grave concern, especially when it transpires they may not be hallucinations, but trips into another dimension, where Leonardo DaVinci and other dead geniuses rally forces for the ultimate battle. Imaginatively and lovingly put together, with stylised but meticulously crafted art by Cam Kennedy.~HS

LIKEWISE

Slave Labor: *1 issue + 2002 to date*

Following from *Awkward, Definition* and *Potential*, which cover her life from ninth to eleventh grade, *Likewise* is Ariel Schrag's account of her senior year at High School, and at three-hundred and seventy-eight pages is due to be published over eight issues. 1 covers her break-up with girlfriend, Mabel, and a long discussion with friends about 'It', not quite smart or intelligent, but somehow a defining personality trait. Schrag's stream of consciousness narrative owes much to James Joyce, but, with her natural dialogue, is engrossing. Her artwork can seem crude, but every gesture and emotion is measured, drawing the reader into the events.~NF

LI'L ABNER

Kitchen Sink: *27 volumes 1988-1998*

Newspaper readers first met Abner Yokum and had their first glimpses of his Kentucky home of Dogpatch on August the 22nd 1934. A simple country boy from the backwoods, Abner was anything but little. There was no shortage of female attention either – especially not in a community where once a year the woman could propose marriage to the menfolk with no hope of refusal. Sadie Hawkins Day, first seen in 3, is just one of the many inventions creator Al Capp introduced into his daily strip over the years. The women of Dogpatch fell into three handy categories: married, just plum ugly or ravishingly beautiful and available. Abner gets courted Sadie Hawkins style by his girlfriend Daisy Mae. As the strip matured the humour gained more political content, making any collection a social document of sorts. 12 is the volume containing Basil

Wolverton's famous Lena the Hyena, winner of Capp's contest to create the ugliest woman, and 18 sees Abner and Daisy Mae finally marry. Various famous characters joined the cast over the years – Hairless Joe and his Red Indian pal Lonesome Polecat in 1939, ripe-smelling bombshell Moonbeam McSwine in 1941, the Shmoos in 1948 as well as Abner and Daisy Mae's miracle baby Mystrious Yokum born in 1953.

A year later Capp was employing Frank Frazetta to actually draw the strips, and in his debut volume, 20, he's even in the strip as Frankie, as Capp parodies the film *The Wild One*. Frazetta drew until volume 27, covering 1957 Lou Fine was among others who would later draw the strip. The collections are printed landscape format so that two dailies can run on each page. After a monster 234 pages covering 1934 and 1935 in 1, each volume runs between 160 and 184 pages and covers approximately one year of dailies to 1961. Ultimately the humour is dated by many satirical undertones and attitudes that have passed their sell-by dates, but Capp's work remains a great example of stripcraft. The most consistently entertaining period is probably the 1940s although the politics become far more overt in the 1950s and 1960s.~SW

LILI

Image: *1 issue (0) 1999*

Brian Michael Bendis is prominently named on the cover, but he only scripted this story of the biblical Lilith returning to Earth to cause an epidemic among women. It's a slight story leaving that "so what?" feeling as the characters are not well enough drawn to make you care.~FP

LILITH

Antarctic: *4 issues (0-3) 1998*

As if the world didn't have enough manga style warrior-bimbo stuff. Ben Dunn's Lilith is the daughter of a demon and an angel and thus has leathery wings (when Dunn remembers to draw them), but she has no other distinguishing characteristics, and you'll save a heap of braincells if you leave this one on the shelf.~FC

LINCOLN-16

Scarwood Productions: *2 issues 1997*

Artistically, creator Geof Isherwood is in prime Barry Windsor-Smith mode, and his densely plotted science fiction fantasy defies a brief precis. It's imaginative stuff, though, and presents a whole spectrum of captivating characters and concepts. In fact, dare one say "Kirby"? That it only lasted two issues makes Lincoln-16 no more than a curiousity, but as brave failures go it's near the top of the list.~WJ

LINDA CARTER, Student Nurse

Marvel: *9 issues 1961-1963*

An attempt at taking the 'fluffy girlie' comic style of *Millie the Model* and applying it to a more workaday environment. *Linda Carter*, drawn in a semi-realistic style by Al Hartley, didn't know whether to be soap or comedy, and failed to be either, though the stories now have a camp nostalgic charm. Hey, any comic featuring paper dolls emblazoned 'Let's Dress The Boys!' can't be all bad... ~HS

LIONHEART

Awesome: *2 issues 1999*

Ian Churchill and Jeph Loeb concoct a moribund tale of sexy archaeologist Karen Quinn possessed by a biblical force that first afflicted Adam and Eve when they were evicted from Eden. A thinly veiled excuse for semi-nude women to posture, punch absurdly proportioned men, and pout. Awful.~WW

LISA COMICS

Bongo: *1 issue 1995*

An awkward attempt at presenting a teaching aid with *The Simpsons* cast, as Lisa Simpson is spirited away to an adventure in Wordland. A rare Bongo comics failure.~FP

LITTLE GLOOMY

Slave Labor: *6 issues* †, *1 Special 1999 to date*

Pretty tale of a cute little girl and the cute monsters and devils who all fancy her, set in the town of Spooksville. Drawn in a broad animated style, it's a sharp blend of soap opera and b-movie madness, as seen through the eyes of a Goth burn-out. Vying with the romantic shenanigans are such icons of the fantastic as invisible men, intractable mysteries and even Gloomy's evil doppelganger. Great art and scripting, but fright fans should be warned that it's more about the dating scene than the twilight zone.~WW

The Adventures of THE LITTLE GREEN DINOSAUR

Last Gasp: *2 issues 1972-1973*

Unaware of the publication dates the assumption would be this was yet another home-produced title hitching the slipstream of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* success. That it's a 1972 underground comic owing more to Carl Barks than Robert Crumb is surprising. The little green dinosaur is a curmudgeonly soul occupying a world of walking, talking and scheming mice and rats, and smarter than all of them. There are concessions to the form of underground comics by way of sex and nudity, but they're forced and break-up the story. A pioneering oddity, but no more.~FP

LITTLE GREY MAN

Crazyfish Comics: *One-shot 1996*

Clint Eastwood, Chow-Yun Fat and Toshiro Mifune, the Cinematic Triad, have been brought to life as government assassins. After slaughtering his race (but letting him live), little grey man sets off on a mission to understand what happened, with help from El Mariachi, an armoured robot turtle and others. Scott Morse's "nonsensical tale of unexplained phenomena for lovers of cinema" is just that, rendered with his heavy blacks, but neither interesting nor funny.~NF

LITTLE ITALY

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1991*

This is one of Eddie Campbell's most charming collections, gathering together a number of scribbled strips produced during a series of visits to Australia to spend time with his prospective wife and her family. The two 'Pajama Girl' stories, reprinted from *Taboo*, sit a little uneasily against the observational pieces. At the heart of the book is 'Little Italy' itself, a cleverly constructed piece about Catholicism and mysticism where the author muses on tradition in families and how it really relates to religious belief, studded with gems of observational humour. Even better is 'This Happened Yesterday', in which the narrator's doctor tries to demonstrate, using his hands and mouth, how an infection got into the narrator's penis – a great piece of bigfoot cartooning. It's collected as part of *Alec: Three Piece Suit*.~FJ
Recommended

LITTLE LIT

Raw Junior/Harper Collins: 2 *Volumes + 2000 to date*

Conceived by editors Art Spiegelman and Francoise Mouly as being in the tradition of old hardback anthologies for children, these are stunning volumes, although fearless acceptance of the Charles Burns puzzle page in 1 and the visions of Kim Deitch in 2 might be asking a little much of children. In addition to amazing strips from the likes of Dan Clowes, Lorenzo Mattotti, David Mazzucchelli, and Joost Swarte in 1 and Jacques Loustal and Lewis Trondheim in 2, these are packed with games and puzzles. Chris Ware typically goes that extra obsessive mile for 1's endpaper 'Fairy Tale Road Rage' game, and in 2, subtitled 'Strange Stories For Strange Kids', Kaz's endpapers are fake instructional bubblegum cards teaching how to draw cartoons. The editorial vision is international and extends to involving creators better known for animation, newspaper strips (Jules Feiffer, Posy Simmonds in 2) and children's book illustration such as Martin Handford (of *Where's Wally/Waldo?* fame, 2), David Macaulay (1), Barbara McClintock (1) and Maurice Sendak (2). There's also

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* Available in a collected edition

the timeless charm of Walt Kelly (1) and Crockett Johnson (2). Children be damned! These are too good for them.~WJ
Recommended: 1-2

Disney's THE LITTLE MERMAID

Marvel: *12 issues 1994-1995*

Trina Robbins and Mary Wilshire are among the big names (which include Marty Pasko and Peter David) to produce an engaging selection of one-off and complete yarns of Ariel, Flounder, Sebastian and all the undersea characters in a series set just before the movie starts. It's a winning blend of adventure, magic, charm and skullduggery from an impressive cast of undersea baddies that's a good read for kids of all ages.~WW

LITTLE MISTER MAN

Slave Labor: *3 issue miniseries 1995-1996*

Very much in touch with his inner child, James Kochalka's stories will leave most commenting "so what?", but there are some who highly regard his stream of consciousness plots, discursive style and mythologising of mundane events. Here we have a child of uncertain origin, his robot, and his bizarrely behaved foster-parents. A case could be made for this being tragic allegory, but it's unlikely. It starts slowly, goes nowhere, and ends arbitrarily. For the converted only.~WJ

LITTLE MONSTERS

Now: *6 issue miniseries 1990*

Absolutely awful spin-off from a very forgettable movie wherein Maurice the Monster takes young Brian and his school chums for another scary adventure in the magical land under the bed. The real horrors are the script and art on this lame rubbish.~WW

The Complete LITTLE NEMO IN SLUMBERLAND

Fantagraphics/Titan: *6 volumes 1989-1991*

As the name suggests, this series of hard-backed collections reprints the complete run of Winsor McCay's masterful *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, which ran in the colour sections of Sunday newspapers from 1905 to 1911 (vols 1-4), and *Little Nemo in the Land of Wonderful Dreams*. The latter is the same strip in all but name, continued for William Randolph Hearst from 1912-1915 (vols 5-6). The strip was revived again in 1924, these pages remaining unreprinted.

Little Nemo is widely considered one of the all-time classic newspaper strips. It deals with the surreal dreams of a small boy, the fantasy worlds to which those dreams take him, and the bizarre creatures he meets there. While the 'plot' advances little over the strip's entire run, the strength is in McCay's wonderful artwork. His fantastic cityscapes and innovative use of colour, impressive as they are today, were decades ahead of their time in the first decade of the century, when sequential art was still in its infancy. These volumes, complete with historical notes on McCay's career, are unbelievably beautiful – even after April 1911, when full colour is abandoned in favour of less sophisticated tints. Although it's difficult to single out any strips from the others when the overall quality remains so consistently high, the Christmas strips of December 1905 (vol 1), the storm-tossed houses of October 1908 (vol 3) and the airships battles of January 1909 (vol 3) stand out. It is a desperate shame that cinema animation and political cartooning eventually seduced McCay away from Little Nemo.

Although some of the depictions in the strip could be pulled up by today's standards of political correctness, the only real criticism which can be levelled against the run is that if you've read one Little Nemo you've really read them all, although you certainly haven't seen them all. At times the constant punchline becomes a familiar friend as the reader knows, as does Nemo himself, that whatever predicament he finds himself in he'll have escaped from by the coming morning when he wakes up. The popularity of the character over eighty years since his last appearance, and more than sixty since McCay's death, is a fitting testament to the quality of the work. If you only ever buy one complete collection of newspaper strips, make it this one.~JC
Recommended: 1-6

LITTLE ORPHAN ANNIE

Fantagraphics: *5 volumes 1992-1996*

Harold Gray wrote and drew his newspaper strip *Little Orphan Annie* from 1924 until his death in 1968. Fantagraphics collected only a fraction of this immense saga, concentrating on Gray's work from the 1930s, often held to be the cartoon's prime period. Gray's work boasted a unique combination of sentimental melodrama and robust free market politics. The fiesty Annie and her faithful mutt Sandy would be put through all kinds of woe before they inevitably trounced the forces of wickedness. An early 1930s storyline, collected in volume three of this reprint series, has Annie desperately searching for the missing Sandy. No less a reader than Henry Ford personally wrote to Gray requesting a happy resolution. This kind of audience involvement was a result of Gray's meticulous narrative structuring. Almost without exception, each daily strip corresponded to a single day in Annie's life. Over the course of a week's action, readers might come to feel they were following an especially exciting diary, even if Annie and her cohorts didn't actually grow any older over forty years.

Gray's clean, functional artwork contrasted the safe autumnal heartlands of suburbia with the danger and darkness of an anti-American underworld. Annie's notoriously empty eyeballs became Gray's stylistic signature, blank slates upon which readers could inscribe their own dreams and aspirations. Gray's moral universe was a brutally simple one: capitalism (good), communism (bad), organised labour (bad), plucky self-determination (good), welfare (bad), and so on. In volume four Daddy Warbucks, the ultimate 'self-reliant individualist', cracks the heads of a few union troublemakers, before taking on corrupts cops, lawyers and cynical do-gooders like J. Preston Slime. To counterbalance this strain of social realism, Gray also introduced supernatural motifs to his strip: volume 5 marks the first appearance of the Indian mystic Punjab.

Little Orphan Annie inspired films, a radio serial, numerous merchandising spin-offs and a hit musical. Although the strip is dutifully hailed as an American classic, one gets the feeling Gray's work is little read these days. While deeply felt, it's hectoring tone, stately pacing and simplistic moralising soon become wearisome, and it's easy to understand why Annie's eternally cheerful demeanour partly inspired Harvey Kurtzman to create the raunchy satire *Little Annie Fanny*.~AL

LITTLE RED HOT

Image: *3 issue miniseries 1999*, 3 issue miniseries ('Bound') 2001*

The bare bones of the first story concern a female assassin named Chane accepting a contract to locate God for a guilt-ridden millionaire. Chane happens to be the devil's spouse, and events are set against a brewing political crisis caused by the impending reversion of the Panama Canal to Panama. Faith, love and redemption play their part. Originality is sadly an all too rare commodity in comics, but Dawn Brown supplies a new concoction. Her art, strongly influenced by Frank Miller, falls short in terms of background and variety of viewpoints, but the readability of her story carries it. That talent, however can't compensate for the addition of Brown's colouring for 'Bound'. At best it's poor, at worst hideous, and it's always distracting. 'Bound' also has a weaker plot, with a predictable twist, so overall it's disappointing.~FP
Recommended: 1-3

LITTLE RONZO IN SLUMBERLAND

Slave Labor: *One-shot 1987*

Heartfelt, but heavy-handed condemnation of the American right's policies via Ronald Reagan's dreams. Jim Bricker's cartooning is good, but it shouldn't really take twenty-two pages to deliver a very unfocussed rant.~WJ

LITTLE SCROWLIE

Chi Comics: *4 issues + 1999 to date*

It's not often a style of art can be genuinely claimed as being unique to comics, but Jennifer Feinberg's managed it with a simple art nouveau style drawing heavily on Klimt's design. Her pupil-less faces are nonetheless expressive in illustrating a story that begins by shoving elements of *101 Dalmations* into what's largely a loving ridicule of goth culture. It's sustained over three issues, but by 4 any plot has been thrown out of the window. Little Scrowlie, by the way, is the resident cat in a flat shared by two vacuous goth girls and largely incidental to anything. This won't have a broad appeal, but it's worth anyone's time to look at the art.~FP

LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS

DC: *One-shot 1987*

An adaptation of the musical film about mild-mannered florist Seymour, and the way his life changes when he discovers a strange, alien plant with an insatiable appetite for... But that would be telling. The adaptation is competent enough, but without the songs and the musical razzmatazz, the weakness of the story becomes very apparent.~FC

LITTLE WHITE MOUSE

Caliber: *4 issue miniseries 1997-1998*, 3 issue miniseries 1998-1999*, 1 issue 2000*

Blue Line Pro: *4 issue miniseries ('Entropy Dreaming') 2001, one-shot ('Retro-Mix') 2002, 4 issue miniseries ('Open Space') 2002-2003*

Loo is a young woman, stranded on a remote mining satellite after the destruction of the ship taking her to a new school. Unable to summon assistance because the satellite computers will not acknowledge her existence, Loo is forced to survive as best she can. Helping her to overcome her loneliness are two robots, Boris and Dieter who are responsible for maintaining the satellite crew's skeletons like any other piece of inert machinery. Adding to the mystery of the satellite crew's deaths is Pascal who may or may not be a ghost and can only be seen by Loo. Loo's also trying to transfer her dead sister's consciousness into a suitable container and has a surprising meeting with some pirates. In the second miniseries, Loo's brother, Xi and friend, Jake Armani start their own search for Loo. In the third (which starts by reprinting the final Caliber issue), with the satellite shutting down, Loo tries to find a way off before the loss of atmosphere. The 'Retro-Mix' issue contains three short stories giving some background information on the characters of Loo, Jake and Pascal. 'Open Space' begins with Loo's first human contact after escaping from the satellite, though has no immediate explanation for a failure to try to contact her family. With a well developed premise and setting, compelling characters and clean artwork that improves with each series, Paul Sizer has created an entertaining and engaging story.~NF

Recommended: first miniseries 1-4, second miniseries 1-3, 'Entropy Dreaming'

LIVINGSTONE MOUNTAIN

Adventure: *4 issues 1991*

There's a living stone mountain where dragons and all kinds of unimaginatively designed humanoid creatures consort. *Fish Police* creator Steve Moncuse had a very good idea for a comic, but it wasn't this dull fantasy nonsense.~WJ

LIZ & BETH

Eros: *4 issue miniseries 1991*, 6 issue miniseries 1992*, 4 issue miniseries 1992**

If you have fond memories of the *George and Lynne* newspaper strip, *Liz & Beth* is the porn comic for you, horny housewives in their scanties stories that go a little bit further. In series one Beth takes her married friend to a masked ball where they both are rogered a lot. Liz reminisces about being spanked by her auntie, then delivers a skirt to a difficult customer from her dress shop and gets rogered... well, you get the idea. By series three we've had Lady Chatterley-style gardeners, mature lesbians, cheeky yokels and pvc freaks, and when they're at a loose end the insatiable twosome turn on each other. Artist/writer Georges Levis gives everything a 1970s feel, although most stories are from the 1980s. Very 'vanilla' by some standards but extremely well done if your fantasies run no further than girl on girl action, the odd spanking and maybe a corset or two for good measure.~FJ

LLOYD LLEWELYN

Fantagraphics: *6 issues 1986-1987*, one-shot 1988*

Before he created the rich and varied sources of amusement in *Eightball*, Dan Clowes was hung up creating the adventures of Lloyd Llewelyn, beatnik detective and coolest cat in town, whose stories came "from the weird side of unusual". Many of the Clowes trademarks are there, including strange characters, mad science and retro-1950s symbolism, but the stories never attain the absurd but genuinely thrilling intensity of his later mysteries. Style over content, and all that. Clowes' drawing at this stage lacks the clarity and assurance of his later work. Thin-line inking gives a mechanical look to the pages, which is further accentuated by the use of a single light grey tone for shadows, and although there's a lack of background detail many of the panels look too cluttered. The first six issues are magazine format, and the one-shot is traditional comic size.~FJ

LOBO

DC: *65 issues (0-64), 4 annuals 1993-1999*

Introduced in *Omega Men* 3, Lobo is the biggest, meanest bastich in the galaxy, a cigar-chomping, bounty-hunting, mercenary powerhouse able to go head-to-head with the DC Universe big guns. Wherever he goes, violence follows, with dismemberment and death portrayed in exaggerated cartoon fashion. Lobo's very much a one-note joke, albeit one that stands repetition. Writer Alan Grant created many suitably ridiculous supporting characters and possesses a deft touch with comic dialogue, while artists Val Semeiks and John Dell (to 18) were adaptable enough to know when to play it straight and when over-the-top slapstick violence was required. Most issues give little plot, but quite a few good jokes strung together, acknowledged by Grant in 36's pastiche. Anyone enjoying one issue should go on looking. Start with 10's religious satire, featuring a good telling of the classic healing-the-sick joke, Lobo's birthday party in 25 or, for an atypical sample, start with the baby Lobo in issue 0 as a full origin is told. From 19 different artists abound, some better than others, with Carl Critchlow consistently good, presumably why he draws roughly four out of every five issues between 31 and 54. His replacement Greg Luzniak is less consistent. Coupled with Grant seemingly running short of ideas or losing interest aware of imminent cancellation, issues from 57 are the weakest of the run.~FP

Recommended: 25, 36

LOBO Miniseries and one-shots

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1990-1991*, one-shot ('Paramilitary Christmas Special')1991, 4 issue miniseries ('Lobo's Back') 1992*, one-shot ('Blazing Chain of Love')1992, 4 issue miniseries ('Infanticide') 1992-1993, one-shot ('Portrait of a Victim') 1993, 4 issue miniseries ('UnAmerican Gladiators') 1993, one-shot ('Convention Special') 1993, one-shot ('Lobocop') 1994, 4 issue miniseries ('A Contract on Gawd') 1994, One-shot ('In the Chair') 1994, one-shot ('The Brave and the Bald') 1995, one-shot ('Bounty Hunting For Fun and Profit') 1995, one-shot ('Big Babe Spring Break Special') 1995, one-shot ('I Quit') 1995, one-shot ('Lobo Goes to Hollywood') 1996, 4 issue miniseries ('Death and Taxes') 1996, one-shot ('Fragtastic Voyage') 1997*

In general the quality of the regular title is far higher than the one-shots and miniseries, which suffer from a paucity of plot and few supporting characters able to play off Lobo's one-string personality. The best *Lobo* remains the first miniseries, in which Lobo is reacquainted with his school teacher. It says everything about the character while he's still fresh in four mindless mayhem-filled issues written by Keith Giffen and Alan Grant, and drawn by Simon Bisley. *Lobo's Back* explains Lobo's immunity to death, but, a good joke with the covers of the first issue apart, the formula is already becoming stale, and

Bisley jumps ship with 3. The patchy 'Infanticide' is Giffen's swansong, and he also draws the series as Lobo's many children come looking for him. The regular title's main art team of Val Semeiks and John Dell début on 'Portrait of a Victim', while the 'Convention Special' has a high quota of funny digs at the comics industry, and is excellently drawn by Kevin O'Neill, taking labelled visual gags to new heights. 'UnAmerican Gladiators' is the best miniseries since the first – Wacky Races gone mad. Lobo participates in a televised celebration of violent excess, pitched against the survivors of the neglected *Outcasts*. John Wagner co-writes and Cam Kennedy's inventive visual gags, fused to a ridiculous cast, hilarious script and silly situations, make for a great read. 'A Contract on Gawd' has its moments, but is stretched thin over four issues. Martin Emond's art on the teaming with Deadman in 'The Brave and the Bald', and on 'Lobo in the Chair', is magnificently excessive, as is Carlos Ezquerra's for 'I Quit'. As ever, story content is slim, but not as slim as 'Fragtastic Voyage' in which a shrunken Lobo not only has to combat bodily defences but the ugly art of Hermann Mejia. Caveat emptor.~FP

Recommended: *Lobo* 1-4, 'UnAmerican Gladiators' 1-4

THE LOCH

Penny Farthing: *3 volumes 1998-1999*

Marlaine Maddux produces a fable for all ages following the life of Nessandra, a young plesiosaur, the last of her kind, who befriends the other dwellers who live below the waters of a small Scottish lake. She grows from a vulnerable youngster to compete for the role of leader of the loch population. Charming fantasy illustrated by Courtney Huddleston, Johnny Beware and Chris Chuckry.~WW

Record of LODOSS WAR

CPM Manga: *22 issue limited series ('The Grey Witch') 1998-2000*, 8 issue limited series ('Lady of Pharis') 1999, 7 issue limited series ('Deedlit's Tale') 1999-2000, 16 issues + ('Chronicles of the Heroic Knight') 2001 to date*

Long-running Japanese fantasy serial that owes a huge debt to *Lord of the Rings*, set on the magical island of Lodoss, where Gods of Evil have been entombed, and where they naturally break out every so often. Whenever that happens, or simply whenever a wizard, King or demon gets too uppity, heroes arise, band together and eventually get it all sorted. Lodoss, where humans, dwarves, elves, knights goblins and ogres all dwell acts as a backdrop for author Ryo Mizuno and a variety of artists to tell old fashioned adventure tales. The first of them was 'The Grey Witch', introducing the young knight Parn, Etoh the priest, Ghim the Dwarf, Deedlit the (female) Elf, Slayn the magician and Woodchuck the thief. An invasion of Lodoss from the dark island of Marmo is set against a historic legend of seven heroes who defeated the Gods of Evil when they last broke free. One of those heroes, Beld, is now the Emperor of the invading army and employs the powers of The Grey Witch to conquer the land he lost his soul to save. Yoshihiko Ochi draws it well enough but it still a very pedestrian tale. 'The Lady of Pharis' recounts that earlier battle from the viewpoint of Flaus, a young girl who is leader of the warrior priests of Pharis, God of Light. Following the Grey Witch, much of the drama is diminished, but the European-style art of Akihiro Yamada makes a pleasant change from the standard manga fare. Next up for translation was the remorselessly coy 'Deedlit's Tale' wherein the mysterious Elf of the Forest of Never Return, is finally reunited with Parn. Setsuko Yoneyama handles the visual paraphernalia competently enough, but how much "will they – won't they" nonsense can even a rabid fantasist stand? Moving into the realms of a generational novel, 'Chronicles of the Heroic Knight' details how apprentice knight Spark has to gather a new band of heroes when the Crystal Ball of Spirit is stolen by Dark Elves for Vagnado, Sorceror of Marmo. Can the neophyte warrior-band thwart the plans of the evil magician and save the endangered Kingdoms of Lodoss? Set some years after the 'Grey Witch' some of the cast are still around, and Masato Natsumoto draws the same old story efficiently, but you really have to love this stuff to enjoy it being rehashed over and over again.~WW

LOGAN'S RUN

Marvel: *7 issues 1976-1977*

Written from the movie shooting script by Gerry Conway (1) and David Kraft (2-5), it includes scenes that didn't make the film, adding something to the experience for fans. The artwork, by George Pérez and Klaus Janson, however, is merely competent without being exciting. John Warner and Tom Sutton start their epilogue to the film in 6 and 7 as the displaced citizens try to make a new life in the damaged city. The story was left unfinished with the series' cancellation. Apart from the Paul Gulacy cover, 6 also offers the bonus of a short strip by Scott Edelman and Mike Zeck featuring The Destroyer and Thanos.~NF

LOGAN'S RUN

Adventure: *6 issue miniseries 1990-1991*

Adapting from the novel rather than the film means scenes of rumpy-pumpy are intact, but that's the only reason to search this out in preference to the Marvel adaptation. The prolific Barry Blair is responsible, and his elfin figures detract from the story, but this was successful enough to prompt a follow-up adapting the novel's sequel *Logan's World*.~FP

LOGJAM

Old Head Press: *5 issues + (0-4) 1997 to date*

A very apt title considering the problem Philip Szostek has getting to the nub of his story. In the zero issue a long conversation between a priest and a teacher raises many questions and offers not a single answer. Thereafter another teacher awkwardly introduces himself to a precocious pupil, and discovers the boy's parents to be extremely intelligent. In the town there would appear to be some antipathy to formal education. This being the extent of the plot over four issues, most would consider long diversions into table tennis (3) or a song (seven pages in 4) wilfully frustrating. Szostek's cartooning is deceptively simple and quite wonderful, but his writing leaves a lot to be desired.~WJ

Superman's Girlfriend LOIS LANE

DC: *137 issues 1958-1974, 2 issue microseries 1990, one-shot ('Girlfrenzy!') 1998*

The cover to issue 1 has Lois riding a broomstick, dressed in rags, for a story called 'The Witch of Metropolis'. One could easily change the 'witch' to 'bitch', because she was the ultimate girlfriend from hell. Lois had débuted twenty years previously in the first Superman story in *Action Comics* 1, where she was introduced as a glamorous reporter who more or less took an instant dislike to Clark Kent, while lusting over Superman. In *Superman* 17, she began to suspect that they might be the same person. Her snooping around the topic, and her character in general, proved popular enough for her to become the first of the Superman cast to have her own strip, 'Lois Lane, Girl Reporter', which ran in *Superman* 28-42. It took another fifteen years, though, before she had her own title, introduced after try-outs in *Showcase* 9 and 10. 1-79 present stories on a few regular themes. Throughout the 1940s and early 1950s Lois' character in Superman was as a gutsy reporter and a bit of a glamour girl. In the late 1950s and 1960s her adventures were more romantic in nature, with assorted plans to win Superman's hand in marriage, to which end she would go to almost any lengths. She's also portrayed as a snoop and spoiled brat, with her selfishness always at the forefront. She did, though, seem quite innocent and unaware of her bad traits. The terms 'implausible' and 'unrealistic' come to mind when considering Lois' adventures until the late 1960s, though they all made sense within the Superman mythos of the time. Lois' main aim in life was to marry Superman, but his affections sometimes swayed towards red-headed Lana Lang, his childhood sweetheart, now a TV reporter. Many a story showed Lois and Lana confronting each other, rivals for Superman's attentions, and the super-cad just led them on. An example is 50, in which Lois goes back in time (something she managed as often as consuming hot dinners) to prevent Superboy kissing Lana and starting their romance. Lana was usually presented as a nicer person and a better dresser, with a flashier job, although the rivalry with

Lois did get to her. Not that she was entirely innocent of plotting schemes to deal with Lois either, banishing her into the Phantom Zone in 33. In 21, one of many stories where the two gained superpowers, at least for an issue, there was a battle between Super Lois and Super Lana. Another time-travel story occurs in 37, in which Lois goes back to meet Leonardo Da Vinci. Guess who actually posed for the Mona Lisa? And here's Lucretia Borgia, looking incredibly familiar, with red hair. Lana lookalikes in the past was another common theme. In 59, though, Lois rather oversteps the mark by not only going back into Krypton's past before it explodes, but initiating a fling with Superman's father Jor-El. The woman had no morals. This wasn't the first time she'd had her head turned, having courted Aquaman (as a mermaid) in 12, Astounding Man in 18, Titan Man in 79. What a hussy! Some romances were hoaxes, one being 'The Irresistible Lois Lane' in 29, when she's caught smooching Aquaman (again), Batman and Green Arrow. Her intentions were good however, as she was merely passing on some Red Kryptonite in her lipstick, enabling the heroes to neutralise a Green Kryptonite rock poisoning Superman at the time. They certainly don't write elaborate plots like that anymore! Lois did actually marry Superman a few times, or so it seemed. For a really classic 1960s-style Lois Lane story you can do no better than 15, which features the 'Superman Family of Steel'. For once it wasn't a hoax, imaginary story or dream as Superman and Lois tie the knot, except they're doubles! So what would happen if Superman and Lois did marry? This was tried and tested many times in 'imaginary stories', the first of which was in 19. She was also shown to have married Lex Luthor on occasions (34, 46). A classic Superman marriage story is 'The Three Wives of Superman' in 51, in which he marries Lois, Lana and former mermaid sweetheart Lori Lemaris, and they all die!

As well as attempting to marry Superman and discover his identity, travelling in time and following her career as a reporter, she was also a volunteer nurse (43), she ran a fan club (50), and it's a little-known fact that she once ran for the Senate (63-64). Before leaving Lois' golden era there are two other issues of note. 70 features the début of the new-look Catwoman, and 73 offers an infamous kinky cover with Superman bound to a bench by Kryptonite handcuffs while Lois is whipping a puppet of him. Almost every issue to 79 was drawn by Kurt Schaffenberger, semi-humorous yet realistic style suited the mood to perfection, and you couldn't have asked for a better storyteller. The writers remain uncredited, but it's known that editor Mort Weisinger had a heavy hand in the plotting. The consistency of the issues is such that it's difficult to recommend any issue above the others, so prospective readers are directed to the giant-size issues that reprinted many a classic, 68, 77, 86, 95, 104, and 113. Before starting, put all disbelief to one side. A nice comfy armchair and a cup of cocoa also add to the ambience.

There came a time, though, when the comic had to progress: the first hint was 79's Neal Adams cover, and in 1968, 80 presented a new-look Lois Lane. The cover said it all, with Lois ripping out the 'girlfriend' part of the logo and throwing it to the floor as the cover proclaimed, "At last, the impossible come true! It's splitsville for Lois and Superman!" Lois is fed up with Superman and decides the time has come for a change. She gets a brand new wardrobe, including some sophisticated mini-skirt numbers, some sizzling bikinis, and a few "Sun and fun sport outfits". Things were never the same. Schaffenberger's art didn't suit the new, more plausible style of story, and from 82 Irv Novick took over, but seemed no more at home. There was the occasional glimpse of the new Lois DC were trying to project, such as when she joins a motorcycle gang in 83, but on the whole it was never entirely successful. The Lois and Lana rivalry came to a head in 99-100, with Lois on trial for the murder of Lana. A change that was more than cosmetic came with 105, when we're introduced to regular supporting character and back-up strip, 'Rose and The Thorn'. It was a dramatic story, written by Robert Kanigher, about a young woman called Rose Forrest, who at night, unknown to her, takes on a different personality as the vigilante Thorn. As if to freeze her in the early 1970s, as illustrated by Ross Andru and Mike Esposito, she wore a lime-green bikini outfit and green thigh-length boots. Despite discussion of sexist costumes being low on the agenda, this was the era of relevance in comics, and as a reporter Lois was better placed than some characters to participate. 106 has a story, perhaps now a bit dated, but well-intentioned at the time, in which Lois changes her skin colour for a day, experiencing the problems faced by African-Americans in the ghettos. The theme of racism and bigotry is taken up by Kanigher again in 110, when Lois becomes foster-mother to an orphaned Native American baby. By this time the arrogant snooper of the 1960s was gone, and Lois was thinking about things. Editor E. Nelson Bridwell ensured that Lois Lane reflected the changes in the other *Superman* titles of the early 1970s, with *The Daily Planet* taken over by a TV company run by Morgan Edge who was operating for the evil galactic conqueror Darkseid. Edge was also running Intergang, a powerful criminal organisation, and from 111 there's a succession of excellent stories by Kanigher and artist Werner Roth. The Rose and The Thorn back-up strip is now being beautifully illustrated by Gray Morrow. Lois also became involved in a fight against another criminal gang, The 100, also being fought by The Thorn, and they would occasionally team-up. 119-120 spotlighted problems faced by Lucy Lane, Lois' sister, who apparently dies. 121 is one of the best-ever Lois Lane issues, as a grief-stricken Lois decides to change her life by becoming a freelance reporter writing about serious social problems. 112-123 are all fifty-two-page issues worth looking at not only for the decent Lois and The Rose and The Thorn strips, but for the reprints, including some 1940s stories in 115, 120 and 122, all minor classics.

With the reversion to a standard-size comic there was also a reversion to the old themes, which just didn't work in the 1970s, and this series merged with Jimmy Olsen and Supergirl in Superman Family. Lois continued as a solo feature and as a primary supporting character in the Superman titles. The microseries from Mindy Newell and Gray Morrow used Lois to focus on the serious subject of missing and abused children. It was maturely written and gorgeously drawn, and involved Lois' relationship with her estranged sister Lucy (not dead after all), and with Lana, who is integral to the plot, and certainly not in trivial fashion. There are more plus points for the fact that Superman is nowhere in sight. Missing children is also a theme of the one-shot (part of the *Girlfrenzy!* series), where Lois dons tight outfit and kicks ass. Despite a contrived plot it's a gutsy tale by Barbara Kesel, Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti. Their version of Lois certainly demanded more attention.~HY

Recommended: 15, 29, 33, 51, 110, 118-121, microseries 1-2

LOLITA

Eurotica: *4 volumes + 1998 to date*

Belore draws in a large, crude, but effective style and he certainly knows his anatomy, chronicling the adventures of his large-breasted heroine and her equally well-endowed friends... not to mention all their many fantasies. Very much a crowd pleaser, with a bit of something for the average guy, pretty much an endless string of shagging and diddling without much pretence of a plot.~FJ

Police Action featuring LOMAX N.Y.P.D

Atlas: *3 issues 1975*

A feeble attempt to produce a detective comic emulating the TV police series prevalent at the time. Lead feature Lomax is a non-starter, and even worse is back-up 'Luke Malone – Manhunter', drawn by Mike Ploog, who seemed to have required something to keep his feet occupied while using his hands to draw *Man-Thing*.~FP

Vertigo Pop! LONDON

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 2003*

The second of Vertigo's music based series concerns 1960s rock star Rocky Lamont, musically redundant and pining for the better times. Screening a film he made aged thirty for himself at sixty, he discovers there is a way he can reclaim his youth. Philip Bond's seedy illustrations are great, and while this is Peter Milligan not trying too hard, it's still a sharply observed domestic comedy with plenty of funny moments.~WJ

THE LONE GUNMEN

Dark Horse: *One-shot 2001*

Spun-off from *X-Files* into their own TV series, these conspiracy theorists and paranormal investigators were quickly cancelled. This is a serviceable story with appeal to the already converted from TV writer Jane Espenson and pleasant, if static, art with consistently good likenesses from Paul Lee. Extra points for use of a photo cover clearly showing two actors standing on boxes to appear taller.~WJ

THE LONE RANGER

Pure Imagination: *One-shot 1993*

He wears a mask, rides a horse named Silver, has a pal called Tonto and goes around shooting people; what else could you ask for in a comic called *The Lone Ranger*? As a very big plus, this collection of Cary Bates' rarely seen newspaper strip features almost fifty pages of prime Russ Heath artwork. So what are you waiting for? Hi-Yo Silver awaaaay!~DAR

THE LONE RANGER AND TONTO

Topps: *4 issue miniseries 1994*

After reinventing *Jonah Hex* for the 1990s, Joe R. Lansdale and Tim Truman took on *The Lone Ranger and Tonto* – a pair that hadn't even made it past the 1960s. It's not bad, with an origin of sorts worked into a good character piece about the relationship between the pair. But the plot, about an alien, mummified by the Aztecs and accidentally awakened by train robbers, is a weak reflection of Lansdale's roots as a horror writer. Having said that, Truman's artwork has a pleasing openness and there's a lot for Western fans to enjoy.~NF

LONE WOLF AND CUB

First: *45 issues 1987-1991*
Dark Horse: *28 volumes 2000-2002*

Itto Ogami is the official executioner of the Shogunate, with a loving wife and child, until he falls foul of the political ambitions of the Yagyu clan and is accused of plotting to overthrow the Shogun. His wife is killed and he's ordered to commit ritual suicide, but instead decides to seek revenge as an outlaw assassin. He offers his small son Daigoro the choice of sword or ball. When the sword is picked he embarks on the road to hell, taking his son with him. The pair travel together, Diagoro in a baby carriage, living off the land and by their wits, occasionally earning money as assassins. Kazuo Koike and Goseki Kojima's comic first appeared in Japan in 1970 and has enjoyed huge success, being made into films, plays and a television series. There are twenty-eight volumes (roughly 9,000 pages) of the strip in the original language, reprinted in order by Dark Horse, but selectively by First, which had around sixty story pages an issue in comic-sized format.

Cited as an influence on the visual style of some of America's film-makers, *Lone Wolf And Cub* is notable in the comics world for inspiring Frank Miller (most obviously on *Ronin*), who provided introductions and covers for the first twelve First issues. After Miller, Bill Sienkiewicz (13-24), Matt Wagner (25-36), Mike Ploog (37-44) and Ray Lago (45) drew the covers. Miller and Sienkiewicz covers are re-used by Dark Horse (1-18), followed by new artwork from Wagner. Ogami's 'origin' is presented in several tales (6, 13), and Diagoro's separation from his father on several occasions provides the impetus for the story (11, 33-39). Throughout, bushido, the warrior's code of honour, determines how the characters must react, even to the point where a messenger's job is more important than the life of a child (45). Stories are saved from repetitiveness by the presence of Diagoro, and by Koike's masterly story-telling, pitting Ogami against various members of the Yagyu clan (15, 16, 32, 43), the Kurokuwashu ninja (3, 26), yakuza and, of course, the elements themselves.

Visually the series is amazing, mostly pen-and-ink work with the occasional wash effect, constantly graceful and vital. Small actions can take pages and there's always time to create atmosphere and setting. There's an expressionistic feel to the drawings, which goes hand-in-hand with the storytelling. This is a violent and uncompromising work that nevertheless goes beneath the surface to the heart of the characters and the social mores of the age in which it's set. Not for the faint-hearted, but essential reading for anyone who loves the medium.

The First series offers the benefit of artwork printed at a larger size, as the Dark Horse volumes are in the Japanese format, smaller than paperbacks, and are therefore still worth looking out for, even if only as a way of sampling the series.~NF

Recommended: Dark Horse 1-28

LONE WOLF 2100

Dark Horse: *5 issues + 2002 to date*

Here's a surprise. Updating the concept of the Ronin with a child wandering his world to the future is valid, but deliberately tying it into what's considered one of the greatest Japanese comics ever is, frankly, bizarre. It invites comparisons in which even better creators are going to be considered second-best, and Mike Kennedy and Francisco Ruiz Velasco are hardly considered among the first rank. Let's put that to rest. It's nowhere near as good as *Lone Wolf and Cub*, and certainly lacks its subtlety. The surprise is, Velasco's horrible colouring apart, that it works. Kennedy has plenty of good ideas, and the mood of the original is maintained. This lone wolf is an escaped synthetic life-form programmed to protect itself at all costs, accompanied by the infant daughter of the man who reprogrammed him. Adventure fans could do far worse than investigate. 1-4 are collected.~WJ

LONELY NIGHTS COMICS

Last Gasp: *One-shot 1986*

Dori Seda offers a mixture of autobiographical strips largely concerning her dog, with whom everyone assumes she has an unnatural relationship, and some further pieces on sex. They're all perceptive, delightfully drawn and very funny, with the only mistake in the whole comic being the ill-advised *Weirdo* style photostrip.~WJ

Recommended

THE LONELY WAR OF WILLI SCHULTZ

ACG: *1 issue 1998*

Collecting the feature from late 1960s issues of *Fightin' Army*. Willy Schulz is a German-American GI who spends most of the war separated from any unit, wandering from one sticky situation to another. Writer Willi Franz was barely out of his teens when he wrote this series for Charlton. Sam Glanzman's years of experience in war comics lends the pages a measure of authenticity, but this is, nevertheless, bashed-out stuff.~SW

LONER

Fleetway/Quality: *7 issue limited series 1990-1991*

A big brute with a gun lands on a hostile planet and stumbles from one precarious situation to the next. Originally serialised in five-page instalments in a British weekly comic, the remit was obviously to end each segment on a cliffhanger, so *Loner* is plotted with no more than the following episode in mind, and as such doesn't make for a compelling read. 1-3 have some good David Pugh art, but standards decline thereafter.~FP

LONG HOT SUMMER

DC/Milestone: *3 issue miniseries 1995*

Try to work your way past the positively bizarre, off-putting and almost unreadable logo incorporating a city aflame. Once inside there's a worthwhile story about urban development and renewal, and the consequences of trampling wholesale over the wishes of the residents. Better still, despite this tying into all other Milestone titles for three months, it's easily read and understood on its own. Until the final, and least effective issue, the regular Milestone superpowered characters play their part largely outside these pages, and there's a decent attempt made to portray them as seen by the ordinary humans in Dakota.~FP

THE LONGBOW HUNTERS

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1987**

Chiefly remembered today for writer/artist Mike Grell's somewhat prurient inclusion of a long sequence in which Black Canary gets strung up, whipped and abused, The Longbow Hunters was one of the jumpers on the 'grim'n'gritty' bandwagon in the wake of *The Dark Knight Returns*. Green Arrow becomes involved in some CIA jiggery-pokery, trading his usual collection of special-effect arrows for the more usual metal-tipped, deadly sort as Oliver Queen gets ready to face up to more 'realistic' dangers in the modern world. There's his usual "I'm getting too old for this" worries followed by "I want to be a dad". Some critics have read into this an unpleasantly patriarchal agenda whereby the Black Canary, as soon as she's refused to have his child, spends the rest of the story getting abducted, beaten and generally abused. Although that's stretching it somewhat, there's a nasty, voyeuristic feel about this aspect of the book, which is otherwise eminently forgettable.~FJ

LONGSHOT

Marvel: *6 issue miniseries 1985-1986*, one-shot 1998*

One moment you're in Dimension A being chased by monsters and with no idea who you are, then some sparkly lights and you're in Dimension B being chased by monsters...etc. All that's apparent is that your luck is miraculously good (providing your motives are pure), and the name Longshot arises and you use it. After a while, you discover that Dimension B is called Earth. Writer Ann Nocenti says she created Longshot to be an innocent – a "clean slate" – and a truly feel-good hero. It could easily have been feeble and saccharine, but instead, it's a delight: such imagination, such pace, and so strange. The writing peaks around Issues 2 and 3, then becomes fractionally more predictable (though still above approved safety limits), but Arthur Adams' artwork becomes steadily more assured and intricate with each issue. Wonderful.

The original miniseries was wonderful, anyway. The 1998 abomination by DeMatteis and Zulli plunges headfirst into every pitfall that Nocenti and Adams avoided so deftly, and may leave you scared to pick up any comic for a good four months.~FC

Recommended: 1-6

LOOSE CANNON

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1995*

Superman supporting character Loose Cannon is DC's version of the Hulk, big, brutish and ever more powerful the angrier he becomes. That he's a policeman in his civilian guise isn't enough to deflect the other similarities. There's disturbingly little in the way of a cogent plot, merely testosterone unlimited as Loose Cannon and Eradicator square off.~WJ

LOOSE TEETH

Fantagraphics: *3 issues 1991-1992*

Hilarious anthology from Scott Musgrove and Brian Sendelbach, either in collaboration or separately. Three strips occupy most of the comic. 'Fruitheads' has large-eyed fruit-headed characters committing or suffering acts of extraordinary violence. This juxtaposition of children's cartoons and uncharacteristic behaviour has a longer shelf life than you might expect, as do the scrawled cartoon stories and diary entries of Billy Mathers (age 7), who responds to the world with typical childish cruelty. The other regular feature is 'Fat Dog Mendoza', who would later graduate to a TV cartoon. Shaped like a curling stone and with a voracious appetite, Fat Dog is a surreal blend of matter-of-fact reportage and seemingly stream-of-consciousness ramblings. Visually he lends himself to hilarious images, such as when he becomes Pope, and he can also be found in a Dark Horse one-shot. At least one laugh a page is guaranteed, and how many comics can you say that about?~FP

Recommended: 1-3

LORD PUMPKIN/NECROMANTRA

Malibu: *4 issue miniseries 1995*

The first three issues of this comic tell two stories, Lord Pumpkin's return to his kingdom after striking a deal with Loki and Necromantra's acquisition of power and influence in the same kingdom whilst Pumpkin is away. The final issue brings the storylines together for a rather unsatisfactory conclusion. Both characters are rather repulsive, which makes the story hard to enjoy and the outcome unexciting, but the fresh artwork by Gabriel Gecko (1-4), Kyle Hotz (1,2) and Jeff Lafferty partly compensates. The series is a spin-off from the Ultraverse's 'Godwheel Saga', Lord Pumpkin being a malevolent vegetable while Necromantra is Thanasi, the betrayer of Archimage, now, like Mantra, in a woman's body.~NF

LORDS OF MISRULE

Tundra: *One-shot 1993*

Dark Horse: *6 issue miniseries 1997**

Callow is a Lake District village where Kieron Wallace is sent by his editor to meet Yolanda Marchant, creator of the best-selling Wyrdfane books. Once there the eerie atmosphere of the village begins to unlock Wallace's buried secrets with grim and overwhelming finality. An entertaining horror tale from Dan Abnett and John Tomlinson chillingly rendered by Gary Erskine. Peter Snejbjerg illustrates the miniseries, in which there are more bad things happening in Callow. When the editor of *Eldritch Express* is murdered, her boyfriend and ex-boyfriend take a trip to Callow in search of some answers. The usual crop of haunted hitchhikers, weirdoes and jolly dead people serve to bring these rivals a little closer, but when Jack, a native of the eerie hamlet, is accused of murder he finds that the influence of Callow is no easy thing to escape. It's another well produced terror tale, with appropriate art from Peter Snejbjerg.~WW

LORDS OF THE ULTRA-REALM

DC: *6 issues 1986, 1 Special 1987*

Fantasy, owing much to Edgar Rice Burroughs, telling the story of Michael Savage, a tortured Vietnam veteran who is mystically transferred to the Ultra-Realm, a reality embodying all of the Earth's fears and hopes, ruled by Seven Princes of Light and Seven Princes of Darkness. Doug Moench's script doesn't really have anything to say, and Pat Broderick's florid but rather flat artwork, though distinctive, is only occasionally engaging.~NF

LORELEI

Starwarp Concepts: *6 issues (0-5) 1993-1994*

Power: *1 issue 1996*

Starwarp Concepts: *Series two 1 issue + 2002 to date*

This is a lot better than you'd expect from the badly drawn covers of large-breasted women with their arses hanging out. Not that they're absent inside, just largely better dressed. The central plot concerns a succubus who feeds on the life force of others to keep herself alive, and a photographer on the verge of national fame who's physically sick from the stresses of life. She's about to appear on a TV show, one of the producers of which is prone to murdering women. It's all decently paced and written by Steve Roman in a horror movie style with impending doom around the corner, and the art of David Matthews improves by the issue. With the plot unfinished, it was surprising to see Lorelei return six years later in a sixty-four page comic that reprints 0 and 1, preceded by a new story very much in the 1970s *Vampirella* style. Steve Geiger's art is better than Matthews', but the homage story lacks the style and intrigue of the previous series.~WJ

LORI LOVECRAFT

Caliber: *One-shot ('My Favorite Redhead') 1997, one-shot ('The Dark Lady') 1997, one-shot ('Repression') 1998, one-shot ('The Big Comeback') 1999*

AV Publications: *1 volume 2000, 2 issue microseries ('Into the Past') 2002*

Lorelei Lovecraft is a struggling actress until she and co-star Allen Roberts are targeted as sacrifices by their director. He's been studying The Necronomicon, but not closely enough and Lorelei survives and decides to study the book herself. As she becomes more conversant with magic, she is involved in more supernatural adventures, all the while trying for her big break in the movies. Created and drawn by Mike Vosburg (Pete Ventrella co-writes from 'The Dark Lady') this is a fun, if not exactly politically correct, horror-comedy (as an actress, Lori might expect to be naked some of the time, after all). It manages to retain a light-hearted charm, despite the horror trappings and it's easily the best artwork Vosburg's produced, with plentiful use of zippatone and shadow. 'The Dark Lady' includes a reprint of 'Linda' Lovecraft's appearance from *Star*Reach* 3. The AV Publications volume collects the Caliber issues and adds a new story tidying up plotlines. With 'Into The Past', Vosburg and Ventrella, have Lori settled as an actress and dating Allen, while dealing with a sinister society of sorcerers called The Cabal in Hollywood and on a self-help retreat.~NF

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* Available in a collected edition

Recommended: AV Publications volume

THE LOST

Caliber: *2 issues 1996*
Chaos!: *3 issues 1997-1998*

The creepy aspects of *Peter Pan* are accentuated in this updating of story elements to the late 20th century. Peter is a hypnotic rent boy, who abducts his Wendy, while the permanently four year old Michael encounters a deranged Captain Hook. The combined talents of Marc Andreyko, Galen Showman and Jay Geldhof are responsible, with Mark Ricketts contributing flashback sequences. This was never completed in either incarnation, but the vision is disturbing enough to merit pulling out of the bargain boxes.~FP

LOST ANGEL

Caliber: *One-shot 1991*

The first chapter having seen print in the *Roulette* anthology, Kevin VanHook was able to conclude his female private eye story here. He's caught between two stools, wanting to play it straight, but realising some pandering to the comic fan audience by way of alluring pin-ups might be commercially prudent. It's a shame, as they're nothing to do with an otherwise good thriller. Van Hook's art, though, is spartan and static, although not lacking talent.~WJ

LOST CONTINENT

Eclipse: *6 issue miniseries 1990-1991*

Set in the mid-fifties, this is the story of the search for a lost Arctic nation. Hazekura, an archaeologist, and Hinata, a reporter, are opposed by a mysterious secret society that seeks the lost land for its own evil purposes. Thrills, spills, dinosaurs and sorcery add up to a fast-paced romp. This traditional adventure series in the manner of Burroughs or Haggard is written and drawn by Akihiro Yamada in a style that is an intriguing mix of Japanese and Western influences.~NF

LOST GIRLS

Kitchen Sink: *2 issues 1995-1996*

Begun in the pages of *Taboo, Lost Girls* is Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie's attempt to produce an intelligent, grown-up comic about sex which doesn't fudge the issue and appeals equally to both sexes. It's unrepentantly pornographic, with a segment of story followed by a balancing segment of sex, but ultimately comes over as cold and over-stylised, despite Gebbie's intensely coloured, Art Nouveau-influenced artwork. Her attention to detail over clothes, shoes and surfaces will engage some female readers, although others will find the artwork garish. Almost too clever for its own good – as erotica, anyway – it re-examines three female archetypes from children's fiction: Pale, opium-addicted Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*, repressed Wendy from *Peter Pan*, and giggling good-time girl Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*. The three women meet in a luxurious hotel and, as they get to know each other, tell erotic versions of their famous stories. It's due for revival from Top Shelp in 2003.~FJ

LOST IN SPACE

Gold Key: *23 issues (37-59) 1973-1977 (37-54), 1981-1982 (55-59)*

Formerly titled *Space Family Robinson, Lost in Space* appeared large on the cover from 15 when a TV show began using a remarkably similar concept to the comic. The title switched when the idea was revived with 37. Buffeted through time and space, the Robinson family encounter a variety of aliens, almost invariably biped humanoids in predictable hokey old plots. This is largely dull, unimaginative material, although reasonably drawn by Dan Spiegle. The 1980s issues are reprints.~FP

LOST IN SPACE

Innovation: *18 issues 1991-1994, 2 issue microseries ('Project Robinson') 1993, one-shot ('Strangers Among Strangers') 1993*

Leaving Earth in 1997 to colonise a planet in the Alpha Centauri system, Doctor John Robinson, his wife Maureen, their children Judy, Penny and Will and Major Don West voyaged in suspended animation. The weight of saboteur Doctor Zachary Smith knocks their craft, the Jupiter 2, off course. The family adopt Smith as Will and Penny's tutor whilst Major West pilots them through uncharted space where the crew and their robot encounter many forms of alien life. The comic's continuity is set seven years into their voyage showing Penny and Will as teenagers. Happening between 12 and 13, 'Project Robinson' focuses on Maureen's early career in 1 and future husband John's in 2. A new story arc, planned as twelve issues, starts in 13 with the crew scattered throughout time and space by the vengeful J'ahl. Unfortunately this was never finished. 'Strangers Among Strangers' reprints 2-3 along with questionnaire interviews with seven of the original cast members.

A prime mover in this series is scripter and "alpha control" Bill Mumy, who was the child actor who played Will Robinson in the TV show, and grew up to front cult band Barnes & Barnes. Mumy and artist Michael Dutkewicz produced 3, 4, 9 and 13-18, while Matt Thompson draws 2, 8 and 12 as well as writing 1 and 8. The earlier stories are unlikely fluff that function as excuses for a rag-tag parade of artists to draw cheesecake shots of the female cast members. Outside the promise of 13-18 the series is completely feeble.~SW

LOST IN SPACE

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1998**

Competent continuation of the movie that sees the criminal stowaway Dr. Smith, held in the brig as the Jupiter 2 blindly gropes its way back to familiar space. The deadly saboteur manages to get his hands on alien technology that not only gives him great power over the heroic Robinson Family but gives a monstrous creature the chance to take over the spaceship for its own vengeful purposes. Faithful if uninspired nonsense that will please the movie fans if few others.~WW

THE LOST ONES

Image: *1 issue 2000*

One of many projects initiated and then almost immediately dumped by Image in 2000. Ken Penders turned out a captivating first chapter about a woman able to control electrons on the run from government agents, her origin somehow tying into the dropping of the first atomic bomb. While working for Archie Comics Penders has developed a clear and open style, and cancellation was a great shame.~FP

LOST PLANET

Eclipse: *6 issue miniseries 1987-1989*

Earthman Tyler Flynn is transported to an exotic other-worldly locale where he encounters, among others, a woman and her chimpanzee, dinosaurs, a talking raven and Ambrose Bierce. This well-illustrated superior fantasy is obviously a labour of love from creator Bo Hampton, and the back-up stories give an added insight into the world and characters he's created. If fantasy comics usually make you barf take a look anyway. You might be pleasantly surprised.~WJ

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* Available in a collected edition

LOST STORIES

Creative Frontiers: *6 issues 1997-1998*

I. M. Lost is dragged down a well by two gnomes, Grimloch and Fitzpatrick, into the world of all lost things, where he comes to believe that his task is to find his missing father. Gilcrest, the Leader of Lost Souls tries to kill him for his body, but he escapes with the help of cloud creature,

Strat, and unfreezes Kylie, a captive. In the meantime, his body is discovered and his funeral arranged. Written by John Riley and with artwork from Garrett Berner, this is an intriguing fantasy with simple, yet effective artwork. Unfortunately, it remains unfinished.~NF

THE LOST WORLD: Jurassic Park II

Topps: *4 issue miniseries 1997*

Competent adaptation of the movie sequel wherein world-weary palaeontologist Ian McCulloch tries and fails to stop a bunch of smug know-it-alls from bringing live dinosaurs back to America. Don McGregor scripts and Jeff Butler draws, but it's still just another big lizard comic.~WW

Sergio Aragonés LOUDER THAN WORDS

Dark Horse: *6 issue miniseries 1997**

This is an excellent collection of wordless gag-pages. Sergio Aragonés works very much in the European style of cartoon gags, and here he's allowed more space than in the margins of Mad to set up and then execute his jokes. The result is excellent, although a rapid read, and a subsequent series of similar material was published as *Actions Speak*.~NF

LOUIS

Metaphrog: *1 volume ('Red Letter Day') 2000, 1 volume ('Lying to Clive') 2001, 1 volume ('The Clown's Last Words') 2002*

In the town of Hamlet, Louis lives and works alone in his house except for companion/pet, FC (for "Formulaic Companion"), a bird-like creature confined to a cage. Unlike the other inhabitants, who eat their regulated rations and occupy their spare time with entertainment centres, Louis daydreams about the mountains. His neighbours, Clean and Jerk Quidnunc, who have convinced him that he has an aunt, and to whom he therefore writes painstakingly about his life, also spy upon him at the behest of the postman. In the first volume, Louis has to rescue FC from his neighbours and attempts to reach the mountains. In the second volume, Louis is arrested and sent to the Bee Farm where he meets Clive, a bee who's trying to fly, the sinister, Weevil, who tries to eat FC and Chief Executive Officer, Clammy, who attempts to brainwash Clive. The third volume sees Louis back in Hamlet, missing his friend Clive and facing weekly cheese interrogations by the Cheeseman Information Agency, which wants to know what he knows about the underground. Louis is diverted, however, by trying to design a new game for a competition associated with a mandatory Fun Day.

The central character of this fantastic, surreal, allegorical series appears to be completely innocent and naïve, oddly ignorant of his surroundings and role in life. Exploring elements of societal control through surveillance, narcotics and authoritarianism, John Chalmers and Sandra Marrs, who work together as Metaphrog, have produced a multi-layered comic that's enigmatic, disturbing, unfathomable and yet, finally, unforgettable. Though quite why *Louis* is described as primarily for children, is itself disquieting.~NF

Recommended: 'Red Letter Day', 'Lying to Clive', 'The Clown's Last Words'

LOUIS RIEL

Drawn And Quarterly: *7 issues + 1999 to date*

This is Chester Brown's biography of controversial Canadian figure, Louis Riel, considering the case for his being a hero or a villain. It begins in 1869 with the sale of Rupert's Land to the Canadian government by the Hudson's Bay Company. Riel was champion of the Métis, people with both Indian and settler blood, most of whom spoke French. Brown dramatises the story from different sources, offering comparisons and corrections (e.g. where he's ignored the facts for dramatic purposes) in notes at the end of each issue, with the intention for the story to be completed in ten issues. Keeping strictly to a six-panel grid per page for his storytelling, Brown's approach is deliberate, but affecting, drawing the reader in to the sparse landscape and the political, social and military machinations of his characters.~NF

LOVE & ROCKETS

Fantagraphics: *Series one 50 issues 1982-1996*, series two 6 issues +, 2001 to date*

Love & Rockets (sometimes with ampersand, sometimes spelled out) was one of the earliest alternative comics written by and for young people. The Hernandez Brothers (Jaime, Gilbert and Mario, although he later faded away) began by writing a range of science-fiction and comic-inspired tales. Within a couple of issues they'd settled down to major storylines, and although they would experiment with different stories from time to time, Jaime's Mechanics universe, and Gilbert's tales of a small Mexican town called Palomar (beginning in 5 with 'Heartbreak Soup'), would be the narratives that held the magazine together.

Jaime is perceived as the lighter-weight writer of the two, although perceptive readers will soon note he takes greater risks both in structuring his stories and in forcing the reader to make leaps of understanding between them. What begins in the first few issues as the funny story of punk mechanic Maggie, her crush on her new boss Rand Race and her possible lesbian relationship with her best friend, Hopey, complete with dinosaurs and robots (collected as the Mechanics miniseries), quickly turns into a harrowing examination of modern values. Nonetheless, the early tales, in which Maggie and her friend Penny Century imagine themselves superheroines, play with the conventions of comics in a revealing way.

The first real sign that Jaime is getting to grips with weightier matters comes in '100 Rooms', a brilliantly paced thriller set in a huge mansion that Maggie and Hopey are staying at, in which Maggie is 'kidnapped' and becomes enamoured of a man who may be no more than a simple vagrant but hints at being on the run. Jaime creates an electric atmosphere throughout the 'inside' scenes, where Maggie and her abductor hide from view, contrasting that with the open, sunny poolside frolics of her friends. For the first time her loyalty to Hopey comes into question, as do her motives for suddenly transferring her affections and her eroticism of violence – buy the comic, as the collection has some extra bits inserted which destroy the excellent, albeit obviously unconscious pacing. In all eventualities it turns out to be Hopey who abandons her to go on tour with her band. Slices of on-the-road life, like 'Crickets' in 20, bring humour back to the series before Jaime starts a number of tragic story-lines. Maggie, fat and working in a burger bar, faces up to the death of an old friend, the boy she never quite got off with, in the brilliant 'Vida Loca' (21-23). Audaciously, Jaime announces the event that will end the gang-war story, by subtitling it 'The Death of Speedy Ortiz', allowing the mood of bittersweet regret to carry the tale.

Things are even less cheerful from then on. Jaime orchestrates a huge cast of characters over twenty-eight more issues, putting each into the spotlight in turn. The plot swoops around examining a younger generation via Hopey's pretty younger brother Joey and his friends, but always returns to Maggie. One of the best later stories, 'Chester Square', in issue 40, amazes the reader by digging still deeper into this character we've been reading about for forty issues as Maggie, abandoned in a neighbourhood she hasn't visited for years, is mistaken for a whore. Jaime draws in a wonderful, sexy *Archie* style, with hints of Kirby and Toth to sharpen it up. He has a great eye for spotting blacks and dramatic composition, not to mention slapstick effects, and even in the last issues, when Maggie has been through relationships and rejections, she can still have a screaming fit that involves steam coming out of her nostrils and goggling eyes. Jaime should be remembered for his ability to put ennui on paper. He studies the limitations of life over and over, using his 'Chester Square' series of stories to go over significant events in the previous forty issues once again.

Gilbert (or Beto) is a comics version of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a magic realist who mingles symbolic acts with everyday dramas in the small Mexican town of Palomar. After several science-fiction stories, including the ambitious 'BEM' (2), Gilbert settled into producing long story arcs, rather than series of short tales like his brother, which start with the arrival of the huge-breasted Luba in the small town, and end with her departure several decades later after an earthquake has destroyed it, serial killers have run amok, and many of her children, all by different fathers, have left home. He explores both the history of the town and Luba's past, again creating a large cast, all of whom will have important roles to play as the stories unfold. He is particularly good, given the number of years the story sweeps over, at confounding your expectations for his characters. He brings perspective to his stories with 'An American in Palomar' (13-14), in which a photographer is delighted to discover such a run-down, backward place and intends to take portraits for a coffee-table 'exposé' of the poor peasants. He surfaces again at the end of the symbolic serial-killer story 'Human Diastrophism' (21-26), which begins with the residents of Palomar joining together to bludgeon a plague of monkeys and ends up with the illiterate Tonantzin, always portrayed as a sexy airhead, immolating herself on television, watched by the photographer. The liberal nonsense he spouts as he ignores his girlfriend being genuinely moved by the scene is one of Gilbert's finest moments.

Although of significance in understanding Luba's character, the long story arc 'Poison River' (29-40), which deals with her life before she sought refuge in Palomar, is probably Beto's least successful work. It has a deliberately chaotic structure, in which Luba's reactions to a hasty marriage to a gangster, and being taken from a quiet life into the glitz and danger of a big-city underworld, are echoed in the storytelling. The reader meets dozens of characters, eavesdrops on incomprehensible conversations between her husband and his operatives, and watches her get hooked on drink and drugs, with all the distortions they cause. It's just too much, panels packed onto the page to get through a huge amount of narrative. The graphic novel, with fifty extra pages, may be even longer but it allows the story some room to breathe.

Generally, though, there is a much greater sense of control and intention in Gilbert's plotting, which is why you can't really avoid reading 'Poison River'. Few stories are insignificant, even delightful shorts like 'The Whispering Tree', in which one of Luba's daughters convinces her sister that a tree's branches rubbing together are the voice of a bruja, or witch. Some of his most touching stories centre around the children of Palomar and their untimely, not to say peculiar ends, and he has a particular gift for drawing gangly-limbed, huge-headed kids. Gilbert is a much more workmanlike artist than his brother, less crowd-pleasing, except in his fondness for women with big hooters. He pushes the story along with the art, using expression and pose to tell half of it, inking freely with a brush and drawing barren landscapes and children with great freedom and beauty.

Love and Rockets contains two of the best dramas you'll find in comics to date. The main stories complement each other perfectly. Both are semi-fantasies that, understandably, have drawn a lot of female readers, attracted by the high number of strong female leads. The Hernandez Brothers share the ability to make you care about their characters deeply and to handle big issues with a personalised touch that gives them impact.

The British collected editions of *Love and Rockets* (from Titan and Penguin) differ in content from their American counterparts, often confusingly using the same titles. They split the work of Gilbert and Jaime into separate editions more than the Fantagraphics editions. Many also include additional material, some of which is published in magazine form as the *Love & Rockets Bonanza*, alongside stories prepared for other publications.

The revival is disappointing, with fewer, comic-sized pages, and a lot of them given over to what appears to be makeweight material. Jaime begins a new Maggie series in which his favourite character, older and a bit more self-aware, is horrified to discover she's no longer cool, while Beto turns back the clock in 'Julio's Day' to chronicle the birth and upbringing of a little boy in a Mexican village. Often grim and brutal, it's the meatiest thing here. The third major series is by Mario and Beto, and concerns the adventures of crash victims and expats in a pirate-riddled, little known sector of the South American jungle. 'Me for the Unknown' represents a strange change of pace, being action heavy and character light, and reads as though it were written some years ago. In between short episodes of these three stories there are a variety of shorts, gag strips and experiments, reminiscent of some of the material in the last three or four magazine issues.~FJ

Recommended: 2-26, 37, 40, 48, 50

LOVE DIARY

Charlton: *102 issues 1958-1976*

Maudlin and patronising 'find a man and keep him' trash that presumes to focus on the middle class aspirations of unloved women. The anthology format revolves around the secret thoughts of the heroines involved as related in extracts from the diaries that all lonely women keep. Appalling and insulting, even in the context of its times, unrelentingly badly written, and with the notable exception of artist Angelo Torres in 6, badly drawn.~WW

LOVE IN TIGHTS

Slave Labor: *6 issues 1998-1999*

Superhero romance anthology featuring new characters and a crop of established independent creations in a selection of stories dedicated in equal parts to love and its loss. Among a veritable welter of contributions there are relatively few standouts. Strips such as Dork Tower by John Kovalic (1 and 6), Rob Hanes by Randy Reynaldo (2), Astounding Space Adventures by Steve Conley (2), John Gallagher's BuzzBoy (3) a short from Lea Hernandez in 4 and Andi Watson's 'Family Ties' and others in issues 3-6 keep the publication from being a complete waste of ink. Confusingly, although part of the regular run, some issues are cover-labeled specials. All in all, though, despite the impressive line-up, the stories are mediocre at best and one or two are just plain bad. Art lovers only and the truly forgiving only.~WW

LOVE LETTERS in the Hand

Eros: *3 issue miniseries 1991-1992*

A positive rarity this, a story in which the sex is essential, and furthermore there's a story to be told. David Hodson contrived a simple but beguiling plot involving the maximum amount of sex, with the assorted couplings occurring in a small 1960s Australian town. A drifter named Stan arrives to bury himself away from trouble, but becomes embroiled in a relationship, the outcome of which is inevitable. There's a wry sense of humour involved, as evinced by 1's postcard pastiche depicting who's fucking whom, and by the daft 'Surferman' strip in 2, but it's the finely paced, almost film noir aspects that see the story through.~WJ

LOVE STORIES

DC: *7 issues (147-153) 1972 -1973*

A retitling of the long running *Heart Throbs* for its final few issues. The 'mod' new name didn't help much.~HS

The Sandman Presents: LOVE STREET

DC/Vertigo: *3 issue miniseries 1999*

Unknown to most of the revellers at an occult garden party in 1968, deep in the dungeon below their feet Morpheus, the Lord of Dream had been trapped in a magic bottle by the wizard Roderick Burgess since 1916. Young runaway John Constantine and a group of fellow magic groupies experienced a terrifying happening that day. Now thirty years later the surviving participants are reunited to solve the mysterious events, before a marauding mystic force destroys them all. A hippy, trippy, but not so zippy thriller from Peter Hogan, Michael Zulli and Vince Locke.~WW

LOVE SUCKS

Ace: *One-shot 1996, 5 issues, 1 Special 1996-1998*

Three guys, three different personalities, three different rates of success with women. There's not quite the necessary hook or depth to give *Love Sucks* a widespread appeal, but Kevin Santiago's Tarantinoesque dialogue for Eddie and sympathetic portrayal of the virginal Patrick should have an appeal to those looking beyond superheroes. Jay Juch's uncluttered art improves issue by issue, so don't be put off by the less than compelling covers. The colour special switches genders to focus on Wendy, last seen in the one-shot, but it's the weakest issue.~FP

LOVELY PRUDENCE

All the Rage: *2 issues 1995-1996*
Modern: *2 issues, 1 Special ('Christmas Bitterness') 1997*

The skull-faced Prudence is a young girl, whose adventures are a vehicle for creator, Maze's indignant rants against society, particularly brand names and the celebrity of murderers. A trip to the shopping mall reveals that Cthulhu is actually Winona Ryder's deformed sister. A slumber party involves the origin of Cashewna, the ghost of John Wayne Gacy and Prudence's rejection of an alien's romantic overtures. The first issue of the second series continues the slumber party story from the first series and also features TV parodies. In the special, Prudence visits Santa Claus and cooks his reindeer. There's nothing new here, though the title's lack of political correctness may be attractive to some. The artwork's distorted and ugly, but Kurt Marquart has a cleaner style in the second 2.~NF

LOVESICK FOOL

Shady Comics: *3 issues + 2001 to date*

Dominic Polcino can draw, but for most of the time employs such a dashed-off and unappealing style that anyone investigating these comics is likely to replace them in short order. They detail and analyse various failed relationships and bachelor frustrations, and elements of 2 apart, they're the same as everyone else's. The lack of a fresh approach and the ugly cartooning earns a thumbs down.~WJ

LOWLIFE

Caliber: *2 issues 1991**
Aeon: *3 issues (3-5) 1993-1996**

Lowlife's lead character Tommy is a whining and self-pitying introspective preferring to pontificate about life than to participate in one. Unfortunately, after a first issue of admitted autobiographical material, one suspects Ed Brubaker is merely applying a thin veneer of fiction over further autobiographical sequences. Most will read *Lowlife* wanting to reach into the comic and throttle Tommy, screaming "Wake up and smell the coffee". Brubaker's art, though, is very simple, open and appealing, and at his best (3's story of ripping off the shop he works in) he can engage. If you're a selfish wastepail borrow this comic and see your lifestyle justified and vindicated. Top Shelf publish a complete collection.~FP

LUBA

Fantagraphics: *6 issues + 1998 to date*

Gilbert ('Beto') Hernandez continues the long-running saga of his Latin American Earth Mother Luba and her extended family in this worthy follow-up to *Love and Rockets*. Bravely making few concessions to potential new readers, Hernandez weaves his complex narrative through a series of short, funny/sad, sometimes sexually explicit, vignettes.

The story begins when Luba leaves her hometown of Palomar for America. She fears that her past political affiliations have come back to her haunt her, and that the only way to end the threat to her loved ones lies in America. From this set-up, Hernandez gets lots of juice out of the contrasts between the 'old country' and the lurid strangeness of modern urban cities, and the series gets more hallucinatory as it progresses. Freed from the shadow of brother Jamie's peerless drawing, Beto's own artwork has never looked more impressive – clear, simple, but highly effective in conveying differences of mood, character and location. This is a tough read, requiring concentration and patience, but a rewarding one.~AL

Recommended: 1-6

LUBA's COMICS AND STORIES

Fantagraphics: *3 issues + 2000 to date*

Having moved on to other projects within *Love and Rockets*, Gilbert Hernandez here presents characters connected with his Palomar stories, mostly members of Luba's extended family. Her equally well-endowed half-sisters Fritzi and Petra feature in all issues, while 2 concentrates on Pipo now a successful business woman. What's first apparent is the seemingly gratuitous sex. In fact, it's largely through the sex, its forms and its consequences that Hernandez explores the characters in quite brutal fashion. The older Ofelia in 3 regrets her more submissive past, as she writes a book about it while helping raise a new generation of children. There are occasional very nice character touches, such as Luba in 3 remembering stopping drawing as a child, and Ofelia recalling the circumstances, but this is the weakest issue.~WJ

Recommended: 2

LUCIFER

Trident: *3 issue miniseries 1990*

This miniseries from writer Eddie Campbell and artists Phill Elliott (1) and Paul Grist (2-3) just about sustains its whimsical tone over three thinly plotted issues. Lucifer is a wicked young man who enters hell through a monstrous wart extracted from a man's nose. After bumping off the devil Lucifer becomes the new ruler of the underworld, and sets about creating hell on Earth. Grist's smooth artwork particularly complements Campbell's soup of bad puns (like that one), absurdist humour and mild-mannered satire.~AL

LUCIFER

DC/Vertigo: *3 issue miniseries 1999*, 32 issues +, one-shot ('Nirvana') 2000 to date*

This continues the incarnation of Lucifer introduced in *Sandman*, written throughout by Mike Carey. Bored with his duties as ruler of Hell, Lucifer resigned and conveniently moved to America where he runs a nightclub. The miniseries is painted by Scott Hampton with his usual panache, painlessly mixing drawn and fully painted images. Lucifer Morningstar's club manager Beatrice and his bodyguard-cum-assistant Mazikeen are reintroduced, and Lucifer finds it necessary to take one Rachel Bengai to Hell, which proves harder than he expected.

The regular series advances in story arcs and one-offs, with Chris Weston drawing the first in 1-3, involving a stage magician and his assistant Jill Presto. 'Born With the Dead' in 4 introduces little Elaine Belloc who is still pals with her dead friend Mona. 5 introduces the series' main artist, the drab Peter Gross usually inked by Ryan Kelly, on a story running to 8 portraying the beginnings of a revolt in Lucifer's old realm. 'Children and Monsters' runs from 10-13 with a prelude in 9 where we hear more from Elaine as minions of Hell come to Earth to confront Lucifer. 9 is the first of many fill-ins entirely drawn by Dean Ormston (14, 17, 20, 24), who was less successful working from Warren Pleece's layouts in 4. 14-16 offer more detail on Mazikeen and her ancestor Lilith, Adam's first wife, and the last of the stunning covers provided by Duncan Fegredo. There's more intrigue in 17-19, and 'Paradiso' in 21-23 returns to the legend of Lilith and her tribe, the Lilim, whose army are successfully attacking Lucifer.

Jill Presto finds herself called back into service in 24, preceding 'Purgatorio' in 25-27 which guest stars cute goth Death, as Mazikeen leads the Lilim against a gravely wounded Lucifer. A run of good Mariah Huehner covers also starts here. Ormston is excellent on 28, which features 'fallen' cherubs (demons) Spera and Gaudium and is a merciful break from the ongoing war plotline, but 'Inferno' in 29-32 features the culmination of the Lilim's attack; a duel between Lord Arux and Lucifer amid more court intrigue.

Mike Carey overwrites throughout, but is a good tactical plotter. Unfortunately skipping his unwieldy expository dialogue balloon continuity means losing the thread completely. The jumping around of visual styles from Ormston's simplified forms to Gross's homogenised ones doesn't do the title any favours in terms of recognition, and there's also the limitation of pencillers working from seemingly overcomplete scripts. Overall, despite acclaim and stories being rushed into collections, *Lucifer* is very ponderous and often a bore.~SW

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* Available in a collected edition

LUCIFER'S HAMMER

Innovation: *2 issues 1993*

Planned as six issues, this painted science fiction story about a massive comet due decimate Earth never made it. Perhaps the comet struck early. It's decently done, but you don't have to pine for the conclusion, since as it was adapted from a novel by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle you can save yourself a lot of trouble just reading that instead.~FP

LUCKY LUKE

Hodder and Stoughton: *8 volumes 1972-1982*
Ravette: *1 volume 1991*
Glo'Worm: *7 volumes 1998-2000*

This highly popular comedy Western strip first appeared as a one-off in the 1946 French anthology *Almanach De Spirou*, written and drawn by Belgian cartoonist Maurice de Bevère, aka Morris. Born in 1923, Morris had previously shared an animation studio with two other giants of the Franco-Belgian comics scene – André Franquin, creator of accident-prone office boy Gaston Lagaffe and the exotic animal strip *The Marsupilami*, and Joseph Gillain (aka Jijé), influential artist on the *Jerry Spring* Western adventure and a mentor to modern-day master Jean 'Moebius' Giraud. When *Lucky Luke* proved to be an immediate hit he graduated to his own weekly strip in Spirou, and from there to a series of bestselling collections, animated feature films, TV programmes, and numerous spin-offs and tie-ins. Lucky Luke is a laconic, do-gooding drifter, "a poor lonesome cowboy a long way from home" who can "shoot faster than his own shadow". He was always accompanied by his faithful but cynical horse Jolly Jumper. Luke's adventures were meticulously researched historical farces that showcased Morris's clear linework and gift for character comedy. Like other European creators Morris was captivated by the sense of freedom, optimism and newness that America, and the American Wild West, represented. In 1948 Morris joined Franquin and Gillain for a six-year sojourn in North America, incorporating his experiences and insights into the new Luke stories that continued to appear in France. Morris also met the French writer René Goscinny in New York, where Goscinny had been exchanging ideas with Harvey Kurtzman. Morris returned to Belgium in 1954, and began collaborating with Goscinny on a run of exquisite Luke stories – 'The Stage Coach', 'Western Circus', 'Curing The Daltons', 'Dalton City', 'The Tenderfoot' and 'Apache Canyon' amongst the best of them. Like Goscinny's other famous creation Asterix, Lucky Luke became a vehicle for the writer's satiric imagination, with Goscinny poking gentle fun at the conventions and clichés of numerous Western movies, while thankfully avoiding Asterix's torturous punning. The strip's supporting characters grew, with the introduction of psychotic bandits The Daltons and dumb dog Ran-Tan-Plan, appearing alongside such historical figures as Judge Roy Bean, Calamity Jane and Jesse James.

After Goscinny's death, Morris has continued to produce occasional Lucky Luke adventures with the assistance of writers like Fauche and Leturgie. In 1983 Luke's ubiquitous cigarette was abandoned in favour of a more health-conscious blade of grass, although some covers on the 1970s English editions of *Lucky Luke* already have the offending snout clumsily removed. These translations, by Frederick W. Nolan, are witty and concise, were briefly brought back into print by Glo'Worm, who added a long unseen volume, 'Ma Dalton'. In England Ravette also published a single, post-Goscinny story in 1991, 'The Dalton Brothers Memory Game', which showed that Morris' style had barely altered since the 1940s. Translated into twenty-three different languages and still one of the most instantly recognisable characters in European comics, *Lucky Luke* remains perennially under-appreciated by English-speaking comic fans.~AL

Recommended: *Apache Canyon, Curing the Daltons, The Dalton Brothers Memory Game, Dalton City, The Dashing White Cowboy, Jesse James, Ma Dalton, The Stage Coach, The Tenderfoot, Western Circus*

LUFTWAFFE 1946

Antarctic: *4 issue miniseries 1996*, 18 issues, 1 Annual 1997-1999**

This is the second part of Ted Nomura's 'Families of Altered Wars' cycle, begun in *Tigers of Terra*. His determination in this strip to see things from the Nazis' point of view is apparently justified by the exclusion of authentic swastika decals from some plastic model kits. The incomprehensible alternative history plot is just an excuse to include ever more incredible aircraft, which, with excellent computer toning by Ben Dunn, are drawn very well, and a load of funny looking nubiles in various uniforms, who are not. Sample expository dialogue: "We knew the day would come when they'd introduce the high-flying B-29's after we drove the B-17's, B-24's, and Lancasters out of the skies!" It's really only for fetishists of one kind or another. The annual is a laugh though, containing Nomura's juvenilia, some of which you could sell to certain hipsters if you put Gary Panter's name on it.~GK

LUGER

Eclipse: *3 issue miniseries 1986-1987*

One of Bruce Jones' ongoing attempts to bring old-fashioned pulp adventures to an unwitting (and, one suspects, often unwilling) public. Luger is a big-game hunter with an insane sister who gets involved in a search for a missing heiress. Good, risqué fun on the whole, with atmospheric art by Bo Hampton and Tom Yeates.~NF

LUM

Viz: *8 issues limited series 1989-1990*, 8 issue limited series (return of Lum) 1994-1995*, 9 issue limited series (Return of Part 2) 1995-1996*, 11 issue limited series (Return of Part 3) 1996-1997*, 11 issue limited series (Return of Part 4)1997-1998**

Young Ataru Moroboshi has a face shadowed by misfortune, or so says an ancient (and greedy) Buddhist monk called Cherry, who accidentally pushes him into a river while trying to stop him committing suicide. Ataru has had a bust-up with his girlfriend Shinobu, but he's hardly suicidal. However from that moment forward Ataru's life is dogged by misfortune. Returning home he finds he's been chosen by space demons to fight their champion Lum for mastery of the earth – by playing tag. In the course of winning the contest, which occupies the early issues, Ataru accidentally asks her to marry him. The rest of the series recounts his attempts to convince Lum he doesn't love her and Shinobu that he does, a classic Rumiko Takahashi love triangle which is soon complicated by the arrival of various other suitors for the hands of all three of them.

Takahashi's plotting is playful, as Ataru's home is overrun by demons (part 3), his mother falls in love with Lum's sexy fiancé, Rei, who has a habit of turning into a huge monster when riled (part 6), Lum kidnaps him to attend a cosmic war with the good gods, which he loses for her side (part 8), and Lum accidentally sends him twelve years into the future, to his own school reunion, when trying to create a short-cut to the school building (part 11). But best of all is part 16, Disco Inferno. Cherry's beautiful niece Sakura asks Ataru to go dancing with her, where they're confronted by Tsubame Ozuno, her magician lover, who's been studying black magic in the west. Ozuno's first attempt to conjure Satan results in Ataru turning into Santa, but soon it's a stand-off between Rei in monster form and the lord of darkness, much to the puzzlement of the assembled groovers. Takahashi's art is simple and straightforward. Her storytelling's very direct, but she has the talent of portraying emotion in small details, as well as

creating broad, slapstick sequences. *Lum*'s not quite as manic as *Ranma½*, but it's very much in the same, pleasantly confusing vein.~FJ
Recommended: 1-8

LUNATIC FRINGE

Innovation: *2 issues 1989*

A disparate group of working stiff misfit superheroes are brought together by a granny to combat some decidedly odd menaces. A light, fun, read with a good joke per page ratio. Further Lunatic Fringe can be found in *Overture!*~FP

LUNATIK

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 1995-1996*

There was previously no Marvel Universe equivalent to DC's Lobo. Now there is. Originality not at a premium, then.~WJ

LURID

IDW: *2 issues + 2002 to date*

The day to day life and stresses of running a California strip club, with various points of view expressed in telling the story. It's so far well written and drawn by the team of Paul Lee and Adam Huntley, and the art will delight anyone wanting to see nude women in a style not too far removed from Terry Moore.~WJ

LUST FOR LIFE

Slave Labor: *4 issues 1997-1998*

Jeff Levine invites you into his life with a collection of comic vignettes and illustrated text pieces ranging from the humdrum to the surreal. Reminiscent of Harvey Pekar, and competent enough, but lacking any real edge.~WW
Recommended: 2

LUST OF THE NAZI WEASEL WOMEN

Fantagraphics: *5 issues 1990-1991*

Entertaining adventure series that pits a burned-out alcoholic pilot who tells tall tales of fighting The Dragon Queen and Leonard, The Easter Bunny (no, really, but it's a good story), against Hitler, who's currently got the body of a parrot, and his Weasel women. Mitch Manzer doesn't always manage to pace his jokes but the bigfoot art style is pleasing on the eye.~NF

The Adventures of LUTHER ARKWRIGHT

Valkyrie: *10 issue limited series 1987-1989*
Dark Horse: *9 issue limited series 1990-1991**

In one version of reality, the (English) Civil War is still being fought in the 1980s. The agency that keeps track of a myriad different probable realities has dispatched a psychically gifted agent to assassinate the parliamentary leader, a hypocrite descending into madness, and thus bring time back into line with the future, putting a stop to cataclysmic events in other realities. That agent is Luther Arkwright, dashing adventurer, sensual lover, deadly assassin.

Based around the universes suggested in Michael Moorcock's *Jerry Cornelius* tetralogy, Bryan Talbot has woven a complex religious and political story that takes us from the painful awakening of Arkwright's mental powers in another dimension through to his god-like transcendence at the end of the tale. The art is packed with imagery, shot through with British mythology and informed by a comprehensive knowledge of world religion. That it is also drawn in Talbot's detailed, elaborately structured style is a bonus. Early issues show too much dependence on design tricks, leading to a stiffness in the action, but later ones put Talbot's theatrical sense of page layout to good effect, using chequerboards of panels to flicker between two simultaneous scenes, or slowing down the moment of assassination to half a dozen pages, each panel only fractionally different to the rest. Some readers may find it all a bit too much to assimilate, with information packed into every drawing and innumerable 'reports' on other realities threading like ticker-tape between the panels. It's a work that repays repeated reading, a love story, an allegory, a philosophical treatise: make of it what you will.

The story runs in 1-9, with Valkyrie's issue 10 (*ARKeology*) being a series of essays, sketches and notes. Dark Horse republished the comic on much better quality paper than the Valkyrie, but the quality of printing is poor. Go for either the limited-premium hardback or graphic novel reprints.~FJ
Recommended: 1-9

LUX & ALBY Sign On & Save the Universe.

Acme: *9 issues 1992-1993**

Lux the Poet & Alby Starvation, protagonists of novels by Martin Millar, are brought to comics by him and illustrator Simon Fraser. Living in a Brixton squat, airhead Lux and paranoid Alby are fair game for any strange character who comes along. Their house alone has a belligerent student of the I-Ching who wants to force his way into Nirvana, a cult who worship the goddess Ishtar (who handily becomes a major player in the series), a philosophical plant, a contented hamster, and visiting drug addicts. Throw in a drunken handmaiden sent on a holy quest to become the best kisser in the universe, a paraplegic bicycle thief and sundry fairies, and you have a fascinating and rewarding read. It's shot through with eccentric humour and unusual parallels, as the battle for Nirvana is compared with the struggle for chairmanship of a housing co-operative. Fraser's art is charming, though he seems rushed towards the end of the series. Six years after the original publication the series was collected by Slab O'Concrete.~HS
Recommended: 1-9

LYCANTHROPE LEO

Viz: *7 issues 1994**

On his seventeenth birthday, Leo Takizawa's father tells him of his lycanthropic heritage and about the Hunters who will be trying to kill him. As the story progresses, Leo finds other members of the Blood Tribe of the Beast (even at school) and other shape-changers from tribes including the buffalo and lion. Promisingly written by Kengo Kaji with dynamic, highly rendered artwork from Kenji Okamura, these seven issues are barely enough to get you started, given the scope of the script. As such it's frustrating that the remainder has yet to appear.~NF

LYNCH

Image/WildStorm: *One-shot 1997*

Jack Lynch is the Team 7 member currently mentoring Gen^{13}. This is an adventure in the Indiana Jones mold set thirty years prior to that, written by Shon Bury and drawn by Trevor Scott. Lynch finds himself opposing nazi treasure hunters and super-villain Helmut in the Amazon jungle. It adds a little to the WildStorm mythos but is otherwise throwaway.~NF

LYNCH MOB

Chaos!: *4 issue miniseries 1994*

An attempt to imitate the big-muscled superhero brutes seen in Rob Liefeld's Image comics of the time, which is so easy even mediocre writer Brian Pulido can pull it off. Were it from someone other than him satire might be suspected, although stretched thin over four issues, but at Chaos! subtlety is for wimps. Perhaps in some bizarre attempt to trademark names dozens of super-powered characters are created, labeled, and disposed of within five panels. Atrocious stuff.~FP

M

Eclipse: *4 issue miniseries 1990-1991*

John J. Muth's atmospheric painted adaptation of the Fritz Lang film, based on the screenplay by Lang and Thea Von Harbou, co-writer (also with Lang) of *Metropolis*. Put under pressure by the police, Berlin's underworld criminals begin their own search for a child-murderer. When he's captured they decide to put him on trial themselves. The painted artwork attempts to bring a photo realism to the title, but sadly detracts from the story.~NF

M.A.C.H. I Secret Weapon

Fleetway/Quality: *9 issues 1991*

When British weekly *2000AD* launched in 1977 with four new series, Judge Dredd took off, and this third-rate Six Million Dollar Man was gone within the year. Over a dozen creators worked on the series, none of them with an ounce of inspiration, and why anyone thought Americans would buy this fifteen years later is a mystery.~WJ

THE MACHINE

Dark Horse: *4 issues 1994-1995*

Having débuted in *Comics Greatest World* and hogged a fair part of early *Barb Wire* issues, The Machine stepped into his own title still hunted by the CIA. A fusion of flesh and machinery, Avram Roman can tap into any computer, has an outstanding regenerative capacity and is stronger than your average bear. It's a concept with great scope and well worked for the title's short life.~WJ

MACHINE MAN

Marvel: *19 issues 1978 (1-9), 1979-1981 (10-19), 4 issue miniseries 1984-1985*, 2 issue microseries 1994*

Debuting in *2001: A Space Odyssey* of all places, Machine Man was one of Jack Kirby's more successful 1970s creations: a thinking robot able to elongate his limbs searching for a place among humanity that rejects him. It's not an original theme, and while the art's still powerful, particularly the covers, it's not Kirby's finest work. The contrast between Kirby and Steve Ditko from 10 is a chasm, but Ditko's art also works. The stories integrating Machine Man fully into the Marvel continuity, though, are functional at best. Where Machine Man thrives is the miniseries. Tom DeFalco, who'd written the final few issues of the previous series, achieves a quantum leap in plotting, but it's the stunning art by Barry Windsor-Smith over Herb Trimpe's breakdowns that ensures this incarnation is memorable. Smith also colours the series, and his sympathetic and muted tones are essential to the evocation of a depressing future. By 2020 Machine Man has been dismantled, while his most persistent enemy owns an influential robotics corporation whose tentacles extend everywhere. Discarded by computer error, the restored Machine Man leads an uprising against the company founded on technology stolen from him. Ten years on, these issues were reprinted as two issues of *Machine Man 2020*. He was later relaunched in *X-51*.~FP
Recommended: Miniseries 1-4

MACK THE KNIFE

Caliber: *One-shot 1990*

The creators are going for that Warner Brothers cartoon effect with the exaggerated violence and talking animals, with Mack being a smooth shark. While there's a few good gags and some manic illustration, it doesn't quite come off.~WJ

MACKENZIE QUEEN

Matrix: *5 issues 1983-1984**

Mackenzie Queen lives happily in a castle. Day-to-day subsistence is not too bad, thanks mainly to his isolated location, but also because of those powers of total wish fulfilment at his command. Then those bothersome agents of the Brotherhood show up and volunteer him to help repel the Ice Men, who are giving a spot of trouble. Oh, they're also about to invade Earth. Luckily, he's assisted by his interplanetary Volkswagen Beetle and Ududu, a sort of personification of the devil: "Have any meat? I like it drippy... What's this? – Cornflakes – This isn't meat! No... but they drip."' It's by Bernie Mireault. It's in black and white. It's underground. It's sparse. It's crude. It's vulgar. It's very, very funny.~APS
Recommended: 1-5

MACROSS

Comico: *36 issues, 1984-1989*

The original *Macross* was a Japanese animated series featuring 'mecha' – planes and other equipment that transformed into robots. The comic started as an adaptation of that Japanese series (1), but then the *Robotech TV* series was created as an English-language adaptation of *Macross* and two other Japanese mecha series and the comic had a change of title to *Robotech: the Macross Saga*, and also of style. The story centres around the Macross battle fortress. This was built by unknown aliens and crashed on Earth in 1998. Humans put a lot of effort into mending it, and it repays them by powering up its automatic defence systems when it senses that its old enemy (the Zentraedi) are in range, and then blasting half of the Zentraedi fleet out of the sky. This means that the Zentraedi immediately wage war on Earth, and the humans make no attempt to explain but simply launch the Macross and pursue the battle out in space. This launch drags most of the surrounding city along with the ship, so the stories can feature a lot of domestic urban detail (beauty contests and teenage recording stars, mostly) mixed in with the heroic teenage fighter-pilots. This plot doubtless seems really clever and cool when you're about ten, and as entertainment for children goes, it's well crafted (apart from 1, which had ghastly artwork), though one hopes that any girl-child who picks it up already has enough self-confidence to shrug off the relentless undermining that's inflicted on the female characters. However, if your tenth birthday is but a dim memory and you're not in the advanced stages of manga addiction, you can safely give this one a miss.~FC

MACROSS II

Viz: *10 issues 1992-1993*

Tsuguo Okazaki and Sukehiro Tomita produced a Japanese comics adaptation of the video series *Macross II*, and this title is an English translation of that comic. The story takes place eighty years after the first *Macross* story, and Earth has been successfully keeping the enemy Zentraedi at bay with recordings of pop songs. However, the enemy's own singers have how arrived and in this story one of them is captured by a shallow young journalist and brought to Earth, causing changes in the singer, the journalist and the war. This isn't a humour series, though it's hard to describe without making it sound like a joke. The pop-song defence was inherited from the first series, where it went almost unnoticed among all the other idiocies designed for the ten-year-old brain. Transplanted to a comic for adults, though, it looks very strange, and that does seem to be much of the point of the story: redesigning the enemy's culture so that their reaction to the pop songs makes sense. The redesign works well, and the comic has a much more alien feel than the first series. Other changes: there's far less emphasis on the transforming machines, and far more on character development (though the characters still struggle to get to two dimensions), and the artwork is much more varied and dramatic. No change, though, in the action sequences, which are almost impossible to follow. Read an issue or two for the atmosphere, but don't expect much of the narrative.~FC

MAD

EC: *424 issues + 1952 to date*

Mad is an institution. It's the longest running non-superhero comic in the USA, and if sagging a little around the waist after fifty years it's had a traceable influence on American culture over several generations. *Mad*'s origin is shrouded in contradictory accounts. What's certain, though, is whoever originally suggested a humour comic, the initial success can be ascribed to the individual vision of Harvey Kurtzman. Stories of his in early issues of *Weird Science* pointed the way, and he stamped his style and personality on *Mad*, writing almost everything and laying out each strip for the artists. How it might have been under other auspices is demonstrated by *Panic*. Released by EC in the wake of *Mad*'s success, it was "the only official *Mad* imitation", and while good, it lacks the offbeat inspiration that characterised the best of the early *Mad*. Whatever it became, though, *Mad* was hardly a guaranteed success when launched.

The first issue entirely parodied other EC titles, and although tame in comparison with what was to follow comics had never seen anything like the frenetic and irreverent gag packed strips. As on all EC material, the art was superb. Jack Davis, and Wally Wood proved as adept at comedy as other genres, and John Severin's restrained approach provided contrast in 1-10. It was Will Elder, though, who really established *Mad*'s early look. His other EC work was stiff, but *Mad* was obviously a liberation. His pages seeped over the top slapstick from every panel, each stuffed with a wealth of verbal and visual asides. Everything Elder produced for *Mad* was hysterical, but for his peak see 'Shermlock Shomes' in 7.

2 ran a Tarzan pastiche (an idea repeated to funnier effect in 5), a theme continued in 3 with parodies of then top TV shows *Dragnet* and *The Lone Ranger*, thus initiating a *Mad* staple. Both were reprised and the best of other early wickedly accurate lampoons were Wood's 'Superduperman' (4) and Elder's *King Kong* (6). Other *Mad* standbys followed. Skewed versions of literary classics were introduced (via swipes at *Classics Illustrated*) with *Treasure Island* in 7, and 5's *Casey at the Bat* initiated a succession of wacky poetry interpretations. The best were Jack Davis' fantastically grubby 'The Face Upon the Floor' in 10 and Elder's manic version of *The Raven* in 9. That issue was a landmark, also introducing contemporary movie parody with a version of *High Noon*, and broadening the targets with a glance at Bop culture. Successive issues cast the net ever wider, with the Elder drawn look at restaurants in 16 stunning. From 11's Wolverton mock-up of *Life*, the covers forsook comic convention for ever more offbeat designs, with Kurtzman having the courage by 23 just to print the word 'think' along with the title. It was particularly apt for an issue containing a *Pogo* pastiche savaging the appalling Senator Joe McCarthy. Perhaps the cover innovations sparked interior artistic leaps, or maybe it was the glut of imitative publications that rapidly appeared, named and pilloried in 17. 12's Wood drawn explanation of 3-D comics is a masterpiece, with pages ripping, characters falling through panels, and daringly concluding with a blank page. That issue also has a Bernie Krigstein contribution, pastiching *From Here To Eternity*.

Comparison features, a *Mad* regular to this day, began in 13 contrasting the book and sanitised movie version of the same story, and while retaining straightforward parodies, less reliance on traditional comic format became the order of the day. Faked pages from a generic newspaper in 16 are used to satirise the furore over comic content, 19 contained unsolveable puzzle pages, there are parody ads in 21 and 22 is almost entirely a stunning photographic collage strip purporting to present the life of Will Elder. More standard strips worth noting in these later comic issues are Elder's Disney character parody in 19, Elder and Krigstein's masterful strip and reality pastiche of 'Bringing Up Father' in 17, an otherwise sub-par issue. An often stolen cover line ran "Humour in a Jugular Vein", and while taken for the wit it was, it's very apt, with Kurtzman's indignation at the placid acceptance of mediocrity informing his often barbarous swipes, such as the Jack Davis drawn pop at cheap TV in 15. The penultimate cementing of *Mad*'s status was the transformation from comic to magazine with 24 to appease Kurtzman's ambition, simultaneously avoiding the strictures of the new Comics Code Authority. While necessitating the removal of interior colour, the change permitted less reliance on strips, and more text and illustration in common with other magazines, and the employment of known humourists including Stan Freberg, but more regularly Ernie Kovacs and Bob and Ray. To all intents and purposes what Kurtzman left with 28 is the template for all succeeding issues, although despite the sophisticated design, innovation and crumbling of comic tradition these magazine issues lack the cohesive nature and manic spark of the final dozen or so comics. Those comics have a legacy far beyond their undeniable quality, with almost all the leading lights of the 1960s underground comics citing them as a primary influence, and plenty of artists beyond comics posting similar acknowledgements. Kurtzman's succeeding projects would not be as successful either creatively or financially.

The historical tendency to canonise the Kurtzman issues, unfairly belittles his versatile and under-rated successor Al Feldstein by comparison. Although not a maverick, passed a successful formula, Feldstein knew how to run with it and tweak it, and it was he who increased sales until they matched reputation. His first problem was replacing four major contributors. Although in 29-31, Davis and Elder joined Kurtzman on the ill-fated *Trump!*, and Al Jaffee, who'd arrived in 24 departed with them. Years later Davis and Jaffee would return as mainstays. Within four issues Feldstein had gathered George Woodbridge and Joe Orlando, the double-jointed slack-jawed figures of Don Martin, the incredibly adaptable Bob Clarke, and the incomparable Mort Drucker, allegedly hired when the result of a baseball game went the right way. All would remain for decades. Of the other contributors most associated with *Mad*, Antonio Prohias produced the wordless 'Spy vs Spy' continuously from 60 until his retirement in 1990, Jack Rickard's almost photographically accurate caricatures were first seen in 64, Sergio Aragonés debuted in 76 and Dave Berg arrived in 1959, although the feature for which he's best known 'The Lighter Side of...' was introduced in 66 in 1961. The observational nature of the latter was part of Feldstein's deliberate attempt to increase sales by incorporating more general humour, and over his first three years as editor he replaced the expensive satirists with lesser known but equally effective writers. That the likes of Dick DeBartolo, Stan Hart, Frank Jacobs, Tom Koch, Arnie Kogen and Larry Siegel remain relatively anonymous after decades of contributions is puzzling. Also noteworthy was Kelly Freas, cover artist between 1958 and 1962, whose interior contributions were a succession of finely painted ad parodies.

Feldstein's major editorial impact came with the introduction of cover mascot Alfred E. Neuman. A lookalike of the shrugging gap-toothed goon with the immortal tagline "What me worry?" was noted by Kurtzman, who appropriated the image for the first *Mad* paperback collection, taking the name from a radio show's running gag. It was Feldstein, though, who ran with the idea, instituting Neuman on the covers. Norman Mingo painted the first Neuman cover on 30, then 31-37. He returned in 1962, continuing to paint Neuman covers until his death in 1980. The cover to 31 has Neuman incorporated into Mount Rushmore, and his fame eclipsed some of the presidents thereon while cementing *Mad* as a universal cultural touchstone. For all the consistency, though, the success of *Mad* can be equally attributed to being in the right place at the right time. As teenagers emerged into post-war prosperity they latched onto an anti-establishment pomposity-pricking magazine in increasing numbers, with sales peaking at over 2 million copies per issue in the early 1970s. By this time artists Angelo Torres and Paul Coker had joined 'the usual gang of idiots'.

Over his first few years as editor Feldstein gradually transformed satire into parody and diminished the slapstick aspects of *Mad*, resulting in humour based more on caricature and dialogue. From that point until recently *Mad* evolved very little, but high editorial standards were always maintained despite losses such as the defection of Don Martin to rival *Cracked* (where Severin was already a mainstay) over the issue of work ownership in the late 1980s. Political commentary was increased during the Nixon years, and the cover gags were phased out in the 1970s, when the commercial decision was made to cover feature the film and TV satires within. Those take-offs generally rely on pointing out the absurdities and plot lapses, and excellent caricatures, most often from Drucker, Davis or Torres, but can be very predictable. Occasionally, though, they offer something more, a prime example being Larry Siegel's scathing indignation at the comedy of *Hogan's Heroes* stemming from the P.O.W. camp setting leading to an outrageous conclusion in 108.

When Feldstein retired in 1985, he bequeathed the editorial desk to Nick Meglin, an assistant editor since 1956, thus ensuring continuity. The success of *Mad* applied a familiarity to the content, though. It's had a vast cultural influence and sustained its position via inertia, in the process having less relevance for each succeeding generation. There's little difference in essence between the shredding of Bonanza (73) in 1962 and Six Feet Under (418) forty years later. Since the late 1950s the first few issues anyone sampled of *Mad* would probably be the funniest comics they'd read, but the repetition and recycling of material to a formula, no matter how well executed, offers diminishing returns. By the late 1990s the retirement of many long-term contributors permitted a slightly fresher outlook from newcomers. Peter Kuper now draws 'Spy vs Spy' as if born to it, and other semi-regulars include Kyle Baker, Shary Flenniken, Drew Friedman, Amanda Conner, Bill Wray, and Rick Geary, whose style fits surprisingly well. More latterly there has been a greater willingness to probe subjects previously off limits. One can't imagine the Drew Friedman illustrated 'Suicide Etiquette' (383) or the recurring 'Celebrity Cause of Death Betting Odds' (from 358) before the late 1990s, and there is sometimes more overt social commentary such as Sergio Aragonés tackling racism (356). 368 was a landmark, returning colour to Mad's interiors for the first time in over forty years for a spoof of *Entertainment Weekly*. It led indirectly, however to 403 when *Mad* reverted to full colour throughout, the extra cost being subsidised by taking advertising for the first time. Previous editorial policy had always held successful satire required total freedom. Cosy familiarity doesn't.

The sheer volume and variety of *Mad* specials and reprint collections makes a comprehensive listing beyond this publication. Ballantine Books began a line of paperback collections with *The Mad Reader* in 1954 (excising 17's Joe McCarthy satire from the second edition on), and later Signet maintained a publication schedule into the 1980s. 1-23 are best sampled through a reprint set of four lavish oversize hardbound collections published by Russ Cochran in the mid-1980s, with DC latterly republishing the early issues in their hardback Archives series. *Mad About The Fifties*, *Mad About The Sixties* and *Mad About The Seventies* are comprehensive samplings of those decades' output, and recommended to any casual reader. *Mad About The Movies* is a decent collection of film parodies, mostly drawn by Mort Drucker, but the completist can't do better than Broderbund's seven CD-Rom set. They incorporate every issue to 376 (minus a few pieces that ran into copyright problems) in affordable format along with the give-away records, filmed interviews and other ephemera.~FP

Recommended: 4, 6, 7, 9, 10 12-16, 18, 19, 21-23

MAD-DOG

Marvel: *6 issues 1993*

The 1990s *Bob* TV show cast Bob Newhart as a comic artist given the opportunity to revive his homely 1960s character Mad-Dog, provided it was given a grim and gritty reworking more in keeping with the name. *Mad-Dog* is a flip comic offering both versions. Ty Templeton's humorous take on the naïvety of 1960s comics, with the original Mad-Dog, is more successful than the updated version, which isn't far enough removed from the ultra-violent 1990s superheroes it parodies.~FP

MAD DOGS

Eclipse: *3 issue miniseries 1992*

Violent thriller in which the cops are as reckless as the gangsters, hence the title. Excellent Victor Toppi artwork promotes this above average.~FP

MAD HOUSE

Red Circle: *3 issues (95-97) 1974-1975*
Archie: *33 issues (98-130) 1975-1982.*

This was previously *Mad House Glads* (and *Mad House Ma-Ad* before that), and featured vaguely horror-themed gags in the Archie style, but for 95-97 the comic was revamped under editor Gray Morrow. Typically for a Red Circle comic, the art is terrific with a wide range of styles on show here, from the likes of Vincente Alcazar, Doug Wildey, Gray Morrow and Frank Thorne, and the numbered short stories are well crafted, if rather tame and wordy. The short-lived 'mature' Red Circle period was followed by a return to the more usual Archie material, albeit with a science fiction bent for the rest of its run.~DAR

MAD PECK STUDIOS

Dolphin/Doubleday: *1 volume 1987*

This is quite the novelty item. Operating as a record reviewer for a local paper, and simultaneously running an art studio in the 1960s, John Peck adopted the alias The Mad Peck combined the two and began doing cartoon strip music reviews. To comment on the music he appropriated the then out of print Black Cat, changing her name to Masked Marvel, supplying her with a small supporting cast including all-purpose musicologist Dr Oldie, and Frogman Jack, son of a 1950s TV star. Television references abound, with plentiful guest appearances from the stars of 1950s shows, particularly *Sgt Bilko*. The Mad Peck eventually made it to *Creem*, then *Spin* with his strip, but it ended in the early 1980s after Marvel of all people sent a lawyer's cease and desist letter claiming Masked Marvel infringed their copyright on Ms Marvel! Thereafter Mad Peck concentrated on TV cartoons, some of which are also represented. The strips are drawn in the cramped style of 1940s comics, and to take the most from them some knowledge of the music is necessary, but music fans should love the earlier material with its suggestions for compilation tapes.~WJ

MAD RACCOONS

Mu Press: *7 issues 1991-1997**

Cathy Hill's *Mad Raccoons* was an annually published anthropomorphic series that managed the difficult task of staying this side of cute, but retaining good old-fashioned charm. Virgil is constantly frustrated, ever ready to fall into a tantrum, Uncle Erf has a personality disorder that makes him act at times like his own son, his own wife or his own dog, Orly and Poppyseed are youngsters, while Cousin Lemur is a wandering minstrel. The strips are generally light-hearted explorations of the raccoons' world, but alongside them there are features on Raccoons in Literature or The Philosophy of Raccoons. The black and white cartooning is simple but visually inventive, with an acknowledged debt to such greats as Walt Kelly, Carl Barks and George Herriman.~NF

Recommended: 1-7

* Available in a collected edition

MAD SCIENCE

Slave Labor: *2 issues 2001*

Jon "Beans" Hastings dabbles with the comedic potential of the mad scientist sub-genre. In Santa Cruz in 1989 the manic Dr Mondo has a spare brain in a jar and a batch of captive aliens in his cellar, when the infamous Loma Prieta earthquake enables them all to escape. Suddenly it's now and a bunch of Scooby Gang knock-off college kids are drawn into a world of weirdness when one of their classmates becomes aware that he is the missing organ-under-glass and the evil doctor finally moves to regain his property. Lackadaisical blend of Travelogue for Santa Cruz and B-Movie pastiche. Unsatisfying.~WW

MADAME XANADU

DC: *One-shot 1981*

Much was expected from the *Detective* dream team supreme of Steve Englehart and Marshall Rogers in the first comic to be sold only through direct-market outlets and thus free from Comics Code restrictions. Englehart offers up those subjects he likes best: the Tarot, drugs and demonology in a lead feature that might have held water had it been published in flower-power days. Ironically, it takes backstage to J. M. DeMatteis and Brian Bolland's poignant seven-page science-fiction back-up.~APS

MADMAN

Tundra: *3 issue miniseries 1992*, 3 issue miniseries (Madman Adventures) 1992-1993**

Dark Horse: *20 issues (Madman Comics) 1994-2000, 2 issue microseries (Madman Jam) 1998*

Infused with the spirit of 1950s science-fiction films, Madman is also a partial return to the innocent superheroes of yesteryear. Writer and artist Mike Allred convincingly presents a world of benign and eccentric inventors creating strange robots, touching and friendly relationships, and although starring a costumed lead, there are no super villains and this is no traditional superhero series.

The first squarebound Tundra series is grey, black and white, and Allred has yet to refine the elements of his strip. There's a dark tone throughout with some resolutely unpleasant (and later uncharacteristic) scenes, but Allred's art is already polished, and it's a fine B-movie style plot. The socially dysfunctional Frank (Madman – although he's never referred to as such, it's just a catchy title) is full and present in costume, and the story establishes the main cast, some of whom were introduced in Allred's previous series, *Grafik Musik.* From many others it would stand alone as excellent, but for Madman it's more a prelude. The recent Oni Press collection adds colour. The second Tundra series is pretty much the finished article, featuring a more mature Frank, a much lighter tone and Laura Allred's vibrant colours providing the final step to an entirely charismatic package.

The continuing series is a success from the off. In the first few issues there's a plethora of bug-eyed monsters, inventive robots and aliens. Hellboy is in 5, and The Big Guy assists Frank (or vice versa) in 6 and 7. The early issues are fun all the way, and anyone who's going to like *Madman* will be instantly drawn to them. 9 is a tale, pretty much complete in one issue, of Madman shrunk to minute stature having to make his way home; this is a good representative sample. Such is the Madman's popularity and visual appeal that there are also two series of bubblegum cards (without the bubblegum), offering interpretations of the character from some of the greatest artists around. Allred used some illustrations as back-cover pin-ups, but they're entirely worth a separate purchase, perhaps as four issues of *Madman Picture Exhibition* (2002).

A thirty month hiatus separated 11 and 12, punctuated by the perfunctory *Madman Jam*, which is neither Allred or Bernie Mireault at their best, but led to Mireault's Dr Robot back-up strips in 12-16 where they outshone by miles a strangely disjointed and padded lead feature. 17-20 are presented as a four issue miniseries subtitled 'The G-Men From Hell', although given series numbering inside the covers. It was a return both to form and to plots Allred left dangling a decade previously in *Grafik Musik.* Madman's participation is minimal, as the dead G-Men continue their quest for redemption after escaping from hell.~WJ

Recommended: *Madman Adventures* 1-3, *Madman Comics* 1-11, 17-20

MAEL'S RAGE

Ominous: *1 issue 1994*

Artist Bart Sears strikes out on his own and rapidly proves he can turn out plotless big-bicep nonsense with the worst of them.~FP

The MAGDALENA

Image: *3 issue miniseries 2000*, one-shot 2001*

There is a lineage of warrior-nuns descended from the daughter of Mary Magdalene and Jesus of Nazareth. Each generation has a champion named The Magdalena and pseudo-history records her working in secret for the Vatican. The present day Magdalena uncovers a coven of christian vampires and finds her loyalties split between the church and these vampyri, leading to a confrontation with The Garduna, the Inquisition's implacable soldiers. The one-shot (issue ½) introduces a horned angel who possesses the legendary spear of destiny. Don't forget that Magdalena is a babe in shiny black skintight gear and she's stacked. Joes Benitez and Wems' artwork, complimented by the incredibly polished colouring of Tyson Wengler (1) and Jonathan Smith (2-3), is exemplary. Unfortunately the writing alternates between banks of exposition and ejaculations of surprise, often during combat. Preposterous, jewel-encrusted nonsense.~SW

MAGE

Comico: *15 issues 1984-1986**

Image: *15 issues 1997-1999**

Reading the first series of *Mage* can be very refreshing if you like fantasies, but are fed up with soft-centred fairies and hobbits. If you don't, you'll probably find it twee. Mage is a quirky updating of Arthurian myth, fast-paced and engaging (if you can stomach whimsical touches like calling the hero Kevin Matchstick). It's unsophisticated but well-structured and full of likeable characters, from Mirth, the teasing wizard, to Sean, the morose ghost. It has all the appeal of films like *Highlander*, but takes itself less seriously, with the characters periodically aware of how silly they sometimes appear. Matt Wagner has a direct approach to storytelling. His hints are very heavy, and most of the time he has one of his characters explain anything that might be confusing to another. His art's bold too, with lots of black backgrounds and bold brush-strokes. Sam Kieth played to this when he took over inks with 4, but added his own finesse. Wagner's art improves throughout. In 1 his action scenes are jerky, but by 5 the comic's become a breathless read. Kieth's inks are dazzling, but the effect is undermined by the garish application of colour. From 6 there's a regular Grendel back-up, later collected, and indeed Mage features as back-up in some issues of *Grendel.*

The second series is very much more of the same, an action-packed fifteen issue single story in which Kevin confronts his own mounting arrogance as 'The Pendragon'. He joins a whole bunch of heroic avatars (Hercules as a redneck, The Monkey King as a po-faced Chinese waiter) to fight an impending menace. There's a real feeling of "been there, done that, bought the commemorative hero statue for way too much money" about the second outing. Perhaps it's simply that like sweets a handful are nice, but too many are sickening.~FJ

Recommended: Series one 5-8

MAGGIE and HOPEY

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1997*

A colour comic filling the gap between creator Jaime Hernandez' Whoa Nellie miniseries and his ongoing *Penny Century* title. Maggie and Hopey from Jaime's *Love and*

Rockets stories feature in seventeen pages set against the backdrop of a swimming pool party gradually going sour. Interspersed between chapters are three short strips starring the diminutive Mini Rivero, Cheeta Torpeda the robot girl superhero and L'il Ray. A delightful read with important developments pertaining to later stories, particularly regarding Negra, H.R. Costigan's daughter. The Li'l Ray story is Jaime in his Dennis The Menace mode and also features Li'l Maggie and Isabel too... 'nuff said!~SW
Recommended

MAGGIE THE CAT

Image: *3 issues 1996*

Arguably Mike Grell's best character, cat-burglar Maggie gets a chance at her own title on the strength of the general interest in 'bad girls' as female leads. Grell's scripting has never been particularly focused and his artwork on this title is looser than ever. Originally a light-hearted sparring partner for Grell's pseudo-Willie Garvin, Jon Sable, for this series Maggie is thrust into a world of spies and international intrigue which doesn't particularly suit her character or her abilities.~NF

Calling John Force MAGIC AGENT

ACG: *3 issues 1962*

Force was a sort of one-man *X-Files*, investigating supernatural threats with a few tricks up his sleeve to stop them. There are three short stories each issue, but the occasionally inventive plots of Richard E. Hughes are dulled by the art of Pete Costanza and, particularly, Paul Reinman. Force later settled into occasional appearances in ACG mystery title *Unknown Worlds*.~WJ

THE MAGIC FLUTE

Eclipse: *3 issue miniseries 1990*

Mozart's Magic Flute is a perennially popular opera, conveying tragedy, farce and romance; here the spectacle is rendered in exquisite fashion with an extraordinary delicacy by P. Craig Russell. He is, however, ploughing a lonely and eccentric furrow in adapting operas to comics. While they have the capacity for pomp and pageantry bestowed by an unlimited budget, the missing sound and fury renders them an unsuitable receptacle for opera, and with little to clothe bare-bones plots one is left with a hollow item of great beauty.~FP

MAGIC PICKLE

Oni Press: *4 issue miniseries 2002**

Eccentric and surreal martial arts/superhero spoof telling the story of Jo Jo Wigman, a little girl whose life is forever changed when Weapon Kosher, the legendary Magic Pickle bursts through the floor of her bedroom! Can she solve the riddle of the Pickles' connection to the Brotherhood of Evil Produce? Is she subject to Dill Justice? Can she possibly get a date with that cute Danny Johnson? A wacky, acquired taste from Scott Morse.~WW

Father Crowe MAGIC PRIEST

Antarctic: *2 issues 1998*

Yet another series with *Warrior Nun* connections, but one of the better ones. Father Crowe is a priest with sorcerous abilities selected to investigate a murder. Having witnessed the murder of his parents as a child, Crowe experiences flashbacks, and also uncovers some disturbing evidence. The diary style narrative occasionally drifts too far into exposition, but the Crowe is likeable and Neil Googe's art is very promising so it's a shame the series never finished.~WJ

MAGIC: THE GATHERING

Armada: *4 issue miniseries ('Shadow Mage') 1995*, 2 issue microseries ('Arabian Nights') 1995, One-shot ('Homelands') 1996, 2 issue microseries ('Legend of Jedit Ojanen') 1996, 2 issue microseries ('Shandalar') 1996*

These are comics based on the collectable card game that took the world by storm. Although better produced than the similar role-playing-game comics that preceded them by half a decade, they remain pedestrian sword-and-sorcery material.~HS

MAGIC THE GATHERING

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1998*

Mike Grell and Pop Mhan knock out by the numbers fantasy based on characters from the role-playing card game. Dull.~DB

MAGIC WHISTLE

Alternative Comics: *7 issues + 1998 to date*

Britain has been blessed with the high quality toilet reading provided by *Viz Comic* for years, mining every scatalogical theme in fabulous fashion. Oddly, there's been very little similar material for the American market. Step forward Sam Henderson, with his gag cartoon strips, drawn in quick sketchy and simple style with Peter Bagge and J. R. Williams obvious touchstones. It's nowhere near as good as *Viz*, but after a few beers the misfortunes of a naked guy who constantly gets stuck in his cat-flap, Dirty Danny and assorted obscene versions of 1970s TV shows can be quite funny. Largely brief, six panel gags, anything extending over a page reads like collisions of short strips. There's also a book titled *The Magic Whistle Blows*, reprinting strips from the self-published minicomics that preceded this. Keep it by the bog.~FP

Mio Odagi's MAGICAL MATES

Antarctic: *6 issues 1996*

Three high school girls use charms and tarot readings to win their fights. Perhaps it's down to the cultural differences in expectations from a story, but even accounting for the fantasy elements, there's little logic underpinning these stories. If you can accept things happen for the convenience of the plot, you might enjoy these adventures of a sort of Japanese Powerpuff Girls. They're obviously intended for young girls, which makes the back cover adverts on some issues totally inappropriate. Despite the series being planned as first eight, then nine issues, there's no evidence of any beyond 6 being published.~FP

MAGICAL TWILIGHT

A.D.Vision/Graphic Visions: *3 issues 1995*

This collection of hardcore short stories is based on an anime series and focuses on themes of erotic fantasy – Yayoi grows a penis and tries it out on her girlfriend, Asami (1), an apprentice witch haunts a young man's dreams (unfinished in 3). The sometimes intricate artwork can be eye-catching, but the overall quality is patchy.~NF

MAGIK

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1983-1984*

In *Uncanny X-Men* 160, seven-year-old Illyana Rasputin is transported to the magical realm of Limbo, ruled by the demon Belasco. She returns to Earth in a second, twice the age she should be, with fantastic powers. This Chris Claremont written series fills in the story of what happened in the seven years she spent in Limbo, with liberal sprinklings of alternate-world versions of familiar characters and all the trademark Claremont angst.~JC

MAGNETO

Marvel: *One-shot 1994, 4 issue miniseries 1996-1997*

The début one-shot was an embossed cover reprint of two Claremont/Bolton back-ups from *Classic X-Men* with a framing sequence and a pin-up gallery. The second attempt to give one of Marvel's potentially most interesting characters his own title was not as prettily drawn and nowhere near as well written. An amnesiac Magneto, now reformed and calling himself Joseph, meets his former followers the Acolytes once again, and Peter Milligan proves once again that while he can be a talented writer, he and the Marvel mainstream just don't mix.~JC

The Mighty MAGNOR

Malibu: *6 issue miniseries 1993-1994*

Sergio Aragonés attempts to recreate the success of his *Groo the Wanderer* with this tale of an amnesiac spaceman who ends up in the hands of two struggling comic artists. Seizing

* Available in a collected edition

the opportunity, they set him up as a real-life superhero, claiming ownership and responsibility, at least until the lawsuits for property damage start coming in! Hilarious stuff.~HS

Recommended: 1-6

MAGNUS/NEXUS

Valiant/Dark Horse: *2 issue microseries 1993*

Prettily drawn by Steve Rude, but otherwise fairly inconsequential team-up between the two characters. Written by regular Nexus scribe Mike Baron, the story deals with Arkon, an alien who arrives on Magnus's planet and goes about curing the population of all ills. Predictably, all is not what it seems and Nexus soon turns up to save the day.~JC

MAGNUS, ROBOT FIGHTER

Gold Key: *46 issues 1963-1977*

Wanting a science-fiction strip of the type that would be too costly for television, Gold Key editor Chase Craig came up with the idea of someone who fought robots, a concept then modified by Russ Manning when the project was assigned to him. Raised from the cradle by all-wise robot 1A, Magnus combats renegade robots in an otherwise idyllic 40th century. Manning plotted and drew the first twenty-one issues (with Mike Royer assisting towards the end of his tenure), and never put a foot wrong. His fluid, controlled artwork enabled him to switch from action scenes to everyday moments with naturalistic ease. His characters were clean and heroic, his villains had a distinctive silent-film quality, and his robots, though seemingly fragile, were well designed, but Manning's plots were really only showcases for the action and the art. 22 reprints the first issue, after which Paul Norris handled the strip until 28. With the exception of the substandard 42 and 44 the remaining issues are all reprint. Valiant issued a further series of reprints with four issues of *Vintage Magnus, Robot Fighter* to accompany their revival of the character. The back-up strip 'Aliens', also by Manning, ran in 1-22, and early strips were reprinted as a one-shot.~SW

MAGNUS ROBOT FIGHTER

Valiant: *65 issues (0-64) 1 Yearbook 1991-1996*

Following his departure from Marvel, Jim Shooter turned his talents to revamping the 1960s Dell/Gold Key heroes. Magnus was the first, and using a blend of strong scripting and understated artwork, was soon setting the comics industry afire. Shooter wisely chose to incorporate the continuity of the Gold Key era, keeping older fans interested whilst he gave the series a 1990s spin. Magnus' guardian, a "Free-will" robot designated A-1, has realised humanity is becoming weak and indolent, easy prey for less enlightened Free-wills let alone a danger to themselves. Magnus has been defending and inspiring humanity for a brief period as the series opens and 1-4 relates how he comes to terms with his prejudices against robots who can think for themselves and his bias for humans who won't. He abandons the spoiled upper echelons of humanity and becomes a member of the Gophs (a human underclass) who live as savages at the bases of the mile high skyscrapers of the 41st century. 4-8 form a flip comic to introduce Rai, the Guardian of Japan and set the pace for a string of well-paced action thrillers that establish the landscape and characters prior to Valiant's big inter-company crossover Unity (14-15). This in turn leads into seemingly unconnected tales, illustrated by Steve Ditko and Ralph Reese, which lay the threads for a major story arc. 21-37 written by John Ostrander tell of the conquest of Earth by alien Malev robots and the guerrilla war for survival that ensues.

Although perhaps overlong, it's one of the few times that this sort of epic actually succeeds, but the follow up is pitiful. With the war over, the story restarts nearly twenty years later, with Magnus as world president, and his teenaged son goofing around, getting into fights and embarrassing dad. Its as heavy-handed and clichéd as its immediate predecessor was gutsy and entertaining. Convoluted plots from a variety of writers including Keith Giffen, involving alien invasions, body snatching Free-wills, Magnus senior lost in time and the Malevs' return, bog down in their own complexity and its no surprise or loss when the comic is cancelled. It just goes to show how important a good editor really is.~WW

Recommended: 1-10, 17-19, 21-37

MAGNUS, ROBOT FIGHTER

Acclaim: *18 issues 1997-1998*

The most recent retooling has Russ Magnus, a cynical world-weary zealot, travel to the present from the year 4000 to prevent society becoming dependent upon technology and dying from couch potatoism. His robotic mentor 'Good Shepherd', a kind of mechanical bishop, has trained Magnus from infancy to fight mechanised society from self-serving desires. When robots conquered mankind by coddling them, they created a religion whereby meat is a sacrament and the only meat left is Homo Sapiens. Magnus has been bred as a rebel because free range meat tastes better. From this peculiar beginning, Tom Peyer and Mike McKone craft average action-adventure with very few high points as most issues use the 'find the future tech, smash the future tech' plot. A storyline deriving from Good Shepherd giving Albania 40th Century technology and making them the pre-eminent superpower had potential, sadly curtailed by Acclaim's premature demise.~WW

The MAGUS

Caliber: *2 issues 1998*

Spin-off from St Germaine, and relating the story of the immortal father of major mystic player Lilith and arch-enemy/father-in-law of St Germaine. Nonsensical eldritch soap opera, impossible to follow without a route map and a scorecard.~WW

MAI THE PSYCHIC GIRL

Eclipse: *28 issues 1987-1988**

Mai is a Japanese schoolgirl who has inherited powerful psychic abilities from her dead mother, abilities the Wisdom Alliance, bent on world domination, want to train and harness. In order to escape them Mai must leave behind her ordinary life, her school-friends and her father, and take a journey, both physical and spiritual, to learn how to best use her inheritance. Kazuya Kudo's script blends the everyday, the mystical and the futuristic effortlessly. Mai is perfectly portrayed on the cusp of adolescence, feisty but needing guidance, alternately exulting and horrified by her powers, laughing with her school-friends over a crush but knowing, simultaneously, that her mind has huge destructive potential. Kudo keeps the comic full of surprises, bursts of humour interspersing epic mental battles and people being injured and killed when you're sure they're too intrinsic to the plot, and too likeable, to deserve such a fate. Ryoichi Ikegami matches these abrupt changes in his artwork. Full of splash pages for confrontations, he also has plenty of time for slapstick sequences and tender scenes. His art is a little more cartoony than usual, particularly in the humour scenes, but it's a lot more realistic than the traditional wide-eyed look he's chasing in his depictions of Mai. Titan reprinted the series in four very handsome Japanese-format graphic novels.~FJ

Recommended: 1-8

MAICO 2010

ComicsOne: *4 volume miniseries 2001*

Masudamasu introduces her android invention, Maico as a radio broadcaster and mysterious enemies immediately begin a campaign to destroy them both. Both androids and robots are used in these attacks while Maico becomes attached to assistant director, Matsuo, who is the object of Akai's affections though he is himself in love with Masudamasu. Then it's complicated by the employment at the station of another android, Rie. Toshimitsu Shimizu's story is easy-going, science fiction; an examination of the nature of humanity and the potential of artificial intelligence. Throw in lots of naked and half-naked women, romantic entanglements and giant robots and you have an entertaining and engaging, if not exactly mind-stretching comic. Shimizu's artwork is clean, with few overly-stylised manga storytelling techniques.~NF

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*Available in a collected edition

MAISON IKKOKU

Viz: *7 issue limited series ('Part One') 1993*, 6 issue miniseries ('Part Two') 1994*, 6 issue miniseries ('Part Three') 1994*, 10 issue limited series ('Part Four') 1995*, 9 issue limited series ('Part Five') 1995-1996*, 11 issue limited series ('Part Six') 1996-1997*, 13 issue limited series ('Part Seven') 1997-1998*, 8 issue limited series ('Part Eight') 1998-1999*, 10 issue limited series ('Part Nine') 1999-2000**

The new manager of a small boarding house called Maison Ikkoku, Kyoko Otonashi is a young widow. Her tenants are an odd bunch and include Yusaku Godai, a student drop-out, Yotsuya, a mysterious young man who spends most of his time scrounging off the rest of the tenants, Akemi, a young woman who works at a local bar, and Mrs Ichinose and her son, who has shown no sign yet of the madness that seems to afflict the rest of the household. From this, Rumiko Takahashi has created a romantic soap opera in which the tenants are comic foils for the nearly on, mostly off relationship between Godai and Kyoko. Constant misunderstandings dog their lives and each is pursued by other suitors to prolong the suspense.

'Part One' sets the scene and introduces Mitaka, tennis coach and all-round good guy who becomes Godai's rival for Kyoko, and Kozue, a young girl student who starts to go out with Godai (when he decides that he does need an education after all) and can't understand why he won't take advantage of her. 'Part Two' continues the will-they-or-won't-they nature of the relationship, as Kyoko's parents try to persuade her to give up her job and move back with them. Godai meets Kozue's very friendly parents, making it all the more difficult for him to tell her he doesn't want to go out with her any more. 'Part Three' begins with a loss, but is mainly about Godai's misfortunes when he shares an apartment with a masseuse and her Yakuza boyfriend. The rest of the series settles into a pattern of sorts. A drunken kiss from Akemi for both Godai and Kyoko causes complications. Mitaka and Kozue unknowingly create the wrong impression when Kozue asks for his advice about Godai. Then there's an impromptu costume party when Kyoko tries on her old school uniform and Godai's grandmother arrives to create some inspired interference. After Grandma's return to her home in 'Part Five', Godai breaks a leg trying to rescue Kyoko from the roof and there follows a series of misadventures in the hospital that eventually includes even Mitaka. 'Part Six' introduces a new resident. Nozomu is a rich troublemaker who's there by accident, but decides to stay to be close to Kyoko. Meanwhile, Godai lands a job as a trainee teacher at Kyoko's old school and finds himself the object of affection for Yagami, one of the students, much to his consternation.

In 'Part Seven', Godai works part time in a strip club, Yagami manoeuvres him into becoming her personal tutor and Mitaka is set up for an arranged marriage with dog-loving Asuna. 'Part Eight' piles on the misunderstandings with Godai playing father to the children of a stripper, a night's hotel reservation and a drunken encounter between Godai and Mitaka. Things look better at the start of 'Part Nine' as Mitaka and Asuna seem to accept their fates, but there are further complications.

Takahashi's artwork is simple, but effective, especially in the expression of emotion. The storytelling, building to an affecting finale, is fast-paced and full of slapstick, but capable of drawing back for quieter, more intense scenes that mostly avoid seeming too manipulative.

Whether you'll enjoy the series depends on your tolerance for being teased and for the largely unsympathetic nature of Godai. Everyone treats him like a doormat, but his ineffectiveness and indecision generally mean he deserves such treatment. As the series progresses, Godai does mature, even as his mishandling of situations seems to escalate, and as he does so, his chances with Kyoko improve. If you enjoy one part of the series, you'll enjoy all of it.~NF

Recommended: 'Part Three' 1-6, 'Part Four' 1-10, 'Part Five' 1-9, 'Part Nine' 1-10

MAJOR BUMMER

DC: *15 issues 1997-1998*

Pity poor Lou Martin. All he wants to do is stay a couch potato, but two inept green-skinned aliens accidentally turn him into a muscular-hunk with brains to boot, and try as he might Lou can't help being a hero. Cue kooky goodie super-group and equally inept adversaries. Add in lots of weird creatures, including a giant cat and a Nazi dinosaur, and you have a forgotten gem by John Arcudi, Doug Mahnke and Tom Nguyen. The series is well paced, very funny and Arcudi's observations about life are wonderful. The only bummer here is the series only lasting 15 issues. To sum up, here's a scene in 13: Knock, knock, knock. "Hey, could you get that? I got a load to drop."~HY

Recommended: 1-15

MAJOR POWER AND SPUNKY

Eros: *One-shot 1994*

Cheerfully smutty *Carry On* style romp, with no nudity or bonking, but bags of innuendo with a gay twist. Scripter Malachy Coney brings up all the old Batman and Robin camp jokes and artist Sean Doran has a real comic gift. A very funny comic if you're not narrow-minded.~HS

Recommended

MALCOLM X The Angriest Man In America

London Publishing: *One-shot 1992*

Worthy but dull effort to bring the teachings of Malcolm X to a comic-reading audience. The problem lies with the illustrations, which add nothing to the text, and an unimaginative talking-heads format studiously applied throughout. You're better off buying a book.~FP

MALICE IN WONDERLAND

Eros: *1 issue 1993*

A reprint of two deeply misogynistic porno strips by noted illustrator/dirty old man/bon viveur Wally Wood. The title story is, of course, a Lewis Carroll/Disney parody that has our buxom, naked heroine adrift in a creepy Wonderland full of horny anthro-animals, while 'Flasher Gordon meets Women's Lib' includes a great many 'hilarious' rape gags. As a dispiriting insight into Wood's boringly conventional sexual imagination this is not without 'interest', but as a piece of erotica, or even a piece of comic art, it's nothing more than tossed-off rubbish, in every sense.~AL

MAN

Nicotat: *1 issue 1989*

Pastiche of the ultra-violent comic characters populating comics in the 1980s, positing that the deadliest creature on Earth is Man. Inside an ultra-brute proceeds to demolish an entire town. It's a joke stretched too far, unlike the two-page back-up, in which Gerard Jones redialogues an old war story to far funnier effect.~WJ

THE MAN

Print Mint: *One-shot 1972*

Completed in 1966 while in college, this collects one of Vaughn Bodé's earliest works. It details several days in the life of a caveman, in which he simply hunts, eats and eventually finds a companion, a lizard. Taking this simple premise Bodé uses it as a means to ask some very profound questions about our relationship with the planet and life itself. Both touching and insightful, this is quite possibly the first existential comic.~DAR

Recommended

Randy O'Donnell Is THE M@N

Image: *3 issues 2001*

A teenage boy is transported via a magical object to another world where he has superpowers and spends his time saving the day, yet at home he can't get a date or the respect of his peers. Tom DeFalco's script is competent, as are Ron Lim's pencils, but don't waste your time looking for original ideas, because there aren't any.~DB

MAN AGAINST TIME

Image: *6 issue miniseries 1996*

An intriguing, dream-like story starring Law, a mysterious hooded figure who creates and destroys timelines at whim so he can have 1940s pilots in space and 19th-century Arizona lawmen fighting ancient Romans. Perhaps he will stop world war erupting in the Balkans a fourth time. The art by Gino DeCicco is the only clear thing in it.~GK

MAN-BAT

DC: *2 issues 1976, 3 issue miniseries 1995*, 3 issue miniseries 1995-1996*

Drinking a serum that transforms him into a mixture of man and bat, Kirk Langstrom débuted in *Detective* 400. He proved popular enough to merit regular appearances in Batman titles, but not to sustain his own series beyond two wildly different stories, almost unconnected beyond the title character. Back-ups in *Batman Family, Detective,* further guest shots and a one-shot reprint of his Neal Adams-illustrated appearances in *Detective* 400 and 402 were the order of the day until 1995. Featuring sumptuously painted art from John Bolton and a slim plot well paced and dialogued by Jamie Delano, the 1995 miniseries is a good read with a conservation subtext. Delano enjoys gently ridiculing Batman by giving him an investigative visit to a whorehouse and a speeding ticket, and the Man-Bat has a previously unseen agenda. The next miniseries has Man-Bat back in Gotham and is very ordinary.~WJ

MAN-EATING COW

NEC: *10 issues 1992-1993**

Wisely realising the one-note joke of the silent title character, the series concentrates as much on the stupid superheroes populating the city, most prominently the wonderfully conceived Crime Cannibal, who eats malefactors. Presented with the po-faced sincerity of the Airplane movies – the police department includes an undercover clown squad – this is a different type of humour from its progenitor, *The Tick.* The best sampler is 6, where cattle mutilations and UFOs plague the middle-American town of Dullsville, "where scientists find more creative household uses for isotopes". The final two issues form part of a longer story with the concluding issues of *Paul The Samurai**.~WJ

The Saga of the MAN ELF

Trident: *5 issues 1989-1990*

The title may sound cutesy but Guy Lawley's Michael Moorcock-inspired near-future fantasy has a very hard edge indeed, as well as enough in-jokes and references to satisfy the biggest Moorcock fan. Using the cast of the *Jerry Cornelius* tetralogy (and handling them better than most writers who've had a go at adding to the *Cornelius* canon over the years), Lawley crafts a semi-absurdist political adventure somewhere between *Luther Arkwright* and *V for Vendetta* (very English in its frame of reference, including the humour). The first two issues are beautifully illustrated by Steve Whitaker, the comic world's answer to Harold Brodsky: those in the know revere his abilities although he's hardly published a thing. *Man Elf* is drawn in an open and European style, which late-substitute artist Richard Weston tried his best to assimilate for the final three issues; unfortunately his take on it looks blocky and clumsy.~FJ

Recommended: 1-2

The Uncanny MAN-FROG

Mad Dog: *2 issues 1987*

The idea of setting a comic in a circus freak show is just so apt you wonder why no one's done it before. Perhaps considering a comic named after a single character would be more attention-grabbing, the team of John Wooley and Terry Tidwell title their series after just one member of their eccentric cast. Sadly short-lived at just two issues, this is an engaging mixture of drama and humour.~WJ

MAN FROM ATLANTIS

Marvel: *7 issues 1978*

A survivor of Atlantis aids an undersea research organisation, encountering assorted villains and anomalies. Creators Bill Mantlo and Frank Robbins seem uninspired by the mundane TV show on which this is based, and cancellation of both show and comic was swift.~FP

The MAN from U.N.C.L.E.

Millennium: *2 issue microseries 1993*

Prosaic and unmemorable affair of Kuryakin and Solo turning out for U.N.C.L.E. to combat a latent T.H.R.U.S.H. menace, years after their active service retirement. The opening line sets the standard for the story: "April 31st".~APS

THE MAN IN BLACK

Harvey: *4 issues 1957-1958*
Lorne-Harvey: *1 issue 1990*

Mr Twilight, The Man In Black, variously Fate, Luck or Death, presents short tales, some 'true', that illustrate how fate can move in mysterious ways. An eagle mascot saves a life in the American Civil War; an outlaw kills a messenger who carried a peace offering on the eve of the battle of Little Big Horn and thus ends up on the battlefield himself. The Weaver ("she who weaves the patterns of life") or Time are his opponents in these tales, urging on the worst possible conclusion, always above the action but trying to influence it. An odd idea, but always strikingly illustrated by the great Bob Powell. The 1990 issue reprints various stories from the first three issues.~NF

Solar, MAN OF THE ATOM

Acclaim: *One-shot 1997*

Frank and Helena Seleski are intellectual twins with a single obsession, a compulsion to seek the origin of creation and "walk in the footsteps of God". Frank is a reserved particle physicist and Helena an expressive theological researcher. A quantum experiment during one of Frank's university classes brings him face to face with Solar, who might be God, and knows for a fact that the universe will end within eighteen months. Helena confirms this through other means. Warren Ellis and Darick Robertson produce a tense introduction to a series of one-shots and specials that detail the countdown to Armageddon. See also *Solar: Revelations, Solar: Hell on Earth, Eternal Warriors* and *Darque Passages.*~WW

MAN OF WAR

Eclipse: *3 issue miniseries 1987-1988*

A centuries-old fight between aliens is finally resolved in the 1980s. Wafer-thin, muddled story that's nothing more than an exercise in page-filling from creator Bruce Jones.~WJ

MAN OF WAR

Malibu: *8 issues 1993-1994*

Malibu's flag-clad patriot steps out from *The Protectors* to progress from one punch-'em-up to the next with very little plot over eight issues. Bryan Lee and Mike Miller's art in early issues is so appalling it needs to be seen to be believed.~FP

MAN-THING

Marvel: *Series one 22 issues, 5 Giant-Size 1974-1975, series two 11 issues 1979-1981, series three 8 issues 1997-1998*

Continuing from *Fear*, Steve Gerber expanded his horizons to experiment with weirder and more outrageous ideas. As it's impossible to characterise Man-Thing himself, Gerber's successful line of attack was to infuse personality and depth into the supporting characters and then examine how Man-Thing reacted to their actions and, specifically, emotions. The virtual absence of superheroes and villains enhanced the whole run, and its suitability for stories of all genres was a great asset. Many issues failed but this was an acceptable by-product of the book's empirical nature. The series declined slightly after half-time, particularly as artistic instability set in and the talents of Val Mayerik and Mike Ploog were lost. Giant-Size 4 and 5 are usually remembered for the first two Howard the Duck solo stories. This does no justice to Giant-Size 4. Words are inadequate to describe the magnificent Man-Thing lead story, Steve Gerber's personal favourite issue. The Man-Thing is drawn towards a funeral, feeding off the strong emotions and recriminations, and the story goes on to relate the circumstances of death.

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* Available in a collected edition

The 1979 revival was mostly crafted by Chris Claremont, who never came to terms with the concept. His approach was much as Gerber's in the first series, but failed to match the bizarre mood. Whereas Man-Thing was an integral part of Gerber's scripts, Claremont's gave the impression that the swamp-dweller was dispensable. Issue 10 is the most impressive, thanks to a guest-starring role by John Kowalski from *War is Hell.* The third series is part of Marvel's disastrous 1997 Strange Tales horror imprint. J. M. DeMatteis concocts an interminable continued saga of the collapse of the nexus of realities – the Florida swamp where Man-Thing dwells. Renowned for his indulgence of pretentiousness, he pulls out all the stops, providing the reader with no tether to any form of solid ground. Some of Liam Sharp's art in early issues is rich, dark and earthy, but he's sucked into the writer's monomania as the abstract and surreal take control and storytelling dwindles to non-existence. Mercilessly, the tale is left unfinished and continues in *Strange Tales* (third series).~APS

Recommended: Series one 2-6, 11, 16-18, Giant-Size 2-4

MANDRAKE

King: *10 issues 1966-1967*

A classic old comics character is ill-served in this 1960s revival, notable only for four pages of early Jeff Jones art in 8 and a reprinted Alex Raymond strip in 10.~FP

MANGA SHI

Crusade: *One-shot ('Shiseiji') 1996, 3 issue miniseries ('Manga Shi 2000') 1997*

Billy Tucci's martial arts heroine is transplanted into the world of high adventure, high-tech and speed-lines as the creator pays tribute to his influences. All the manga trademarks are in evidence: Killer robots, jet fighters and futuristic societies that settle arguments with blades, and it's all done in fun. The plots are hideously derivative, but that could actually be the point. Fun for the fans.~WW

MANGA EX

Antarctic: *6 issues 2001-2002*

High quality manga style anthology that continues the publishers' twin commitments to popularising all things Japanese, and to giving new talent a break by adapting the tradition of lots of short serialised stories in each big issue. Regular features include the excellent spy/action thriller *Twilight X* by Joe Wight, Armary by David Hutchison and Hiro-San, 'Clare's Stupid Life' by Kyle A. Carrozza and many others. Solid, unpretentious fun.~WW

MANGAZINE

Antarctic: *Volume I 5 issues 1985-1986, Volume II 44 issues 1989-1997, Volume III 36 issues + 1999 to date*

Long-lived and often impressive fan created publication that has always been at the forefront of the invasion of Japanese popular culture into the American comics marketplace. The first incarnation launched on the back of the mid-1980s black and white comics explosion, and is pretty poor fare. This despite the first appearances of Ben Dunn's Tiger-X (1) and Mighty Tiny (3), which would both see marked improvement and well-received solo series in years to come. The remaining slots were packed with enthusiastic but unremarkable features.

Volume II was a much larger and more ambitious package, eventually becoming more media magazine than comic and concentrating to a much greater extent on things Japanese. It kicks off as an eighty page giant reprinting the first issue of volume I, but with new material such as the excellent 'Messerschmitt' by Dunn, which Ted Nomura would eventually evolve into Luftwaffe 1946. The practice of running less than professional material from relative newcomers gave many a rare chance to learn on the job. Beneficiaries include Fred Perry Jr. (*Gold-Digger* 11-14) and Joe Wight's *Twilight-X* (8-9). They were accompanied by translated Manga such as *Astroboy* (15), *Godzilla* (16), *Macross II* (17) and a host of other Japanese favorites including *Sailor Moon, City Hunter, Project A-Ko,* and *Captain Harlock.* Gradually though the many features pushed out the comics, many of which were now being published by other companies.

Volume III saw the most ambitious step yet as the title expanded to an average of 256 pages, featuring Antarctic's own, now well-established properties such as *Tigers of the Luftwaffe, Warrior Nun Areala, Ninja High School* and *Gold Digger.* This was both as new and represented material playing alongside new material such as Kouta Hirano's 'Hellsing 'or Les Major's 'Forevermore'. Always a treat for Manga fans but perhaps an acquired taste for the general populace.~WW

MANGLE TANGLE TALES

Innovation: *1 issue 1990*

Scott Rockwell's homage to George Carlson's 1940s *Jingle Jangle Tales,* which is largely forgotten today, but unjustly so according to Harlan Ellison's enthusiastic introduction. That Innovation chose to cover feature his name while relegating the creator credits inside indicates their belief in the comic's potential. Rockwell writes imaginative nonsense stories, well illustrated by several artists, J.T. Casey being the best of them, but it's a form of humour considered passé today, Ellison's championing notwithstanding.~FP

MANHUNT

Print Mint: *1 issue 1973*

Cartoonists Co-Op: *1 issue (2) 1974*

An interesting but only partially successful comic about relationships, produced by a mixture of male and female cartoonists. The most talented cartoonists were certainly Gary Hallgren, Ted Richards and Bobby London, but their material here is disappointingly trite. More interesting by far was Aline Kominsky's crudely drawn 'Fat Came Between Us' in 1 and 'I was a Teenage Intellekshul!', a presumably autobiographical piece by the great Lee Marrs in 2. Quite a lot of the material was clearly designed to be shocking – Leslie Cabarga's 'Child Molester' in 2, for instance – but what once seemed far gone can leave a contemporary audience rather unsettled.~DAR

MANHUNTER

DC: *24 issues 1988-1990*

No relation to the previous Manhunters (for which see Detective), Mark Shaw was introduced in *First Issue Special* 5 as a wannabe superhero manipulated by alien masters. Everything came to a head in the *Millennium* series, leaving Shaw independent, with a mask full of gimmicks but with his identity public knowledge. 2 is a rare occurrence, mostly occupied by a genuinely suspenseful and inventive fight sequence, but the diluted reprise that concludes the series is disappointing. There's minimal continuity between 4 and 18 (although 14 is a chapter of the 'Janus Directive' crossover) and all are decent superhero comics. Those who prefer final resolutions to the happy ending closing the series should check *Eclipso* 13.~WJ

Recommended: 2, 4

MANHUNTER

DC: *13 issues (0-12) 1994-1995*

With the name once again up for grabs, DC unleashed this musician bonded with an eldritch entity called The Huntsman. A difficult-to-follow origin story occupies 0-3, and it turns out to be a mixture of selling one's soul to the devil and your basic revenge plot. In 4 the villain says "You're supposed be something new. Show me something different", and that really sums up the series. The stylised art and non-linear storytelling are mere trickery disguising the banal, clichéd and obvious. Steven Grant and Vince Giarrano managed far better with *Badlands*.~FP

MANTRA

Malibu: *Series one 24 issues, 1 Giant-Size 1993-1995, series two 7 issues 1995-1996, one-shot (Mantra:Infinity) 1995, 2 issue microseries ('Spear of Destiny') 1995*

Woefully cheesy tale of reincarnating mystic warrior Lukasz, who is betrayed and permanently slaughtered. Our hero finds himself subject to a final contingency plan and wakes up in the body of a really stacked woman named Eden Kane. Not only must he cope with all those feminine problems, bring up two kids on his/her own, learn magic (because girls can't fight), but must also cope with being hit on by every hero in his particular universe, as well as a couple of others. Apart from losing her clothes with disturbing regularity, it's pretty standard superhero fare from Mike Barr and, initially Terry Dodson, although he is soon replaced by a legion of less able pencillers, as Eden/Lukasz fights wizards, robots, monsters and other heroes. An intriguing subplot, poorly handled, occurs when Lukasz, who has always fancied Eden's (his) body meets her soul, and they become lovers. It culminates in him having a male body to inhabit whilst she gets her own back (13-19), but otherwise it's what you'd expect of an older guy writing for adolescent boys. 22 features the Marvel villain Loki, in an editorial effort to bring the universes closer together, from the period Marvel bought out Malibu.

The second series, following on the heels of the Infinity/Black September crossover details the adventures of a younger, cuter, perkier Mantra, but the stories are no better, and as the original returned (5) the series was shelved. Generally a sad waste of some very talented people, although coy comic nudity has never been short of afficionados.~WW

MANYA

Vagabond Press: *One-shot ('3½ Hours and 5 Cups of Coffee') 1995, one-shot ('Poetry, Prose and Mosquitoes') 1996, one-shot ('Falling') 1996, one-shot ('Marie') 1997, one-shot ('In The Meantime…') 1998, one-shot ('Map to the Moon') 2001*

Manya is named after the lead (and only regular) character, who acts as voice for the feelings and opinions of author Jen Benka. This is a delightful series, a joy of which is not knowing from issue to issue what the comic will be about. It includes imaginary conversations with Marie Curie ('Marie'), the emotions released by a friend dying ('Falling'), the perils of driving a lonely highway alone ('Map to the Moon'), or plain rants ('Poetry, Prose…'). Every topic is well handled with some of Benka's more poetic work reminiscent of contributors to Australia's *Fox Comics*. Kris Dresen's naturalistic cartooning is joyful and expressive, bringing real character to Manya, and when pages of random phrases are so absorbing to look at due to her pictures ('In the Meantime…') the depth of her talent is revealed. The first and two most recent one-shots are assorted shorter strips.

This is a difficult series to assemble. In addition to relative scarcity, issues aren't identified by an escalating numerical sequence, but by individual titles, only featured on the inside front cover. The production curve is ever-upward, though.~FP

Recommended: 'Marie', 'Map to the Moon'

MARA OF THE CELTS

Aircel: *4 issues 1990-1992**

Rip Off: *1 issue 1993*

Eros: *9 issuse ('Feltic Shamaness')*

Most people don't care if porn makes sense or has a good story, but this really is one of the most stupid erotic tales ever produced. Mara lives on another planet but hops from one dimension to another whenever it looks like anything remotely interesting might happen to her on her quest for revenge against the slaver who's kidnapped her sister. Dennis Cramer's scripting is very poor: most captions tell you exactly what's happening in the pictures, and the story relies far too heavily on deus ex machina rescues. Nil for storytelling effort. Cramer draws in a stilted style mixed from equal parts Aubrey Beardsley and Vaughn Bodé. His ability to draw facial expressions is particularly poor. Mara's always vogueing with her tits stuck out, and despite being set up as a positive figure of a woman she's rather offensively passive in the final analysis. Not the best choice for a quiet evening in, sorry to say. For those who disagree, though, there's the Eros paper doll cut-out special where different artists costume Mara.~FJ

MARC HEMPEL'S NAKED BRAIN

Insight Studios: *3 issue miniseries 2002*

Marc Hempel is both one of comics' great stylists and great humourists, and fully knows he's under-appreciated for both. The bulk of *Naked Brain* is a series of one-page gags, sometimes strips, less often a single panel, informed by and infected with a dour cynicism that will seem too bleak to many. The cartoons possess the rare ability to expose the nub of a situation in a few pen strokes, though, and while Hempel doesn't always operate in the same social comment territory, comparisons with Jules Feiffer are not misplaced. The one-pagers are backed-up by short Tug & Buster strips. While excellent in their own title, they here lack breathing space and are vehicles for gags that could have been applied to anyone. There are also sketchbook pages, and discussions on humour (in 2). While some of the material ranks among Hempel's best, and therefore the best funny comics, there's too much filler surrounding it, so tread carefully.~FP

THE MARCH HARE

Lodestone: *1 issue 1986*

A black comedy about Milo, a professional hitman who inherits a pooka spirit that resembles a rabbit when he's hired to kill his brother. The pooka appears to have driven Milo's brother Harry to suicide, but this is never verified. The Pooka's magical powers help tidy up after numerous hits and have given Milo's dog Buick human intelligence. Plotted and drawn By Keith Giffen in his best "I stole it all from Jose Muñoz" style and nicely scripted by Robert Loren Fleming, the idea is to hear Bugs Bunny when the pooka speaks. Memorable but strictly back-up material.~SW

MARCO POLO

Charlton: *One-shot 1962*

ACG: *One-shot 1998*

This adapts a movie offering a somewhat fanciful interpretation of Marco Polo's thirteenth century adventures in the Orient, but is graced by some excellent Sam Glanzman artwork. Detailed and descriptive in classic adventure strip style, it almost convinces you Marco Polo really was a suave lover and two-fisted buccaneer who led revolutions. Lacking the horrible Charlton colouring, the ACG reprint is actually the better product, and certainly the cheaper.~WJ

MARIONETTE GENERATION

Viz: *3 volumes + 2001 to date*

Izumi Morino is a cartoonist and Good Girl artist finally breaking into the business. Kinoko is a high school student and his assistant, but aspires to move in and run his life. His old girlfriends are bad enough, but one day she catches him in bed with a rag doll that he has named Lunch. The truly weird thing, however, is that the doll is alive and seems to have superpowers. A bizarre triangle quickly ensues with the doll and the schoolgirl competing for the affections of the hapless artist. Kinoko and her school art club then band together to discover the secrets of the living doll as other animated toys, such as a Santa Dog Doll, begin to appear in an already overcrowded set-up. Laborious slapstick storytelling with an inappropriately dramatic art style from creator Haruhiko Mikimoto make for a tedious read that was first serialised for Western readers in the anthology *Animerica Extra*.~WW

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* Available in a collected edition

THE MARK

Dark Horse: *6 issues 1987-1988, 4 issue miniseries 1994*

The potentially interesting idea of a man branded 'genetically impure' waging a war against a fascist state, Lutzania, is strangled at birth by a change of either writer or artist every issue. The succeeding stories in *Mayhem* were better, and the story continues in *Dark Horse Comics* 14-15 before the miniseries, which is much improved. Here the Mark travels to the USA to kill the deposed Lutzanian dictator.~FP

MARMALADE BOY

Tokyopop: *5 issue miniseries 2001-2002, 4 volumes + 2002 to date*

Miki Koishikawa's parents surprise her by divorcing, only to swap partners with a similar couple they met on a cruise. Both families move in together, along with the other couple's son Yuu, but to make matters worse for Miki, she seems to be the only one unhappy it. Despite complaints to her best friends, Meiko and Ginta, Miki seems to be coming around to the idea, while growing closer to Yuu, whose teasing of her, whilst appearing charming to everyone else, is why she claims he reminds her of marmalade, sweet on the outside, bitter and twisted inside. The romantic entanglements are complicated by the appearance of Arimi, Yuu's previous girlfriend, and Ginta's declaration of love for Miki, after apparently rejecting her in the past.

Volume 1 reprints the miniseries, and 2 heats up the romantic rivalry as it spills over onto the tennis courts and Arimi creates confusion by playing up to Ginta. The fact that Yuu and Miki are living in the same house is the source of gossip in 3, though Meiko takes some of the attention away from Miki with her own scandalous relationship. Miki and Yuu seem to be happy in 4, until Yuu's attentions to a new, male, schoolmate, cause more jealousy and confusion.

Wataru Yoshizumi's teen romance plays with more serious topics than some, touching on alternative lifestyles and the possibility of love between relatives, but at the heart of it all is a charming, deftly produced soap opera, that's easy on the eye, where characters grow up and move on, and nothing is ever simple where love is concerned.~NF

THE MARQUIS

Caliber: *One-shot ('Les Preludes') 1997*

Oni Press: *5 issue miniseries ('Danse Macabre') 2000-2001*, 2 issue microseries ('Hell's Courtesan') 2002*

The Marquis is Vol de Galle, a masked man on a mission to send demons back to the Hell from which they've escaped. Guy Davis sets his story in 18th century France, but it's a bleak, perpetually wintry, alternate version of our world, in which the religious Ministry of Inquisition works to maintain order through fear of God. In 'Danse Macabre', Davis has Vol convinced alternately that he's on a righteous mission after suffering doubt about his work as inquisitor and that he's simply insane to see demons where everyone else sees innocent humans. The collection of 'Danse Macabre' also reprints 'Les Preludes' and explains how Davis came to redo that episode for the miniseries. In 'Hell's Courtesan', something else is hunting demons besides Vol, who's becoming increasingly detached from humanity, while de General continues to try to catch the 'beast' that the Ministry insists is behind the murders afflicting the city. Lovingly depicted by Davis with his usual scratchy realism, these atmospheric horror stories challenge the nature of faith whilst overtly condemning the hypocrisies of the Inquisition.~NF

Recommended: 'Danse Macabre' 1-5

MARRIED WITH CHILDREN

Now: *Series one 7 issues, 1 Special, 1990-1991, series two 12 issues 1991-1992, 3 issue miniseries ('Kelly Bundy') 1992, 3 issue miniseries ('2099') 1993, 4 issue miniseries ('Quantum Quartet') 1993, 1 Annual 1994, 3 issue miniseries ('Kelly Goes to College') 1994*

Fleetingly popular series adapting the unaccountably well received sitcom featuring the loathsome Bundy family, a kind of live-action *Simpsons* without the redeeming features. The two regular titles were reasonably faithful, if sub-professional, variations on the TV formula. With the miniseries, Now started using desperate gimmicks: the 'Kelly Bundy' series had photocovers featuring Christina Applegate, the actress whose interpretation of Kelly was more of a doodle than a portrait. The 'Quantum Quartet' series recast the Bundys as Fantastic Four parodies, and the '2099' effort tapped in to one of Marvel's less inspired hypefests. All told, it was a welcome release when these things finally stopped being excreted by Now.~HS.

MARS

First: *12 issues 1984-1985*

Mark Wheatley and Marc Hempel's metaphysical science-fantasy series ponders such abstract ideas as the nature of reality, the power of memory and the lure of dreaming. It's told in a mysterious and often metaphorical manner; some readers may well find the series simply pretentious or bafflingly obscure. However, those unfazed by the unconventional should appreciate *Mars'* pleasingly thought-provoking, mysteriously seductive qualities.

The first issue briskly introduces heroine Morgana Trace, a paraplegic able to walk in zero gravity, courtesy of a computer mindlink process invented by her late scientist father. Selected for a mission to Mars, Morgana and a crew of six are forced to hibernate for 10,000 years after all contact is lost with Earth. Finally awakening on the red planet, Morgana is immediately lured into a series of surreal and often disturbing adventures. Mars is not the bleak landscape of fact, but a lush Garden of Eden populated by fawns, alien predators, strange gods and, in issue four, the artists Van Gogh, Gauguin and Norman Rockwell!

As the series progresses Wheatley and Hempel dispense with even the pretence of linear narrative and the comic acquires a dreamlike quality, so that Mars becomes a state of mind, or perhaps even a nightmare dreamt by the dying Morgana. Underneath the simple, cartoonish artwork lurks something dark and disturbing. Wheatley and Hempel seem obsessed with decay, destruction and betrayal, themes also explored in their subsequent DC miniseries, the equally fine *Breathtaker*.~AL

Recommended: 1-12

MARS ATTACKS

Topps: *Series one 5 issues 1994, series two 7 issues, 1 Special 1995-1996*

Robust, often perversely hilarious gross-out spin-off from the popular 1950s bubblegum cards, released in anticipation of a movie deal. Charlie Adlard's art on the miniseries is much more fun than the needlessly sedate *X-Files* gig he moved on to, and the dark, twisted humour makes this very entertaining reading.~HS

MARS ATTACKS HIGH SCHOOL

Topps: *2 issue microseries 1997*

What would have been issues 8 and 9 of the regular series were eventually released as a separate black and white series. *Mars Attacks* fans will find more of the same, and for others there's some decent art from Claude St Aubin. For the unconverted the best part of the issue will be writer Dwight Jon Zimmerman's editorial structured around *Oprah* style revelations.~FP

MARS ATTACKS THE IMAGE UNIVERSE

Image: *4 issue miniseries 1996-1997*

Useless cash-in inspired by the useless Tim Burton flick. The usual bunch of misproportioned Image clowns stop evil

Martians from taking over the world. And that's it. There's a starring role for Bill Clinton, and Bill Sienkiewicz 'inks' the whole thing with his spare foot. Does not have any bearing on Image 'continuity', you'll be relieved to hear.~AL

MARS ATTACKS THE SAVAGE DRAGON

Topps: *4 issue miniseries 1996-1997*

Tapping into the Dragon's unknown origins, those rascally l'il Martians convince him he's a mutated Martian dispatched to Earth as a spy. So when they attack the Image earth (see *Mars Attacks the Image Universe*) the Dragon is returned to Mars for debriefing and causes all kinds of chaos. This is the same type of tongue in cheek romp common to both parent titles, so readers of those titles are likely to enjoy this as well.~FP

M.A.R.S. PATROL

Gold Key: *10 issues 1965-1969*

The first two issues were titled *Total War* "featuring the fighting four of M.A.R.S. Patrol". Lt Cy Adams, Sgt Joe Striker, Cpl Russ Stacy and Sgt Ken Hiro are military specialists for the Marine Attack and Rescue Service, and the strip is 1960s military paranoia with a twist. The Earth is invaded by alien troops, and it's the job of Adams and his men to thwart the attempt of the aliens to take over. The twist? The men from M.A.R.S. vs the men from Mars. 1-3 are written and superbly drawn by Wally Wood, with a further seven issues by Dan Spiegle following. The series would have been validated by some kind of conclusion, but, as it is, the first issues have better continuity than the later ones.~SW

Recommended: 1-3

MARSHAL LAW

Marvel/Epic: *6 issue miniseries 1987-1989*, one-shot ('Takes Manhattan') 1990*

Apocalypse: *One-shot ('Kingdom of the Blind') 1990*

Dark Horse: *One-shot ('Super Babylon') 1992, 2 issue microseries ('Cape Fear') 1993*

The vigilante, Marshal Law, sees himself as standing alone against the decay caused in the city of San Futuro by the corrupt élitist superheroes. Some, the most powerful and popular, he tolerates publicly, derailing their schemes covertly. Others, he kills. The first series, a story of politics, power-games and serial murder, is a compelling read, dark, twisted and shot through with bleak humour. Pat Mills' mordant scripting and Kev O'Neill's disturbing art are on top form. The 'Takes Manhattan' one-shot is a parody crossbreed of the Marvel Universe with *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and while readable, lacks bite. 'Kingdom of the Blind', on the other hand, has all the bite you can hope for, a savage yet perversely amusing tale of vivisection and vengeance. From there, the strip went into a run in the British comic Toxic, and emerged into 'Super Babylon', a superbly vicious attack on 1940s superheroic ideals and their relationship to the realities of war. This material is collected as 'Blood, Sweat and Fears' . After that, the Marshal started to look a bit tired. 'Cape Fear', though containing amusing sideswipes at both the 1960s incarnation of The Legion of Super-Heroes and the plethora of current *X-Men* titles, was just a succession of nasty gags, with everybody seemingly going through the motions.~HS

Recommended: Epic 1-6, 'Kingdom of the Blind', 'Super Babylon'

MARTHA WASHINGTON

Dark Horse: *5 issue miniseries ('Goes To War') 1994-1995*, one-shot ('Happy Birthday') 1995, one-shot ('Stranded In Space') 1996*

Frank Miller and Dave Gibbons' war story from *Give Me Liberty* returns with more instalments from the career of Martha Washington, a poor black girl whose courage, ingenuity and fighting spirit take her from strength to strength in an army whose integrity isn't a patch on her own. It's 2014 and the USA is split into several states. Martha's lover, family and psychic friend have been killed in the nuking of Chicago, although she'll later discover some surprises on that score.

Frank Miller tells his stories using magazine covers, newspaper snippets and other print media, as well as cartoon strip, guiding his Everywoman heroine through a maze of global threats and personal attacks to emerge, mentally and physically scarred, but always alive, at the end. Dave Gibbons' lushly detailed art is admirably suited to the chases and battles that make up a large part of the story. 'Stranded In Space' is a weak one-shot with a lead story in which Martha, investigating a strange hole in space that leads to other probabilities, sees a vision of what her polluted future earth could look like. In the back-up tale, the spoofy 'Attack of the Flesh Eating Monsters', Martha and her co-pilot are picked up by a group of flesh-eating aliens, only to find they aren't what they seem.~FJ

MARTIAN MANHUNTER

DC: *3 issue miniseries ('American Secrets') 1992, 4 issue miniseries 1994, Special 1996, 38 issues (0-36, 1,000,000), 2 Annuals 1998-2001*

Débuting in *Detective* 225, and running there for years, there's a case for Martian Manhunter being the start of the 1950s superhero revival. Despite this and being a founder member of all Justice League incarnations, he's always been a second-stringer. The problem was that he's a near-omnipotent alien with a fatal weakness (fire), and DC already have a far more popular near-omnipotent alien with a fatal weakness. Gerard Jones circumvents this for the first series by concentrating on the Manhunter's assumed identity: John Jones, Denver police officer. It's set soon after his arrival on Earth and the plot is a checklist of the 1950s in hindsight. Payola, quiz fixing, UFO scares, a pink Cadillac, *Mad* magazine, the fear of Communism, the new suburbs, Elvis Presley (or as near as his estate's lawyers will permit) and *Leave it to Beaver* are all thrown into the mix for a dark and atmospheric story lifted further by Eduardo Barreto's art. The succeeding series is dull stuff, as suppressed memories rise to the surface and, yawn, the Manhunter must confront his true identity. A spiritual quest also starts the poor 1996 Special, which soon degenerates into fights, but the 1997 *JLA* Annual has a good Martian Manhunter solo story, as does the 1989 *Secret Origins* 35.

The 1998 series begins with a disappointing issue 0 followed by a poorer 1,000,000 (which does reveal the final fate of Darkseid), but thereafter John Ostrander and Tom Mandrake hit the form that made their *Spectre* so intriguing. They establish that the Martian J'onn J'onzz maintains multiple identities, acting as a global protector, and for the first time since his introduction the parameters of his metamorphic and telepathic abilities are explored, finally differentiating him from Superman. Ostrander dips into various aspects of Manhunter's past, seamlessly integrating what might be seen as anomalous, makes sense of his previously capricious name, and Mandrake's moody pencils (until 33) maintain the essentially sombre character. He's given a new arch enemy in 0, used to good effect in 6-9, and Cameron Chase, late of her own title, provides fine occasional support. The beauty and appeal of the series, though, rests strongly with Ostrander, who possesses a rare ability to take any genre and have the Manhunter not only work within it, but seem at home. Furthermore, his scripts are always thought provoking, to the point where even a largely substandard teaming with the JSA in 18-19 still contains some worthwhile characterisation and a fine pay-off. 'Revelations' (20-24) begins with a gem as it explores the early interactions J'onn experienced with his superheroic counterparts, but thereafter even the Spectre in 23 disappoints. Renegade Martians recur to good effect in 25-27, after which John Jones is split from J'onn J'onzz in 29-31. It begins well, but other than setting up an excellent treatment of Jack Kirby's Apokolips characters in 33-35 it disappoints. The final issue is a trawl through the Manhunter's more recent history as the supporting cast is under threat. If the series had to end, this was an apt finale.~FP

Recommended: Miniseries one 1-3, ongoing series 3, 6, 7, 17, 20, 25-27, 29, 33-36

MARTIN MYSTERY

Dark Horse: *6 issue miniseries 1999*

Long before *X-Files*, Martin Mystery and his companions, fiancée Diana and caveman Java, travelled the world investigating mysteries, always doomed to lose the proof of their fantastic findings. Recurring villains include the Men in Black, whose sole purpose appears to be to ensure that all such proof is destroyed, and one-eyed, one-armed, Orloff, a man with a serious grudge against Martin. These paperback books are reprinted from the original Italian Bonelli comics. Martin locates Atlantis (1), uncovers the secrets of Excalibur (2-3), witnesses an invasion from the dimension of dreams (4), finds Egyptian relics in South America (5) and meets the secret society at the heart of the mystery of Rennes-Le-Chateau (6). The scripts are full of Alfredo Castelli's research, complemented by the simple (Toth-like) artwork of Giancarlo Alessandrini. Somewhat overwrought, these are still exciting adventures.~NF

MARVEL ADVENTURE

Marvel: *6 issues 1975-1976*

If you want *Daredevil* 22-27 edited by a few pages per issue to fit the lower 1970s page-count this is the title for you.~FP

MARVEL ADVENTURES

Marvel: *18 issues 1997-1998*

Marvel's *Spider-Man* and *X-Men* cartoon tie-in titles were supplanted by this all-encompassing series, although both regularly turn up (teamed in 5). Series writer Ralph Macchio presents simplified versions of Marvel's heroes, fusing familiar events with new stories. While obviously aimed at younger children than the main Marvel line, it's functional material that never grabs the imagination, ably pencilled by Andy Kuhn for the most part. 12's encounter between the Fantastic Four and the malevolent Frightful Four makes a decent sample, being about as good as the title gets.~FP

MARVEL BOY

Marvel: *6 issue miniseries 2000-2001**

In another radical reinvention of a venerable character, Grant Morrison rescued Marvel's obscure 1950s superhero Marvel Boy for the new millennium. This reinvention meant grafting Captain Marvel's origin (Kree warrior comes to earth, much confusion and japery follows) onto the Marvel Boy character. Over the ensuing six issues, there's lots of action, mostly involving fights with a character called Midas (who inexplicably wears Iron Man's old 1960s armour) and the odd touch of romance, but there is an aching chasm at the heart of the comic. What Morrison's concoction lacks is (ironically) humanity. The whole exercise is uninspired and cold, and, despite J.G. Jones' impressive art, the title is a major disappointment.~DAR

MARVEL CHILLERS

Marvel: *7 issues 1975-1976*

1-2 starred Modred the Mystic, an apprentice of Merlin revived from suspended animation. He would have been better left there. Previously Cat by name, Tigra prowled 3-7 after her feline transformation in *Giant-Size Creatures* 1. Tigra, Red Wolf and the sleepy outback setting collided inelegantly with robots and the Super Skrull. The only positive spark arose from her attempts to reconcile her human and feline personae. Three writers and four pencillers in five issues rarely bodes well. This series proved the point.~APS

MARVEL CLASSICS COMICS

Marvel: *36 issues 1976-1978*

The majority of these forty-eight-page literary adaptations are reprinted from the sixty black and white Pendulum Illustrated Classics produced by Filipino artists between 1973 and 1978. Artwork from the likes of Nestor Redondo on *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1) and Dracula (9), Alex Niño on *The Time Machine, Moby Dick, The Three Musketeers, War of the Worlds* and *The Invisible Man* in 2, 8, 12, 14 and 25, and Rudy Nebres' *Treasure Island* in 15 accompanied undistinguished scripts. Only nine titles were originated by Marvel, all with equally lifeless writing. Most noteworthy for their artwork are John Buscema's *Count of Monte Cristo* (17), Gil Kane's *Master of the World* and *She* (21 and 24), Alfredo Alcala's *Robin Hood* (34), Frank Bolle's surprisingly faithful *Alice In Wonderland* (35) and some of Mike Golden's earliest professional work in *The Pit and the Pendulum* (28). It's hard to recommend any of these condensed classics and one has the feeling that the addition of colour may not have done the highly detailed Filipino artwork any favours.~SW

MARVEL COLLECTORS' ITEM CLASSICS

Marvel: *22 issues 1965-1969*

This double-size title reprints runs of *Doctor Strange, Fantastic Four, Hulk* and *Iron Man*, almost from the beginnings of their own strips. The title changed to *Marvel's Greatest Comics* with 23.~APS

MARVEL COMICS PRESENTS

Marvel: *175 issues 1988-1995*

Bi-weekly anthology featuring a rotating headliner, generally an *X-Men* related character, and a number of back-up serials. 1-10 feature Wolverine by Chris Claremont and John Buscema in a tale introducing the Island of Madripoor and Logan's third identity, Patch. Man-Thing by Steve Gerber and Tom Sutton and Master of Kung-Fu by Doug Moench and Tom Grindberg both help the title off to a strong start. Ann Nocenti, Rick Leonardi and P. Craig Russell's Colossus runs from 10-17* followed by a Cyclops eight-parter (18-25)*, then Havok and finally, Excalibur star before Wolverine settles into the lead slot in 38 (usually in a team-up) until 143-146 when all four stories tie-in to the 'Siege of Darkness' storyline that ran through the Midnight Sons group (all the supernatural titles, including *Ghost Rider* and *Doctor Strange*).

From that time *Marvel Comics Presents* was more actively involved in contemporary continuity, presumably in an effort to cross-promote flagging titles, often supplementing events in the Marvel Universe such as the 'Hands of the Mandarin' crossover (*Iron Man, Force Works* and *War Machine*) with side-bar stories. Wolverine appeared briefly again in 149-153 before moving on, leaving the starring role to Ghost Rider/Vengeance; a more or less permanent addition since 90, when the comic switched to a flip book/double cover format. Vengeance stayed the only regular feature until the title's demise, with stories of diminishing quality.

Sadly for such a wealth of material, there are very few stories of any lasting note. Some of the Wolverine/Typhoid Mary issues (109-116 and 149-150) are well rendered by Steve Lightle, but Nocenti's scripts wallow in self-indulgence. Even the much heralded and long awaited 'Panther's Quest', a twenty-five part sequel to 'Panther's Rage', one of Marvel's most lauded hits of the 1970s, falls far short of the standard expected from Gene Colan and Don McGregor. Apart from the occasional well-crafted short story, such as a beautifully drawn though insubstantial Ant-Man short by Sandy Plunkett in 131, there is an unrelenting amount of second rate tosh, and other than the groundbreaking Weapon X storyline by Barry Windsor Smith in issues 72-84*, nothing of note or of worth was produced.~WW

Recommended: 1-10, 72-84

MARVEL DOUBLE FEATURE

Marvel: *21 issues 1973-1977*

Reprints the Captain America and Iron Man stories from the latter twenty-odd issues of *Tales of Suspense*.~APS

MARVEL FANFARE

Marvel: *Series one 60 issues 1982-1991, series two 6 issues 1996-1997*

In 1982 Marvel were taking their first steps to producing titles for exclusive distribution to comic fans through comics shops, sidestepping the traditional news-stand market altogether. They reasoned fans would pay more for stories

* Available in a collected edition

on better-quality paper written and drawn by their favourite creators, hence *Marvel Fanfare*. The opening story in 1-4* exemplifies the ideal, featuring a teaming of Spider-Man, perennially Marvel's most popular character, and the X-Men (then selling very strongly in comic shops, but not so well outside) with Ka-Zar, written by Chris Claremont, started by the highly regarded Michael Golden (1, 2), and completed by recently departed *X-Men* artist Dave Cockrum (3) and the then little-known, but very talented Paul Smith (4). However, beyond a certain point (around halfway), and with the comic-shop market established as an outlet for high-volume sales, *Marvel Fanfare* rather slipped into becoming a try-out title or a home for previously commissioned but unpublished stories, although the editorials kept denying that it was an 'inventory' title.

Apart from the opening story, there really was very little strong material, and only a handful of issues that are worth tracking down. 7 has an unusually downbeat Daredevil story about a missing guide dog, from generally unsung writer Bill Mantlo and artist George Freeman, and 15's 'That Night...' is a clever and amusing Fantastic Four story from Barry Windsor-Smith, with the Thing prominent. 27 has Marc Hempel's take on Spider-Man coping with boredom, and 40 features the haunting 'Chiaroscuro' by Ann Nocenti and Dave Mazzucchelli, tying into the Mephisto limited series. Of lesser interest are Gil Kane's adaptation of *The Jungle Book* in 8-10, Charles Vess' story about a lost poet inadvertently gathering material (13), and a Captain Universe story (25) in which a bullied schoolkid acquires the powers just long enough to see him through a bad day. There's also a John Byrne Hulk story in 29 in which every page is a splash page, a Dr Strange story by Walt Simonson and Dave Gibbons in 41 and the all-pin-up issue 45. Elsewhere there is a small amount of material that might be of interest to completists: more Charles Vess in 6 and his Warriors Three story in 34-37, with some nice rose bushes but little plot, Colleen Doran's music-based story and portfolio in 38, and a Power Pack tale in 55. In general, don't get your hopes up.

The draw of the second series is presumably meant to be the price, which is very low at 99 cents. It's still not worth it, though. There's a Hulk/Wolverine story (2-3) that is just about readable, but Pop Mhan's cutesy style of artwork is distractingly inappropriate. Fans of Longshot's innocent charm might be tempted by 4 and 5, but should resist the temptation with all their might.~FC

Recommended: Series one 7, 15, 27, 40

MARVEL FEATURE

Marvel: *Series one 12 issues 1971-1973, series two 7 issues 1975-1976*

The first series is a showcase comic. 1-3 feature the first appearances of the Defenders (Doctor Strange, Hulk, Sub-Mariner), by Roy Thomas and Ross Andru, before the team moved to its own title. 1 includes a significant back-up strip in which Doctor Strange returns to his role as a sorcerer after having renounced the mystic arts in *Incredible Hulk* 126. 4-10 spotlight Ant Man in a strange solo run by Mike Friedrich. Hank Pym retrospectively narrates the whole series, in contrast to conventional story-telling, but the ludicrous concepts, plot and dialogue insult the intelligence of a seven-year-old. 11-12 are the first Thing team-up stories, an immediate prequel to *Marvel Two-In-One*. Both drawn by Jim Starlin, 12 spins off from the Thanos war story line in Captain Marvel 25-33.

The second series was won by Red Sonja after a popular introduction as a supporting character in *Conan the Barbarian*. As a young girl, she was transformed into a warrior by a goddess after her home and family had been pillaged and slain and she herself raped. The goddess imposed a condition: that she could love no man unless he had first defeated her in fair combat. Written by Bruce Jones and drawn by Frank Thorne, the series suffers from uninspired plotting and cartoonish artwork, although the odd nice human touch surfaces sporadically. Red Sonja continues in her own title.~APS

Recommended: Series one 2

MARVEL FRONTIER COMICS SPECIAL

Marvel UK: *One-shot 1994*

Sampler comic for Marvel UK's Vertigoesque Frontier line, which by the time of publication had packed up and died. There is a disappointing epilogue for *Children of the Voyager*, an appalling hacked out *Bloodseed* strip, wisely uncredited, and snapshots featuring characters from *Dances With Demons*, and *Immortalis*. Most intriguing are prologues for two never seen again series. 'Troubling Deaf Heaven' is a whimsical tale of reincarnation excellently drawn by D'Israeli, but, slim though it may be, David Hine's Evil Eye is the star turn, introducing a gloomy psychic detective.~FP

MARVEL Graphic Novels

Any graphic novel featuring characters with their own series is dealt with in that series' entry. Considering superhero volumes first, *The Aladdin Effect* starts well enough, with a Wyoming town enveloped by an impenetrable force field and the consequent reactions of the inhabitants. She-Hulk may not be able to batter a hole in the force field, but she could throw a bus through the holes in the plot, and there are even bigger contrivances as four superheroines are plucked from their outside lives to help. *Revenge of the Living Monolith* and *Emperor Doom* both concentrate on familiar villains. Dr Doom actually succeeds in taking over the world in the latter. It's a clever plot poorly executed, which ranks it higher than the former, but it relies on a particularly daft ending.

Taking *Thor* supporting characters Fandral, Hogun and Volstagg on a quest, *The Raven Banner* has the benefit of Charles Vess art, but a merely functional plot. The Mike Mignola-illustrated teaming of Dr Doom and Dr Strange is also excellently drawn, but every time the plot becomes interesting another bunch of demons are thrown in as Doom investigates the mystical side of his nature. Even less commendable is *Blood Truce*, a comic-sized teaming of Captain America and Nick Fury, which passed muster as an annual, but not a $6 one-shot. *Rick Mason, The Agent* isn't superpowered, but his adversaries are. Supervillains occupy a small South American country, transforming it into a drug-supplying haven, and Mason is sent to sort them out. James Hudnall and John Ridgway supply a decent suspenseful spy thriller concentrating on character, with Mason a heroic-fiction tough guy archetype. *Absalom Daak, Dalek Killer*, is a gung-ho testosterone-propelled brute. Emanating from the British *Doctor Who Magazine*, he takes a violent pride in his work. More in the mode of a traditional British annual with other features and text pages in addition to the lead, Daak is most notable these days for the Steve Dillon art.

Actors Billy Mumy and Miguel Ferrer write *The Dreamwalker*, modeled on the 1930s pulp heroes, and woven into a world of gangsters and government agency revenge. It's a readable page-turner that rather falls to pieces at the end, although Gray Morrow's art throughout is excellent. More effectively redolent with the seamy pulp atmosphere of the 1930s is *Nightraven*: 'House of Cards'. It's available in both book and traditional comic size, and the titular hero is a lurking background figure as the focus is on gangster Soldier Jack, gradually being drawn into a situation beyond his control. Jamie Delano populates the story with a fine sleazy supporting cast and David Lloyd's moody art evocatively portrays the bygone era.

A frequent problem is that Marvel's graphic novels are technically proficient, yet fail to engage emotionally, with Sam Glanzman's *A Sailor's Story* foremost among them. It's two beautifully drawn volumes of Glanzman's navy experiences during World War II, with some fine moments, but overall too bitty and prolonged to captivate. *Hearts and Minds* is similarly reality-based, this time a tragic Vietnam war story drawn by the worthy Russ Heath, yet strangely uninvolving. There's nothing wrong, either, with *Greenberg the Vampire*, previously seen in *Bizarre Adventures*. The idea of a Jewish vampire has a novelty, but beyond that there's nothing to make it an essential purchase, with J.M. DeMatteis treading familiar territory regarding families and writing, and functional art from Mark Badger.

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* Available in a collected edition

Super Boxers from Ron Wilson is a step down. Among the first Marvel graphic novels to stray from established characters, there's an action movie predictability about this boxing tale in a corporate-controlled future. Stale from the off, it wheezes towards a predictable conclusion in the manner of a consumptive asthmatic. Far better is *Arena*, written and drawn by Bruce Jones. It's a simple combination of time-gates in the Ozarks with hillbillies looking for a wife, and a mother / daughter relationship in need of some repair. *Heartburst* blends science fiction and Aboriginal myth with some New-Age sentiments, to concoct a story of one man against the world, persecution and spiritual enlightenment. Rick Veitch writes and draws, and sometimes loses his way, but it's largely very readable. *Ax* is bizarre fantasy, entirely the work of Ernie Colón, down to the lettering. Science-fiction elements are merged into a muddy, vaguely moralising, script through which the title character wanders, seemingly impervious to harm. The art's great, though, vibrantly coloured and illustrative. *Marada the She-Wolf* collects the warrior woman's first appearance in *Epic Illustrated* 10-12, now with a fine palette enriching John Bolton's excellent art. Chris Claremont's plot of Marada bewitched and stripped of her character makes for a decent fantasy story, and it's followed by a tale detailing a glitch on the journey home.~FP

Recommended: *Marada the She-Wolf, Night Raven*

MARVEL HOLIDAY SPECIAL

Marvel: *4 issues 1991-1993, 1996*

Anthology featuring various Marvel characters in stories set around the winter solstice. Those in the 1991 issue are mostly indistinguishable in their mixture of sentimentality and violence, but the 1992 issue has some gems. There's a wordless Wolverine story that says a lot about the vividness of childhood imagination, then a hilarious Doc Samson story in which he's supposed to be telling the story of Chanukah to a class at a Hebrew school, but is forced to make some drastic revisions, and finally a Daredevil story written by Ann Nocenti. It follows the thoughts of a toy lamb that Daredevil has just bought as a present, but Nocenti keeps the story the correct side of cute throughout, and that's a real achievement. The 1993/1994 issue isn't up to this standard, though it's worth a look for two strips: a Nick Fury story by Howard Chaykin which is ultimately sentimental but has a compulsive rhythm to it, and a Ghost Rider story written by Ann Nocenti, which has a nice idea about a timid office worker getting a chance at revenge, but is let down by the ending. The 1996 issue has rotten stories involving Spider-Man, Kitty Pryde, the Silver Surfer, and the Rawhide Kid, and a marginally readable one involving the X-Men.~FC

Recommended: 1992

MARVEL KNIGHTS

Marvel: *Series one 15 issues 2000-2001, series two 6 issues 2002*

A composite team comprising everyone whose solo comics appeared under the Marvel Knights imprint might not have been the soundest editorial decision, but Chuck Dixon's reliable talent for edgy urban adventure ensured this ticked along nicely, ably aided by Ed Barreto's pleasing pencils. Something failed to fire the readers' enthusiasm, however. Perhaps with all its heroes moonlighting from elsewhere, Dixon lacked the freedom to develop events, and disparities in the personalities and modus operandi often seemed artificially strained. It was never realistic that anything other than an editorial decision was keeping this team together. Marvel Knights nonetheless produced some intriguing subplots. A mismatched cast allowed Dixon to explore concepts such as where vigilantes should draw the line via disagreements between Daredevil and the Punisher (2), Moon Knight's attempts to buy himself (and Luke Cage) into the team's favours (6, 11) and the bizarre ying/yang partnership of femme fatale Black Widow and innocent savant Dagger. 15 brings this ill-considered but often entertaining series to an all too obviously abrupt halt as the heroes decide it just isn't working and agree to go their separate ways. Truth mirroring fiction and all that…

The reboot tried to address what might previously have gone wrong by paring down the team, theoretically giving more focus. Take away the personality clashes, however, and new scripter John Figueroa was left with a gritty urban setting in which a few characters united to do nothing they didn't do in their own titles. Hardly surprisingly, it didn't last.~JC

MARVEL MYSTERY Comics

Timely/Marvel: *92 issues 1939-1949*

The title that launched the careers of the Human Torch and the Sub-Mariner, and thus the entire Marvel Universe, this series is unquestionably significant. Historic. Nay, even iconic. It's not actually very good, though. You see, in the early 1940s, Timely, the antediluvian ancestor of Marvel, was the Poverty Row production company, employing mostly folks who jumped ship as soon as they got a more lucrative gig, or those who couldn't get work anywhere else. This did improve by 1944 or so, but apart from the ornate and insanely convoluted Alex Schomburg covers, most of these early *Marvel Mysterys* are rough, thrown-together ragbag comics, with a crude vitality but very little artistic merit. In addition to the Human Torch (1-92) and the Sub-Mariner (1-91), *Marvel Mystery* featured Captain America (80-92) and a host of lesser strips. Among the most popular was Ka-Zar (1-27), a blond Tarzan later recreated for 1960's Marvel, and The Angel (1-23). Inspired by Leslie Charteris' Saint, this costumed but non-powered detective's sedate adventures were unaccountably popular with the Marvel staff, to the extent that he was given several early covers. The Vision (13-48) was a supernatural being who entered and exited the Earthly plane in bursts of smoke; this low-rent Spectre was best known for being created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, who drew his early adventures. The Patriot (21-74), crusading reporter Jeff Mace, filled the Captain America-type slot until it dawned on *Marvel Mystery*'s editors that they could just as easily import the real thing. Miss America (49-85) was teenager Madeleine Joyce, caught in an electrical experiment and emerging with superstrength, flight, X-ray vision and the wisdom of the ages. As you do. None of these powers helped her failing eyesight (must be the strain of the X-ray vision), and by 1946 she was proudly the first four-eyed superheroine. The Blonde Phantom (84-91), alias Louise Grant, mousy secretary, let down her hair, doffed her glasses, and slipped into a thigh-slit, bare-bellied, low-cut red silk evening dress to fight crime. Surely, by the time she got all dolled up, most emergencies would be either over or beyond control? So, historically significant, funky, nostalgic – and most issues beyond 50 were even consistently competent, but, unless you've a real taste for the cruder or stranger side of superheroics, not worth the hugely inflated prices generally demanded. For a sample, though, Marvel reprinted 1 as paperback in 1999.~HS

MARVEL PREMIERE

Marvel: *61 issues 1972-1981*

Although designed as a try-out series featuring new lead characters every few issues, Doctor Strange (3-14) and Iron Fist (15-25) shanghaied the title until both were promoted to their own books. 1-2 witness the transformation of supporting character 'Him' into Adam Warlock. 3 contains a lovely, surreal Stan Lee story with exquisite Barry Smith art, but Gardner Fox follows with a horribly convoluted plotline that was mercifully laid to rest by Steve Englehart. He and Frank Brunner then produced a highly original time-travel story in 12-14. 15 introduced Iron Fist as Daniel Rand, a youth who entered the mystic city of K'un Lun and was taught oriental fighting skills by the race of immortals who dwelt there. The continuing storyline narrating his origin suffers from a suicidal maximum-three-issues-per-writer syndrome. 25 sports early John Byrne artwork.

From 26, the try-out concept genuinely took over, with no character holding centre stage for more than four issues.

Marvel Premiere was designed to feature brand-new concepts whilst its sister title, *Marvel Spotlight*, showcased established characters. In practice, the difference was hard to distinguish. 31 features Bill Mantlo and Keith Giffen's Woodgod, a marvellously original treatment of the Frankenstein theme told in an ingenious, unorthodox first-person narrative by the hybrid creature. Howard Chaykin's space mercenary, Monark Starstalker, delivers competent action adventure in 32, whilst Roy Thomas' 3-D Man in 35-37 has one of the most ludicrous origins and costumes in any comic book. Doug Moench and Mike Ploog deliver the second Weirdworld appearance (following *Marvel Super Action* 1) in 38; a warm elven fantasy tale told with charm and a certain degree of tongue in cheek. However, Moench's Seeker 3000! science-fiction strip in 41 is immature and scientifically inaccurate.

Don McGregor's portrayal of Paladin, the *Daredevil* supporting character, in 43 is muddled and self-indulgent. Whilst Bill Mantlo and Keith Giffen's Jack of Hearts in 44 makes the grade, it is seriously at odds with the character's treatment in the later miniseries. Alarmingly, Dave Kraft chooses a sword-and-sorcery setting to tie up the loose ends of the Man-Wolf story so rudely interrupted by the cancellation of *Creatures on the Loose* three years earlier. Amazingly, he pulls off a blinder, laced with restrained humour, John Jameson's reluctant acceptance of promotion to godhood and George Pérez's usual gorgeous pencils. Scott Lang's début as the new Ant-Man in 47-48 is acceptable superheroics and a wild contrast to Alice Cooper's début in 50, which Alice co-plotted. 51-53 tie up the Black Panther loose ends from the cancellation of *Jungle Action*. 54 sports a new Western hero, Caleb Hammer, as Peter Gillis presents a fine, melancholy tale and Gene Day's five-star pencils serve up a dead ringer for Clint Eastwood. 57-60 reprint British Marvel *Dr Who* strips by Dave Gibbons, and the title bows out with Doug Moench and Tom Sutton's outstanding Starlord science-fiction story. Much food for thought is provided by the vastly different interpretations of the same events experienced by Starlord and the sentient planet he visits.~APS

Recommended: 1, 3, 12-14, 31, 45-46, 54, 61

MARVEL PRESENTS

Marvel: *12 issues 1975-1977*

Best to ignore the Bloodstone strip occupying the first two issues. Suffice it to say he went on to better things in the rear of *Rampaging Hulk*. The Guardians of the Galaxy took up residency with issue 3, continuing their story from *Defenders* 26-29. Steve Gerber wrote fun space opera with engaging characters, illustrated by Al Milgrom seeming like he cared for once, with their best issue being Gerber's satire on 1970s New York in 5. Roger Stern becomes writer with 10, but lacks Gerber's light touch, and although not bad, his issues suffer in comparison. Beware the reprint in 8.~FP

Recommended: 3-7

MARVEL PREVIEW

Marvel: *24 issues 1975-1980*

Another Marvel try-out comic, in this case a black and white magazine whose contents were sometimes inspired and occasionally bizarre. The first feature was the Erich Von Daniken-inspired 'Man Gods From Beyond The Stars', a spacemen and cavemen epic by Doug Moench and the brilliant Alex Niño. Contrary to expectations it effortlessly transcended its rather ludicrous premise, as did its EC tribute back-up, 'Good Lord', wherein a group of spacefarers meet God... and kill him! 2's headliner, The Punisher, was overshadowed by a lovely Howard Chaykin 'Dominic Fortune' short, while 3's 'Blade' strip (a refugee from Vampire Tales) was well drawn by Tony DeZuniga among others. With 4 the title discovered its only real success in Steve Englehart and Steve Gan's Starlord, a (for its time) downbeat space-opera strip. The next instalment, in 11, featured the crowd-pleasing line-up of Chris Claremont, John Byrne and Terry Austin and a far more conventional superhero slant. Subsequent appearances were less bombastic and boasted nice art from Carmine Infantino (14-15) and a young Bill Sienkiewicz (18).

Sienkiewicz reappeared for the superhero strip Moon Knight (in 21), which followed another colour comics transplant, Thor (10), though neither gained much from the format change. More successful were the natural inhabitants of the magazine format, the horror issues, with none more so than 7's Claremont-scripted Satana with the superbly atmospheric art of Vincente Alcazar. 'The Legion of Monsters' in 8 boasted Gene Colan and Mike Ploog artwork and an epic tale of Morbius, the living vampire, while 12 – 'The Haunt of Horror' – starred Dracula, Lilith (with a typically strong Steve Gerber script) and a terrific Mike Kaluta short. The most impressive collection, however, was 16's 'Masters of Terror', with three Colan strips, the best of which was another Gerber Lilith story, the cutting dissection of 1970s mores 'Death by Disco'.

Many of the remaining issues were decent, but uninspired reads. Sherlock Holmes headlined 5 and 6, 9's Man-God was an adaptation of Philip Wylie's 1930s novel *Gladiator*, Blackmark in 17 was a below-par Gil Kane, and Kull in 19 and Merlin in 22 were equally undistinguished. 20 and 23 were both titled 'Bizarre Adventures', with the first all reprint and the second a collection of stories by an all-star cast (including Frank Miller, Gene Colan and John Buscema) that proved surprisingly unsatisfactory. *Preview*'s final story, the science-fiction Paradox strip, mixed sex and drugs and was considered quite daring for the day, though contemporary audiences may well wonder what the fuss was about. Undoubtedly the comic's strangest hour, though, was 13's 'UFO Connection', a heady brew of alien abductions, time- shifting and pyramid power from David Anthony Kraft and Herb Trimpe (great aliens, Herb!). From 25 the comic was retitled *Bizarre Adventures*.~DAR

Recommended: 1, 2, 7, 16

MARVEL SAGA

Marvel: *25 issues 1985-1987*

Retells the significant events of the Marvel Universe to early 1966, concluding with the origins of Galactus and the Silver Surfer. Researcher Peter Sanderson writes new framing text around cut and pasted panels from comics of yesteryear. All events are presented in order of internal chronology, including those not revealed until many years later, thus creating heaven for continuity freaks. Full source and creator credits contribute to a professional product. A fine, shortcut revision guide for boning up on early Marvel history.~APS

MARVEL SPECTACULAR

Marvel: *19 issues 1973-1975*

Reprints *Thor* stories sequentially commencing with *Thor* 128.~APS

MARVEL SPOTLIGHT

Marvel: *Series one 31 issues 1971-1977, series two 11 issues 1979-1981*

The companion title to *Marvel Premiere* was also a showcase for new strips, albeit initially with a pronounced horror bent. The exception was 1's Red Wolf feature, an unremarkable Western by Gardner Fox, Syd Shores and Wally Wood, but popular enough to spawn its own series. More successful was 'Werewolf By Night' in 2-4, blessed with gorgeous art from Mike Ploog; typically for Marvel monster features it took a rather superheroic approach to the age-old concept. The giant-sized 2 also featured a lovely Bill Everett Venus reprint from the 1950s. The talented Ploog was on hand again for Ghost Rider, which ran in 5-11 before inexplicably going on to become Marvel's longest-running horror title. Clearly any series about a stunt cyclist selling his soul to the Devil was never going to have much intellectual depth, but Gary Friedrich's scripts were vigorously fun, and Ploog's visualisation of the fiery-skulled motorcyclist had an undeniable, if kitsch, resonance. Friedrich's next creation was even more bizarre, none other than the Son of Satan. How on Earth did Marvel ever get away with it? And again, its lengthy run (12-24) spawned its own series. With Hulk artist Herb Trimpe on pencils, as inappropriate a choice as its possible to imagine, the strip revelled in scenes of the suffering denizens of Hell and innumerable very muscular demons. Oh, and Satan looked peculiarly like the Human Torch! Creative successors Steve Gerber and Jim Mooney calmed things down a bit before Gerber and Gene Colan gave the strip its only brief sense of direction with a very powerful exorcism two-parter in 18 and 19. The strip's final creative team, Chris Claremont and Sal Buscema, did little, and the next few issues, with Sinbad (25), The Scarecrow (26), Sub-Mariner (27) and Moon-Knight (28-29), proved equally unexciting. The last few issues of Spotlight's first run were a mixed bag. The Warriors Three from the pages of *Thor* in 30 had nice John Buscema artwork, 31's Nick Fury story by Jim Starlin and Howard Chaykin saw neither at their best, and 33 continued Deathlok from *Astonishing Tales*. All failed to catch the public imagination. Only 32's Spider-Woman went on to bigger things, though this first appearance was perfunctory.

The second series was like much of Marvel's early 1980s material, humdrum in the extreme – with two notable exceptions. 1-4 printed left-overs from the recently cancelled *Captain Marvel* to no great effect, though 8's Captain Marvel tale at least boasted some nice early Frank Miller art. Steve Ditko's efforts on Dragonlord in 5 and Captain Universe (9-11) remain unforgivable exercises in abject hackery that he should be suitably embarrassed about. On the other hand, Doug Moench and Tom Sutton's Starlord in 6 and 7 was well crafted and quite touching space operatics of the highest order.~DAR
Recommended: Series one 2-4, 18, 19

MARVEL SUPER ACTION

Marvel: *One shot 1976, 38 issues 1977-1981*

The black and white magazine one-shot leads off with a decent Archie Goodwin Punisher story, the follow-up to his origin in *Marvel Preview* 2. Back-up tales are the Huntress (who later became Mockingbird), Dominic Fortune by Howard Chaykin and the incongruously placed first appearance of Weirdworld by Doug Moench and Mike Ploog.

The second incarnation reprints Captain America stories starting with 100. 12 and 13 reprint the first two Steranko issues (110, 111) with pages cut. Issues 14 on reprint *Avengers* 55-77, continuing from where the deceased *Marvel Triple Action* left off. From 27 most issues also carry back-up Hulk stories previously seen only in British comics.~APS

MARVEL SUPER-HEROES

Marvel: *One-shot 1966, series one 95 issues (12-106) 1967-1982, series two 15 issues, 1 Special 1990-1993*

The 1966 one-shot reprints 1940s Sub-Mariner and Human Torch stories alongside *Daredevil* 1, and the title was resurrected to replace *Fantasy Masterpieces* a year later. The policy of reprinting 1940s material was continued, backing up one new feature per issue until 20. There's the Black Knight in 17, Medusa in 15 and Dr Doom in 20, but the introduction of the Guardians of the Galaxy in 18 by Arnold Drake and Gene Colan is as good as it gets, although 12-13 are notable for Captain Marvel's first appearances. Thereafter it's reprints all the way, with *Uncanny X-Men* 1-8 and *Daredevil* 2-7 featuring in 21-27, then *Hulk* reprints running sequentially until *Hulk* 157. The second series revived the giant-sized format to feature at least three stories each issue, encompassing a variety of Marvel characters right down to third-stringers like Sabra and Spitfire (well treated in 4, which also has an Alan Davis Black Knight strip) along with the top of the line mainstays. There's a fair selection of irredeemable rubbish, but while never remarkable, it's not the total disaster one might assume given the prevailing standards at early 1990s Marvel. Freed from the constraints of continuity, crossovers, guest appearances and tie-ins, many of the stories display a spirit absent elsewhere in the line. The inventory material also featured isn't quite as good, although Ms Marvel fans will want to pick up 10 and 11, featuring what would have been the 24th and 25th issues of her title. 3 contains a story prepared for *Captain Marvel*'s late 1970s run.~WJ

MARVEL SUPER SPECIAL

Marvel: *41 issues 1977-1986*

Don't look for the title *Marvel Super Special* on the cover, as it was an umbrella title under which numerous features appeared. Much trumpeted high production values led to high expectations, but most issues are little more than magazine-size comics. It launched with a coup, the first comics story featuring inordinately successful glam rock band Kiss. With their greasepaint personae Kiss were heavily comics-influenced, and the creative team of Steve Gerber, pencillers Al Weiss, John and Sal Buscema and Rich Buckler (one for each member of the band) and inker Al Milgrom produced a largely enjoyable slice of nonsense about Kiss fighting Marvel villain Dr Doom. The series incorporated song titles throughout and Kiss as superheroes. In keeping with the band's over-the-top persona, each member donated a vial of blood to be added to the red printing ink. The comic's success was such that a quick reprise was prompted in 5, but by lesser talents.

Warriors of the Shadow Realm is a fantasy series occupying 11-13, where, again, much was made of the comic's production in the editorial pages, presumably to deflect attention from the dull content. The space opera of *Battlestar Galactica* (8) and *The Empire Strikes Back* (16) works well, and Conan fans might want to find 2 and 9, the latter with a decently drawn Red Sonja strip by Howard Chaykin. George Pérez draws the story of the Beatles well enough in 4, and 7 may feature an adaptation of *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, but was withdrawn from US and British publication when the film proved an all-time turkey. It was allegedly published in Japan, and listed as such in several price guides: do you actually know anyone who's seen a copy?

From 14 it's film adaptations all the way, with highlights difficult to locate. Few of those working on these adaptations made much effort, although Gray Morrow's *Sheena* in 34 is, at least, a visual treat. Walt Simonson and John Buscema turn in an acceptable *Raiders of the Lost Ark* for 18, and Bill Sienkiewicz draws *Dune* for 36. Perhaps fittingly, the series closed with an adaptation of *Howard the Duck*, another all-time turkey, but the only other comic in which Kiss appeared until the 1990s.~FP

MARVEL TALES

Marvel: *291 issues 1964-1994*

Marvel's longest-running reprint title deals almost exclusively with Spider-Man. The first two double-size issues are titled *Marvel Tales Annual* and reprint the origins of most of the early Marvel superheroes. 3-33 are also oversize, as *Amazing Spider-Man* reprints are backed up by Thor and Human Torch in 3-27 (from the beginnings of their runs) and miscellaneous features, most notably 1950s Marvel Boy stories in 13-16. From 34, Spider-Man assumed the solo feature until 136, which reprints *Amazing Spider-Man* 159. 131-133 reprint the British *Captain Britain* 1-2, not previously published in the US, and 134-137 feature Doctor Strange's first four appearances from *Strange Tales*.

With 137, *Marvel Tales* rewound its reprints to *Amazing Fantasy* 15 and re-presented all the early issues of *Amazing Spider-Man* until 190 (reprinting *Amazing Spider-Man* 50). These are laudably free of edited pages, but suffer from the smudged production typical of Marvel's early 1980s output. *Spider-Man Digest* continues reprints of *Amazing Spider-Man* from 51 onwards. *Marvel Tales* then went hot, reprinting random issues featuring *Spider-Man* stories guest-starring popular characters, namely the John Byrne *Marvel Team-Up* issues to 208, Punisher to 222, X-Men to 244 and then scattered Morbius, Ghost Rider, Hobgoblin and Black Costume appearances until its finale.

A handful of new back-up stories, paradoxically rarely featuring Spider-Man, have filled out occasional issues: Angel in 30, concluding his story-line from *Ka-Zar* 3, Hawkeye and Two Gun Kid in 100, Spider-Man and Thing in 198, X-Men and Sunstroke in 262 and Woodgod in 263. Owing to their minute page-count (5-10 pages), all are inconsequential aside from the Woodgod tale, which serves as an eloquent epilogue to his origin in *Marvel Premiere* 31.~APS

MARVEL TEAM-UP

Marvel: *Series one 150 issues, 7 Annuals 1972-1985, series two 11 issues 1997-1998*

After DC teamed Batman with other superheroes in *The Brave and the Bold*, a Spider-Man team-up title appeared in 1972. Early issues are only noteworthy for some fine Gil Kane art, particularly in 4's X-Men guest-shot. Laughably, 1-24 are now available in the cheap format *Essential* series. You'd have to be demented. Writers Len Wein and Gerry Conway show little interest, bottoming out with Conway's all-time stinker in 28 as Manhattan Island is towed back into place by Hercules, having been held for ransom in the Atlantic. Between 21 and 32 Spider-Man had every third issue off, with the Human Torch filling in. It was probably a similar contractual deal to that of talk-show hosts. In 41-44 Bill Mantlo and Sal Buscema turn out an interesting tale involving the Scarlet Witch, Dr Doom and the Salem Witch Trials, but it was merely a blip among the mediocrity, as was Daredevil's appearance in 56.

With 57 Chris Claremont became writer, joining regular penciller John Byrne, who'd already drawn 53-55, and *Marvel Team-Up* became interesting. More offbeat guest stars like Yellowjacket and the Wasp (59, 60), Captain Britain (65, 66), and even the cast of *Saturday Night Live* (74) became the order of the day, and it seemed the creators cared about more than meeting a deadline. Highpoints are the conclusion to the Iron Fist series in 63-64, the unusual appearance of Red Sonja in 79 and, artistically, Thor and Havok in 69-70. The two parters were reprinted along with 75's Power Man story in a 1998 one-shot titled *Giant-Sized Spider-Man*. A plot involving the Black Widow, Nick Fury and Shang-Chi (82-85), is notable for the art of Sal Buscema inked by Steve Leialoha, and 86's Guardians of the Galaxy appearance is also worth a look. Byrne had already gone when Claremont left with 89's Nightcrawler story. From 90 an assortment of creators sent the title spiralling back into a panache-free zone, brightened only by Claremont returning in the company of Frank Miller to team Spider-Man with the Fantastic Four and introduce New Mutant, Karma, in 100.

Appointing regular pencillers Herb Trimpe (106-118) and Kerry Gammill (119-133) along with writer J.M. DeMatteis (111-133) doesn't lift the title – with one glorious exception. In 119 there's no supervillain and Gargoyle and Spider-Man spend little time in each other's company, but each is involved in a situation pertaining to old age, resulting in a very touching story. DeMatteis appears to have been resolving some questions regarding his relationship with his parents during his time on *MTU*, as the gulf between parent and offspring is a recurring theme, even in 131's deliberately ridiculous Frog Man story. From that point the only issue worth mentioning is the silliness of 137, in which Spider-Man's aged Aunt May and Franklin Richards team to save Earth from the planet-devouring Galactus. By 1985 a team-up title was no longer required as guest appearances were commonplace at Marvel, while crossovers were about to become the norm rather than the exception, and *Marvel Team-Up* departed with a whimper.

It was revived in all but name as *Spider-Man Team-Up* in 1996, then restored in 1997 with Spider-Man teaming in 1-5 and 7 and Namor teaming in 8-11. They shared 6. Tom Peyer writes all issues, Glenn Herdling joining him for those featuring Namor, with Pat Oliffe and Josh Hood pencilling most. Hood does a decent job, but everyone else falls well below par for a run offering scant entertainment value.~FP

Recommended: 56, 63, 64, 69, 70, 79, 82-86, 100, 119

MARVEL: THE LOST GENERATION

Marvel: *12 issue limited series (12-1) 2000-2001*

The Marvel heroic universe began in 1961, with the debut of the Fantastic Four, yet Marvel continuity places them as being around about a decade. They were preceded by the 1940s heroes, and the abortive 1950's revival of *Captain America*, the *Human Torch*, and the *Sub-Mariner*. This left the Marvel Universe, from circa 1955 to an eternal 'ten years ago', without superheroic protectors - until John Byrne and Roger Stern came up with the 'continuity implant', to fill the spaces.

Investigating the alien Skrulls via incomplete records, late 22nd Century researcher Dr. Cassandra Locke travels to earlier points in Earth's history, from the 1950s to the 1970s, seeking evidence of previous Skrull attempts to control or invade Earth. Along the way, she encounters a number of key figures in Marvel history – Dr. Strange, Nick Fury, the Sub-Mariner – as well as an entire generation of heroes, primarily those organised as the team 'The First Line', whose operations were mostly covert, and who have been forgotten by posterity. Sadly, Cassandra, is never more than a cypher. She stumbles into situations she doesn't understand and utters warnings, thanks to her knowledge of the future, that, like the predictions of her mythological namesake, are seldom believed. And that's about it.

Byrne and Stern's continuity-implant heroes, however, are varied and largely appealing. Due to the pacing and structure of the series, the majority remain "costume X whose power is Y", but several are given enough layers to intrigue, and quite a bit of imagination is brought to filling in gaps in Marvel's history without becoming plodding about it. Seriously flawed, but still interesting and eminently readable. The title was originally released as a 12-1 'countdown', but works much better when read in conventional order from 1.~HS

MARVEL TRIPLE ACTION

Marvel: *47 issues 1972-1979*

Where the triple action came from no-one knows. 1-4 reprint Kirby *Fantastic Four* issues, and from 5 it's *Avengers* reprints all the way, encompassing the final Lee and Kirby period, through Thomas and Heck to John Buscema's earliest days on the comic. Fewer pages in the 1970s comics meant that all stories are edited by at least a page, some none too sympathetically.~FP

MARVEL TWO-IN-ONE

Marvel: *100 issues, 7 Annuals 1974-1983*

This team-up title stars the Thing and a different superhero guest every issue. Such titles are difficult to write well. The traditional formula has the co-stars battling each other before collaborating against the villain, and *Marvel Two-In-One* has more than its fair share of these potboilers. Steve Gerber started on a sound footing for its first nine issues, although most stories are heavily tied to other titles he was writing contemporaneously. His depiction of the Thing's artful sense of humour provided a refreshing change from the continuous wisecracking machine often portrayed. The title's nadir swiftly followed, with most issues in the teens hitting absolute rock bottom.

Sporadic signs of promise surfaced in issues 42-43 and 50-51 before Mark Gruenwald and Ralph Macchio taught all other scripters a lesson on how to write team-up titles. Their run in 53-58 and 60-74 seamlessly melds rotating guest stars into multi-issue story-lines, punctuated with such delightful one-off stories as the touchingly humorous Impossible Man tale in 60. The 'Project Pegasus' saga serves as the crux of their run, fostering several meaty sub-plots, all of which are resolved by the end of their tenure, a rare event in more modern times. Regrettably, the output fades towards average over their final few issues. The visual side is spoilt by the presence of too many artists in the twenty-one issues, although work by Byrne, Pérez, Day and Bingham is of high quality. Tom DeFalco failed to heed their lesson. 75 onwards churn out mediocrity at best. His only issue worthy of mention is 86, in which Sandman goes straight. Annual 2 by Jim Starlin chronicles the final chapter in the Warlock/Thanos feud that began in Warlock's first series. Although not the best issue of that run, this fine story depicts one of Thanos and Warlock's many deaths. All the other annuals are forgettable.~APS

Recommended: 6-7, 10, 51, 53-58, 60-67, Annual 2

MARVEL UNIVERSE

Marvel: *7 issues 1998*

Roger Stern becomes Marvel's official biographer in this series dedicated to untold stories of the continuity prior to the events of *Fantastic Four* 1. 1-3 star the Invaders, and

explain how Hydra/Baron Strucker came by such advanced technology, all beautifully rendered by Steve Epting and Al Williamson, whilst the remainder concern Ulysses Bloodstone and Dr Druid in a tribute to the monsters that plagued the pre-superhero world. Wonderful, old fashioned, fun.~WW
Recommended: 1-3

MARVEL VALENTINE SPECIAL

Marvel: *One-shot, 1997*

A pleasing and imaginative look at the romantic lives of Marvel's heroes. Spider-Man and Mary Jane star in a *Pygmalion* homage, Daredevil and Karen Page try to help a victim of spousal abuse, and Absorbing Man and Titania (Marvel's 'Married... With Criminal Records' couple) have problems when 'Sorby's attempt to get a Valentine's Day present for the little woman goes wrong. All three stories are well-written and drawn, self-contained and accessible to new readers, a rare treat. The icing on the cake is a delicious farce starring Venus, Goddess of Love, in her first solo for 45 years, as she finds several of Marvel's old teen-comedy stars working at a dating agency, and fights off The Blind Date From Outer Space! Writer Frank Strom and artist Dan DeCarlo do a fine job on this tribute to Marvel's funny girls. There's also a Cyclops and Phoenix story set in the dismal Askani's World continuity, confusing and muddily drawn, but hey, there's a coffee cream in every box of chocolates.~HS
Recommended

MARVEL'S GREATEST COMICS

Marvel: *74 issues (23-96) 1969-1981*

Carrying on directly from *Marvel Collectors' Item Classics*, issues 23-34 are double-size and continue reprints of Doctor Strange, Fantastic Four and Iron Man. Also included are Captain America's early stories from *Tales of Suspense*. From 35 on, the book shrank to a thirty-two-page *Fantastic Four* reprint title. 116 is the last issue reprinted before cancellation.~APS

MARVELS

Marvel: *5 issue limited series (1-4, 0) 1994**

This groundbreaking series by Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross retells early events in the Marvel Universe through the eyes of news photo-journalist Phil Sheldon. Like his ordinary fellow-men, he has to come to terms with the appearance of superbeings and the effects they have on day- to-day life. Through him, his family, colleagues and strangers he meets, we see mankind's fear, insecurity, helplessness and prejudice laid bare by these awesome Marvels whose conflicts wreak millions of dollars of property damage with apparent disdain for the misery heaped upon affected innocents. Every piece of superheroic action is sourced from an existing Marvel comic. Each issue focuses on a major event from a different period in Sheldon's life. These events and real-time publication dates are: 1 – the first appearance of the original Human Torch (1939), 2 – anti-mutant hysteria (1965), 3 – the coming of Galactus and the Silver Surfer (1966) and 4 – the death of Gwen Stacy (1973).

Ross's painted artwork is magnificent. Realism and lavish attention to detail underlie every panel, particularly exemplified by 1's late 1930s period setting – the cars, the dress styles, everybody smokes. Backgrounds are meticulous. Spot the Beatles at Reed and Sue's wedding in 2 and Pete Townshend in 4. Busiek's script is low-key and understated. A young J. Jonah Jameson makes a guest appearance in 1, yet his name is never mentioned. Issue 2 is the strongest. Sheldon is involuntarily swept up in a frenzied wave of anti-mutant hysteria and subsequently has to reassess his stance when he meets a defenceless, innocent mutant child face to face. Later, Sheldon writes a book titled 'Marvels' which contains many of his news photos.

Issue 0 was published some four months after the regular series and is not essential. It contains short text pieces describing how the project came to be, an eleven-page prototype story with a more detailed origin of the Golden Age Human Torch, and pin-ups and character sketches by Ross during development.

Marvels' success can be gauged by the spin-offs and reprints it has generated. 1-4 were reprinted individually during 1996. All five issues have been collected in softcover, hardcover and limited-edition variants. The softcover boasts the same cover as Sheldon's fictional book, provides further details of the project's design stages and, for complete fanatics, lists the source of every recaptured event right down to issue and page number. Spin-offs *Ruins* and *Tales of the Marvels* were published during succeeding years and maintain the same theme. Busiek has since adopted a similar approach with unfamiliar superheroes in *Astro City*. Marvels cannot be recommended too highly, although unfamiliarity with the early, retold stories does slightly lessen its appreciation. It is an adult comic in the true meaning of the word, with neither an ounce of exposed flesh nor exposed innards in sight.~APS
Recommended: 1-4

MARVELS

Marvel: *6 One-shots (Captain America, Daredevil, Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, Thor, X-Men), one-shot (The History of Marvels Comics) 2000*

It's long been established that the heroes who inhabit the Marvel universe have comics issued about them. These purport to be some of those comics, produced by creators who adapt the exploits of the heroes from interviews, press releases, news items, and naturally, sheer imagination. Ranging from the silly *Captain America* "written and drawn" by Rick Jones and Steve Rogers to the eccentric *Daredevil* (an actual escaped demon) by Tony Isabella and Eddie Newell, to the just plain dumb blood-drinking mutant *Spider-Man* (Paul Grist and Kyle Hotz) it's easy to see why the comics industry is having such a hard time prospering. Of special note, though, is *X-Men* by Mark Millar and Sean Phillips. Stylistically and thematically it could be considered a test run for the *Ultimate X-Men* . *The History of Marvels Comics* is a promotional sidebar publication to support them. Ultimate Marvelites only.~WW

MARVILLE

Marvel: *3 issues + 2002 to date*

Marvel Comics president Bill Jemas and artist Mark Bright produce a so-so parody full of comics industry in-jokes, wherein Ted and Jane send their son Al back 3000 years to the Marvel Universe of today. He thinks he has superpowers and becomes a witless and unwitting success despite only wanting to get into the pants of a girl who can't stand him. Although there's the odd nice touch to augment the good artwork, this is way too cynical and not nearly as sharp as it thinks it is.~WW

MASK

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1985-1986, 9 issues 1987*

One third of the cartoon series and toy triumvirate, *Mask* is pretty simple car and vehicle related adventures scripted, seemingly in his sleep, by Michael Fleisher. What makes this of passing interest is the classic *Superman* art team of Curt Swan and Kurt Schaffenberger still on good form.~FP

The MASK

Dark Horse: *5 issue miniseries (0-4) 1991, 4 issue miniseries (The Mask Returns) 1992-1993, 18 issues 1995-1996, one-shot ('Virtual Surreality') 1997, 4 issue miniseries ('Toys in the Attic') 1998*

0 features reprints from The Mask's earlier appearances in *Mayhem*. The actual miniseries reintroduces the character to the world as Stanley Ipkis, an ineffectual nerd, all his inhibitions released whenever he puts on an ancient tribal mask he has acquired. John Arcudi and Doug Mahnke produce a series of set-ups and deliveries that approximate quite nicely one continuous story, but eventually the protagonist is an annoying, unsympathetic and unfunny one-trick pony. The ongoing series moves the concept on as Arcudi and Mahnke and their successors use the 'miniseries within a series' format (cover numbered as miniseries) to tell tales of The Mask as it possesses different people. 1-5* (*The Mask Strikes Back*) sees a succession of drop-out kids where

The Mask more or less fulfils their individual suppressed desires. 6-9* ('The Hunt for Green October') has Evan Dorkin and Peter Gross explore what happens as news of the power of The Mask spreads to the underworld and crypto-Nazis, Ninjas and Mafioso all try to possess it. Competent but unremarkable. The madness goes mobile in 11-14* ('World Tour') before settling down for some down home lunacy in 15-18* ('Southern Comfort'). The series then went dormant until the release of the manic one-shot, a jam issue featuring the likes of Sergio Aragonés, Mike Mignola and others, leading to another miniseries by Bob Fingerman, but generally the character remains a foil, useful for playing against other characters, or in intercompany cross-overs, dependent on milieu and antagonists, not his own qualities, to hold the attention.~WW

Adventures of the MASK

Dark Horse: *12 issues 1996*

So-so cartoon adaptation as this general audience version carries on from the Saturday morning kids show. It tells watered down, less manic tales of the Stanley Ipkis character and his misadventures whenever possessed by an ancient mask that releases his pent-up hostilities in the form of a shape-changing, reality-altering psychopath. Consistently average.~WW

The MASK Graphic Novels

Dark Horse: *The Night Before ChristMask 1994, The Mask Summer Vacation 1995, The Mask in School Spirits 1995*

Three wacky and genuinely bizarre specials from sporadic genius Rick Geary released as seasonal fillips to tie in with the US vacation schedule. Although probably not considered canonical by hardcore fans, and targeting a general rather than comics audience, they most closely approach the spirit of anarchy and lunacy that seems to be the basis of the character.~WW

Recommended: *The Night Before ChristMask*

THE MASKED MAN

Eclipse: *9 issues 1984-1985*

As a child, Dick Carstairs saw his mother shot dead, so now he runs a detective agency and sometimes he rolls his sleeves up to his armpits, puts a mask on, and hits people. He débuted in *Eclipse Monthly* as an obvious homage to Will Eisner's *Spirit*; there are refreshing aspects, in that Carstairs is desperately puppy-like and gormless, and the mask never stops anyone recognising him. The stories by B. C. Boyer are feeble and ponderous, and his artwork stiff, at best. The final issue, though, is unintentionally hilarious. You would have to be lost to all finer feelings not to laugh out loud at the death scene.~FC

Masayuki Fujihara's MASKED WARRIOR X

Antarctic: *4 issues 1996*

This translated Japanese series only lasted four issues of a planned six, probably because it's commonplace manga in which every point of interest is ruthlessly curtailed in favour of lengthy combat sequences punctuated by slapstick gags. Protecting society where cybernetically implanted athletes commit crimes, Dan is the invincible Kendo Warrior. Raised from birth to his position, his armour has fused to him, and regenerates from his own body, the more interesting implications of this remaining unexplored. The title comes from his kendo mask and his habit of slicing his conquests with an X across their torso in Zorro fashion.~FP

J.N. Williamson's MASQUES

Innovation: *2 issues 1992*

Adapting short stories from the series of horror anthology books, means that there's a Stephen King story in 2, but, as with most of the content, it's nothing the horror devotee won't have come across before. Adding illustrations dims the power of imagination, which is what makes most horror work in the first place. The best story is the longest, 'Nightcrawlers' in 1. It's the classic formula of the stranger wandering into the remote outpost in stormy weather and proceeding to reveal the truth. Not coincidentally, it's also the only story of the run produced in pen and ink, with Ted Naifeh drawing his template from the Steve Bissette and John Totleben pairing on *Swamp Thing*.~WJ

MASTER DARQUE

Acclaim: *One-shot 1997*

Alexandre Darque is devilishly handsome, a sorcerer, fashion photographer and manipulator. Prior to this he popped up in various Acclaim titles, a mystery man with a personal agenda. Even here he is almost a secondary character as we meet Brixton Sound, a photography student desperately seeking a cure for the cancer killing his mother. Darque offers him a job and a solution that results in a whistlestop tour of the Acclaim universe as Sound retrieves three tokens from DeadSide (Shadowman), The (Eternal Warriors) Palazzo and the Lost Land of Galyanna (Turok). He is drawn deeper into Darque's world of magic, glamour and debauchery, with unrelenting predictability, and no real resolutions. A typical introductory issue although Leonardo Manco's art elevates a standard 'Mature Readers' script from Christina Z. His story continues in *Darque Passages*.~WW

MASTER OF KUNG-FU

Marvel: *109 issues (17-125), 1 Annual, 4 Giant-Size 1974-1983, one-shot 1991*

Max: *6 issue miniseries 2002-2003*

The potential for disaster was immense. Not only was the comic to tie-in with a 1970s fad, the lead was the son of oriental pulp-novel villain Fu Manchu. Given the inauspicious conception, it's astounding that this survives as a highspot of 1970s Marvel output. The title continues the numbering from *Special Marvel Edition*, which saw the début of Shang-Chi, Master of Kung-Fu. The original creators departed rapidly, and replacement writer Doug Moench overcomes a faltering start to infuse the comic with a lyrical blend of philosophy, a well conceived and fleshed-out supporting cast, and action that's questioned and justified in situ. For large portions of the run Moench is accompanied by excellent artists. It's Paul Gulacy (most issues between 25 and 50) who's the best remembered, but Mike Zeck inked by Bruce Patterson then Gene Day (67-101) is good, and given the chance to pencil, Gene Day (102-120) is the pick of the bunch. He can't quite match Gulacy's dynamism, but compensates with subtlety and decorative layouts.

The comic takes off once Moench and Gulacy dispense with all-out butt-kicking kung-fu action and opt for spy thriller as the apt genre for the cast. Shang-Chi is a man raised to be a living weapon in his father's service, but discovers Fu Manchu's true intentions in early issues. He adopts Denis Nayland-Smith, also inherited from the Sax Rohmer Fu Manchu novels and head of the British government anti-terrorist branch, as a surrogate mentor. Smith's right-hand man, Black Jack Tarr, and agents Leiko Wu and Clive Reston (dropping claims of Sherlock Holmes and James Bond among his ancestry), round out the main cast for the entire run. Shang-Chi is a consistently reluctant combatant but constantly finds circumstances lead him down that path.

The best issues of the title came relatively early into the run, with a tragic love affair in Hong Kong providing the background for 38-39, and an epic battle against Fu Manchu narrated in turn by involved cast members in 44-50. That's not to say, however, that later issues are substandard. Almost the entire run attains a level of quality rarely seen today, and if some of the philosophising seems dated, and the martial arts villains contrived, there's always something to compensate. Moench and Day left the title with 120, and that it was cancelled a mere five issues later speaks volumes.

An ill-advised return by Moench, initially serialised in *Marvel Comics Presents*, was issued as a one-shot in 1991, and he followed that with the *Moon Knight Special* in 1992, with Shang-Chi taking an equal part. Shang-Chi later appears in *Journey into Mystery* 514-516. Collectively they seemed to prove the adage "you can't go home again", but the Max miniseries is a creditable reuniting of Moench and Gulacy. The name of Fu Manchu was obviously off-limits this time, so Moench just has Saint Germain playing the same role. It feels like a new actor being wheeled in to play James Bond. Moench provides a few surprises, though, and some jokes, not least a snipe at what passes for a covert action squad at Image. The passing of time is acknowledged, with Wu and Reston now married and Shang-Chi is dragged out of isolation for a suitably nefarious threat. Gulacy's art is looser, but his faces sloppier. Overall, if not a return to peak form, it outshines expectations.~FP

Recommended: 29-31, 33, 34, 38-40, 42-51, 71, 76-80, 83-89, 96-98, 100, 109-111, 114-118, 120

MASTERS OF TERROR

Marvel: *2 issues 1975*

A black and white reprint magazine that drew its material from the likes of *Supernatural Thrillers* and *Journey into Mystery*. Of the two, the first issue is better, with strips by Gil Kane, Frank Brunner and Esteban Maroto, although either is a nice introduction to Marvel's horror titles.~DAR

MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE

Image: *2 issues + 2002 to date*

The reviving of every 1980s toy-related comic has finally trickled down to this. Despite the dynamic art of an enthusiast rather than some hack knocking it out during their morning dump, this is the same old rubbish you read twenty years ago. Except you're not seven years old any more.~FP

MATT CHAMPION

Metro: *2 issues 1987*

The world of wrestling in the 1930s is the theme of Ernie Colón's series, but don't let that put you off. The central character has evolved into a powerful wrestler by means of illegal injections administered by his chemist father, and the story deals with the corrupt nature of wrestling in general, though not without a sense of humour. Matt is a kindly soul who rebels against the crooked promoters, and when dealing with gangsters it's as well the injections have also made him bulletproof. If you're looking for something different, this may be for you. Sadly it was never completed.~HY

MATTER BABY

Antarctic: *1 Annual 1997*

Despite being called an annual, this bears the page count of the traditional comic, but the mis-labelling is either in keeping with the editorial oversight that only supplies credits in the indicia's minute type or the wacky content. It's to be regretted that writer John Marshall and artist Steve Willhite aren't highlighted for an early example of the post-ironic character now prevalent in TV cartoons. Matter Baby is a superhero baby fighting the likes of Disco Concrete Man, and warring amoeba within a drop of water in these funny short pieces. Go on, treat yourself to a laugh.~WJ

MAUS

Pantheon/Penguin: *2 volumes 1986, 1991*

Art Spiegelman covered quite a few bases in shunting comics forward another level. On the face of it he was an unlikely candidate. Certainly a man who cared about his artwork, this was often to the detriment of any narrative or popular appeal. *Raw* magazine, which he co-produced and edited, presented strips almost wilfully teetering on the fine line that separates the King's new clothes from works of genius, yet – at odds with much of the other content – it was here that he began *Maus*. It's a work that replays the horrors and fear accompanying Nazi occupation during World War II, and eventually the death camps that resulted from their ethnic cleansing programmes. Instead of selecting a straightforward portrayal, Spiegelman elects to depict the Jews as mice, and the Nazis as cats, following the metaphor through with other, often inexplicable, depictions (Poles as pigs?). Given the sensitivity of the topic, it demands a serious approach, and Spiegelman never flinches from portraying events as they're told to him, political correctness be damned. These sequences alone, the topic they cover and the story they tell would mark *Maus* as a landmark.

But there's another level. Spiegelman is conveying the experiences of his father Vladek, a death-camp survivor, who's relating the story in segments at his son's prompting. Father and son have had a fractious relationship over the years. While *Maus* is the story of Vladek's experiences in the 1940s, it's also the story of a then twenty-something and now thirty-something art attempting to reconcile and make sense of the contradictory emotions he has regarding his father, and come to an understanding of what shaped the man he knows. It's this extra level that elevates the entire project, with each chapter of horror sandwiched by sequences with art and Vladek. Maus is an extraordinarily honest work: implicit in its presentation is art's admission of badgering his father for his own ends, although there's no way he could have foreseen the critical and financial success his father's story would bring. For all the introspection and worthiness, Spiegelman always sticks with a simple, accessible narrative. There have been few comics as intensely involving as *Maus*, and none as harrowing. It's widely acknowledged as a masterpiece; the only shame is that in ten years since the publication of the first volume few works have come anywhere close to equalling it.~FP

Recommended: 1, 2

MAVERICK

Marvel: *One-shot 1997, 12 issues 1997-1998*

Maverick is a pal of Wolverine and Sabretooth, from the days when they were known collectively as Team-X. He's a mutant (naturally) and mercenary for hire (because all the charity mercenaries work for DC) with a high-tech arsenal. The series deals primarily with his relationship with Sabretooth and that Maverick is dying of the Legacy virus (a type of AIDS for the genetically-enhanced). There's an intriguing supporting cast, including Elena Ivanova, an ex-KGB psi-spy whose mother was killed by Sabretooth, and Brian Johnson, a boy also dying of the virus, who provides an occasional moment of genuine warmth in what is otherwise just another mutant cash-in shoot 'em up.~WW

Wolff & Byrd's Secretary MAVIS

Exhibit A: *4 issues + 1998 to date*

Mavis is secretary to Batton Lash's supernatural lawyers, Alanna Wolff and Jeff Byrd, who appear in *Supernatural Law*. In 1, after her boyfriend Toby has proposed marriage, Mavis must cope with her family's pressure to accept and a ghostly bride rooming a local graveyard. A delinquent teenage vampire's deposition threatens her peace of mind in 2, coinciding with the reappearance of one of her own teenage crushes. These themes return in 3, when Mavis is split into three people, each with a different motivation for her future. With fewer legal trappings, this is about Mavis' own reactions to the creatures that come through the law firm's doors as well as giving more space to her life outside the office. Otherwise, this is no major departure from Lash's main series.~NF

MAX & LILY

Vagabond Press: *One-shot 1999*

Max (female) and Lily (male) start as the eccentric vehicles for creator Kris Dresen to explore various political and social topics of the day via one-page strips, presumably originally produced for another publication. As polemic, they make their point in an inoffensive fashion, although Max and Lily are almost squashed by word balloons, and are very nicely drawn. They're still very nicely drawn when the emphasis shifts to character based humour, but it's not sharp enough or different enough to make compelling reading.~WJ

MAXIMAGE

Image/Extreme: *7 issues 1995-1996*

There has, apparently, always been a mystical entity known as the Maximage. This time the Ancient, recently released from incarceration by aliens, selects Lori Sanders, a street urchin, to do the job. Knowing nothing about her new powers, Lori has to confront the aliens in the 'Extreme Destroyer' multi-title crossover (issue 2) and then gets involved in the battle between Glory, Angela and Celestine (4). Pretty much what you'd expect of a Rob Liefeld character, but with scripts by Bill Messner-Loebs (from 2) the title's at least better written than most Extreme offerings.~NF

MAXIMORTAL.

Tundra: *7 issue limited series 1992-1993**

Continuing Rick Veitch's deconstruction of the superheroic genre, *Maximortal* tells of an alien creature who is used as the ultimate weapon, but turns the tables on his abusers. It's also the story of two naïve young cartoonists who lose the rights to their character 'True-Man' when they sign a contract without looking at the small print. It's also seemingly about several other things, but frankly, it just doesn't tell any of the stories very well at all. The segments involving Spiegal and Schumacher, the cartoonists ripped off by Sidney Wallace, are the strongest, but whenever the action moves away from them it becomes incoherent and metaphysical. And it's got another of those irritating The-End-Is-The-Beginning cop-out conclusions. After the power and drive of *Brat Pack*, this woolly meandering is simply annoying, not meaningful.~HS

MAXIMUM FORCE

Atomeka: *1 issue + 2002 to date*

Simon Bisley knocks out exaggerated mayhem from a Dave Elliott script. Fans of Lobo dive in, everyone else stay clear.~FP

MAXIMUM SECURITY

Marvel: *One-shot ('Dangerous Planet') 2000, one-shot ('Ego The Living Planet'), 3 issue miniseries 2000-2001,*

Alien powers have decided that as the human race is basically full of thugs, it won't matter if they dump all their criminals here as well, making Earth a kind of intergalactic Australia. This miniseries, which bookends crossovers into many of the corresponding months' Marvel titles, could have been a lot of fun. Instead, Kurt Busiek and Jerry Ordway manage to drag it down to absolute tedium, while none of the tie-in issues really get behind the concept; the respective heroes usually brushing off a few alien muggers in a few panels before getting back to their own inevitably more interesting subplots. About the only worthwhile part of the project was that it gave Marvel the excuse to publish the one-shot reprinting three early appearances of the celestial body who played a pivotal role in the crossover. The trio of stories, which all originally appeared in late 1960s issues of Thor by Stan Lee, Jack Kirby and Vince Colletta are, much better entertainment.~JC

Joe Sinardi's MAXWELL MOUSE FOLLIES

Renegade: *6 issues 1986*

If there's an artform entirely inappropriate for treatment in comics it's song and dance, yet Renegade belly flopped two such titles into the shops (the other being *Neil the Horse*). This has a mouse society in 1930s New York flourishing as a scaled-down version of the real thing, but every time the plot starts to spark, a musical number grinds it to a halt.~FP

THE MAXX

Image: *35 issues 1993-1998*

Story and art by Sam Kieth, with dialogue by Bill Messner-Loebs (most issues) and Alan Moore (21). The Maxx is a masked purple guy with large claws and huge feet, who lives in a dumpster in an alley, and all he knows about himself is that he's a superhero. His only friend is Julie. She was assaulted while in college, and though she would say it was no big deal, she dropped out of college and became a freelance social worker, which (her friends point out) gives her feelings of power and superiority. One of her friends is Sarah, an unhappy teenager, and her main enemy is Mr. Gone, a serial rapist and murderer. It sounds grim, and it is, but it's also funny and surprising and constructive. *The Maxx* is a course of psychological therapy, sometimes conducted through metaphor, sometimes through direct confrontation, and since the people involved are interesting and the metaphors imaginative and illuminating, this makes for an absorbing read. The therapy aspect is emphasised by the letter column, which frequently seems like a deliberate extension of the main story.

The 35 issues can be divided (approximately) into four story arcs. The first, 1-11, collected over two volumes, introduces the main characters and metaphors and answers a lot of questions about the ties between Julie and Maxx. It answers them in its own good time, though, and you will have great fun trying to figure out what is going on. The second arc, in 12-20, concentrates more on Sarah and Mr. Gone, but ends with further revelations about Julie and Maxx. The third arc, from 21-29, moves forward ten years and is mostly about Sarah and Mr. Gone; this is still interesting, but in comparison with the planning and foreshadowing that were put into Julie's story, it feels rather tacked on. The fourth arc, from 30-35, tells the stories of new or peripheral characters, all part of the process of closing down the storyline and moving the characters on to different universes.~FC

Recommended: 1-20, 30-35

Friends of MAXX

Image: *3 issues 1996-1997*

This is a development of *The Maxx*, with Sam Kieth plying the same themes of insecurity, dependence, the search for guidance and for an escape from unproductive habits. The Maxx appears on the covers of 1 and 2, but the only real connection between the titles is their appeal to the same readership. Unlike *The Maxx*, there are no fantastical aspects, and the double-length issues make for a more demanding read, though a rewarding one. 1 ('Dude Japan') tells the story of a couple, and depicts very well the histories and expectations that each brings to their stormy relationship; this is life, people, and it's not pretty. 2-3 ('Broadminded') are about young Ira, and his journey home from prison in the company of Charley, his uncle. Ira doesn't say much about his time in prison, but it's clear that it has left him very uncertain about what it means to 'be a man', and he considers this issue from many angles during the course of the story.~FC

Recommended: 1

MAYHEM

Dark Horse: *4 issues 1989*

Anthology title featuring strips from two cancelled titles and the first version of the Mask in his current madcap form. An attempt to blackmail the Archon in The Mark goes wrong, and the Mecha crew locate more giant robots in the only dull strip.~WJ

THE MAZE

Metaphrog: *2 issue microseries 1997*

Obscure yet gritty tale of Xia, working as a waitress on the Greek Holiday Isle of Krissos, her tragic involvement with a liar who says he loves her, and the gentle, friendly folk who are so nice to visitors and tourists, yet so casually barbaric to their own poor. Property developers, bent cops and demented ex-girlfriends provide more authentic villainy than your average fantasy comic and the modern overtones of Greek Tragedy play well in the bold, line artwork. A very readable alternative from Metaphrog.~WW

MAZE AGENCY

Comico: *7 issues 1988-1989**

Innovation: *16 issues (8-23), 1 **Annual**, 1 **Special** 1989-1991*

Caliber: *3 issues 1997*

Each issue of *Maze Agency* features a mystery to be solved in the classic whodunnit manner. Private detective Jennifer Mays and her partner Gabriel Webb, true-crime writer and amateur sleuth, sort through the clues and red herrings in this cleverly-crafted series, written by Mike W. Barr. As the series progresses we learn more about the lead characters and their developing relationship, leavening the Ellery Queen-style pat detection with romance. The whole is as light-hearted as a series dealing with murder could be.

Maze Agency introduced artist Adam Hughes to an appreciative public. He drew 1-12, and thereafter there seemed to be a new artist on every issue, so while the scripts remained consistently good, the title lacked visual appeal. It also suffered from being published by the relatively obscure Innovation. The 1990 annual has a terrific cover and homage to *The Spirit* by Mike Ploog; a special includes stories drawn by Joe Staton, the Pander brothers and Alan Davis. The Caliber series saw the introduction of regular artist Gene Gonzales (in black and white) but otherwise no change.~NF

Recommended: 1-5, 8, 9, 12

'MAZING MAN

DC: *12 issues 1986, 3 Specials 1987, 1988, 1990*

'Mazing Man is an impossibly genial little guy who believes he's a superhero and wanders his Queens neighbourhood in home-made regalia performing good deeds like unclogging drains and keeping a watchful eye on the local infants. The other residents of 'Mazing Man's block make for a fine supporting cast. The series resembles nothing as much as a superior sitcom, rich in whimsy, sensitivity and observation, and able to elicit laughter and sympathy while bringing a glow to the heart. Stephen DeStefano's cartooning is excellent, and Bob Rozakis more than atones for all the drek he wrote in the 1970s. Every issue is a gem. A delightful series.~FP

Recommended: 1-12, Specials 1-3

M.D.

EC: *5 issues 1955**

Gemstone: *5 issues 1999-2000**

Another peculiar choice of title from EC, but the intentions are plain from the first page of issue 1, which has a ghastly Graham Ingels-drawn screaming caveman heralding a story about the practice of medicine through the ages. It's well researched and beautifully illustrated by the likes of Reed Crandall, George Evans, Ingels and Joe Orlando; the contents veer between domestic dramas and medical emergencies in the fashion of TV medical shows since day one. They are, though, far too reliant on authenticity at the cost of tension. Three pages of meticulously detailed operations don't carry the same tension they would on television. 3 is the most diverting issue, with an Ingels story of a hillbilly community coming as an antidote to the antiseptic tone, and an unusually moralistic examination of now discredited electroshock therapy. The Gemstone issues are facsimiles, and are collected as a bound set, which comes far cheaper than the luxurious hardbound black and white reprint volume.~FP

M.D.GEIST

CPM: *3 issue miniseries 1995*

The uncharismatic Geist is a genetically engineered soldier with 'supernatural' fighting abilities. Imprisoned unconscious in a satellite, he returns to a different Earth, but is soon back to busting heads and being surly. Unusually for US comic versions of Japanese videos, Koichi Ohata the creator of our animated 'hero', contributes to the title, the remainder being drawn by Tim Eldred. It's deliberately unpleasant with heavy doses of sex and gruesome violence. This makes it stand out from all the other future Earth scenarios to be found in translated manga, but is hardly any recommendation.~FP

MEAN MACHINE: Travels With Muh Shrink

Fleetway: *One-shot 1993*

Reprinting the weird and wonderful strip from 2000AD starring Mean Angel, the psychotic cyborg with the metal head whose berserker rages are controlled by a dial on his forehead. Here he's cured of all social defects and becomes a useful member of society, for about thirty seconds. The painted art by Richard Dolan is vibrant and funny, and John Wagner reaches a peak of dramatic lunacy, with the writing evoking laughter and tears by turn.~WW

Recommended

MEANWHILE...

Crow Comics: *1 issue 1997*

Soaring Penguin: *3 issues (2-4) 1998-2001*

Edited by John Anderson, this anthology is dedicated to presenting the work of British creators, and the mix of small press, independent and unknowns is refreshing, but means that the overall quality is very uneven. In addition, the use of older material (Eddie Campbell in 1, John McCrea in 3) alongside the new is unexplained. Of particular note are Ralph Horsley's accomplished, wordless western (1), Andy Brown's script about one man taking on the guilt of a whole town (2), David Hitchcock's pirate love story (2), Rachael House's feminist rant about fanboys (2), a biographical tale from Hunt Emerson (2), David Hailwood's comedy zombies (3 and 4), and Roger Langridge's Doctor Sputnik versus Bobzilla (4). 4 is a squarebound special that previews Hitchcock's 'Whitechapel Freak' and also contains a Gary Spencer Millidge Strangehaven tale. An Italian strip by Grateata, Mark Stafford's one-page gag strips and Howard Stangroom's anthropomorphic 'Rent Boys' can't entirely overcome the feeling that a hundred pages was really pushing it.~NF

MEASLES

Fantagraphics: *8 issues 1998-2001*

This unusual quarterly anthology brought together many of the biggest names in alternative and underground publishing to produce a title suitable "for all ages", specifically 6 and up. On show is work by, among others, Peter Bagge, Sam Henderson, all three Hernandez brothers, Joost Swarte, Lewis Trondheim, Steven 'Ribs' Weissman and Jim Woodring. An admirable if somewhat bizarre proposition, their hearts seem to be mostly in the right place, but some of the subject matter is unlikely to convince the Bible belt that comics are really good wholesome fun for all the family. Still, if a teenager raised on Bagge's Girlie Girl and Beto Herandez' streetwise social observation is what you're aiming for, what better way to start them off? Jaime Hernandez' superhero spoof 'Los Supersonics' is the pick of the bunch.~JC

MEAT CAKE

Iconographix: *1 issue 1992*

Fantagraphics: *13 issues (0-12) + 1993 to date*

Thematically, Dame D'arcy is the comics equivalent of Nick Cave. Her weird tales of obsession, love, death and murder are set in a surreal twilight world where talking shrimp and malevolent mermaids are the norm. There's a knowing, painterly (specifically Pre-Raphaelite) approach to the way panels are presented and an overall Gothic atmosphere. A description of the recurring characters provides the best introduction to the nature of the strips. Strega Pez communicates by means of words on a bar of candy that she projects from a wound in her throat. There are Hindrance and Perfidia, Siamese twins and Scampi the Selfish Shellfish who is kept on a leash by Friend the Girl. Effluvia's the mermaid and Richard Dirt is actually a female whose doppelganger turns up to help play a practical joke on the sex-pest Wax Wolf (6). Each issue there's almost always a strip or reference to a "filly" and horses generally are a common sight. Apart from her own characters, the series includes some illustrated ballads and songs and an absurd Alan Moore story (9). 'Planet Blue' is a continuing story of pirates and wasp women (10-11), but otherwise the last few stories seem patchy, even as the artwork improves. 0 reprints the Iconographix issue. The artwork fills the pages, panels have embroidered borders and words get everywhere. The density of the pages can be initially intimidating but once past this, the highly stylised artwork is impressive and very effective.~NF

Recommended: 3-9

MEATHAUS

Meathaus Press: *6 issues + 2000 to date*

Experimental anthology with a large percentage of fine-lined cartoonists, which has grown in size and confidence – the latest two issues both having over one hundred pages. The best of the contributors to every issue are Chris McDonnell (chunky comedy), Jay Sacher (odd, urban tales in wash), Theo Edmands (wonkily drawn games with language and anthropomorphics) and Stephen Q. Halker (a.k.a. Stardog, dreamlike fantasies). Stephen Gilpin (1, 3-5) offers comedies about imagination, James Jean (1-3, 5, 6) tales of music, art and childhood and Zachary Baldus (4-5) an animation style romance. More straightforward fun is provided by Earl Holloway's wild ducks (2), Mu Dafaka's 'The Evolution of Chinese People' (5) and Joe Simko's 'Vomit' (4). Initially strips are limited to between two and four pages, but, in 5 and 6, there are also some slightly longer stories. This has meant that the reader has plenty of variety, and visually, at least, this series is always interesting, without being irritatingly 'arty'.~NF

MECH DESTROYER

Image: *4 issue miniseries 2001*

It's 2063 and a group of resistance fighters has developed the XR5000 battledroid, planning to use it against the Ja-Daks, who have conquered the Earth. Unfortunately, a stereotypical hothead, Reese Bennet, accidentally becomes connected to the XR5000 during testing and his military inexperience puts everyone at risk. Robert Chong's script doesn't offer anything new to this scenario, but Jae Kim's striking mix of manga and realistic artwork compensates.~NF

MECHA

Dark Horse: *6 issues 1987-1989*

In as much as it offered insights into the occupants, this is a better-than-average giant-robot comic, although that's not saying much, and Harrison Fong's artwork is excellent. Mecha continues in *Mayhem*, and bears no relation to the character of the same name introduced during *Comics Greatest World*.~WJ

MECHAMEN

Antarctic: *One-shot 1990*

This mix of Japanese giant robots and Godzilla reads like an introduction to a series as it ends with a growing number of giant cyborg Mechamen battling a thousand different monsters with names like Igwaro, Gorugon, Meteora and Zettog. There's no time for characterisation or logic in what is just an enthusiastic series of battles.~NF

THE MECHANIC

Image: *One-Shot 1998*

A caveman, a dinosaur and a hippy chick are transported to 3742, where they are genetically enhanced by the evil Doctor Medula and his hapless assistant, the Mechanic. The garish painted artwork by Joe Chiodo is cartoonish enough to suggest that this is meant to be a light-hearted sci-fi romp, but it's difficult to find many laughs in Jonathan Peterson's plodding script. The comic was issued under two different covers, neither of them especially attractive.~AL

MECHANICAL MAN BLUES

Radio: *3 issue miniseries 1999*

Practically incomprehensible story about a subjugated society who revive a mechanical man to aid their fight for freedom. The impossibly proportioned woman in 1 seems to have no nipples, poor dear. There's far better manga and titillation, so don't bother with this.~FP

MECHANICS

Fantagraphics: *3 issue miniseries 1985*

Fantagraphics' first attempt to bring the Hernandez Brothers to the attention of a wider audience. This reprint of Jaime's first sustained story, about Maggie the pro-solar mechanic on assignment with Rand Race, the boss she's infatuated with, in a far country where dinosaurs and robots share the same landscape, loses a great deal of impact by being coloured. Paul Rivoche did the crisp, sensual artwork few favours by smearing dark watercolours over it, detracting from the postcard-home format of the strip. Jaime's writing is feeling its way, but manages to both make you laugh and worry about his characters' fates.~FJ

MECHANOIDS

Caliber: *5 issue miniseries 1990*

A competent science-fiction adventure from Gary Reed and Mark Winfrey based on the Palladium Games role-playing package. The Mechanoids are bio-mechanical slaughter machines that have returned after an absence of two hundred years to wreak more havoc on the known universe. The usual crew of stalwarts: craggy, bluff captain, sexy scientist and curvy psychic, aided by a spaceship full of expendables is determined to put a stop to it all.~WW

MECHTHINGS

Renegade: *4 issues 1987-1988*

By the 41st Century, the entire world has become totally automated. Unemployable writer Bertram Baum must work at a Reclamation Centre – a junkyard to us – where he is befriended by Ahab, a loud-mouthed, slovenly robot. He also meets the Wild Robots with whom he accidentally foils the evil plans of a super-intelligent Moose to conquer the world with a Giant Robot Death Mouse. This series is actually even worse than it sounds.~WW

MEDABOTS: A Boy and His 'Bot!!

Viz: *5 issues + 2002 to date*

Medabots are robot kits with interchangeable parts that their owners use to stage ro-battles. Winners get the undamaged parts of the defeated. Like most manga, the point for Ikki Tenryou – the obligatory little kid protagonist – is to become the best and win all the bits there are. Shoddy duplication of the *Pokemon* fad, and just like it, adults haven't a hope in heck of understanding. You have been warned.~WW

MEDAL OF HONOR

Dark Horse: *1 Special 1994, 4 issues 1994-1995*

The series recounts the individual exploits of the people who've won the USA's highest military award, the Congressional Medal of Honor. Reducing the actions of extraordinarily brave people to a succession of dialogued panels has to be deftly handled to avoid cliché, and sometimes Doug Murray's scripts don't cope. That said, every issue contains at least one excellent tale, with the most poignant being those of Richard Bong (1) and the lost battalion (4). It was advertised as a 5 issue miniseries, but the fifth issue was never published.~FP

Recommended: 1, 3, 4

MEDIA STARR

Innovation: *3 issues 1989*

A creditable attempt at relaunching a romantic soap opera comic, with the twist of making the lead a female kick-boxer very much in the public eye. The writing just about works, although the targets are obvious, but the lack of professional polish to the art is a constant distraction.~WJ

MEEF

Print Mint: *2 issues 1972-1973*

More of Fred Schrier's extraordinary art coupled with his discursive ramblings about escaping beyond mundane reality. The strips are best experienced after copious ingestion of mind-expanding substances, presumably reflecting the conditions under which they were created. Even then don't expect a lot of sense. Schrier's regular co-conspirator Dave Sheridan is also on hand for the first issue with material in a very similar vein.~FP

MEGA-DRAGON AND TIGER

Image: *5 issues 1999**

In 2015 cruel President Bates rules an Earth where only one percent of the population survived a devastating meteor shower, living under his protective domes. Brain power is prized above all, and anyone not meeting standards is exiled. Two childhood friends develop opposing ideologies and warrior skills, and these issues are a prelude to the main action never seen in the USA. Tony Wong is the Stan Lee and Jack Kirby of Hong Kong rolled into one. His comics dominate the home market, and his is the only name credited apart from James Hudnall's English script, although others worked on the title. As with Kirby, ideas and action take priority, and forcing them in sometimes means storytelling sacrifices, but it provides for widescreen entertainment. The mixture of line art, computer colouring effects and assorted painting is odd, but martial arts movie fans should find plenty to enjoy here. The Comics One collection is the first volume of a proposed continuation.~FP

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* Available in a collected edition

Cryptic Writings of MEGADETH

Chaos!: *4 issues 1997**

The lyrics of Megadeth songs adapted into comics. Given the puerile sixth form loner poetry of the source material, no-one not already a fan of the ban is going to venture in. Unbelievably, though, where something can be interpreted literally with lots of red ink, that's exactly the chosen route. Wretched.~WJ

MEGAHURTZ

Image: *3 issues 1997*

Any series that bills itself as "cutting-edge sci-fi" beneath the title is just begging for a kicking. No cliché is left unturned – bacterial warfare, cybernetics, virtual reality – in this perfectly pedestrian tale of a cyborg run amuck.~HS

MEGALITH

Continuity: *Series one 9 issues 1989-1992, series two 8 issues (0-7) 1993-1994*

The first run of Megalith differed from other Continuity titles by dint of its resolutely urban setting, concentrating on smaller issues like gang warfare, gun control and kidnap. Unfortunately, Peter Stone and Neal Adams' bombastic writing style totally scuppers every chance at credibility. Artistically Mark Texeira (1-3), Trevor Von Eeden (4, 5), Mike Netzer (6, 7), Dave Hoover (8) and Sal Velluto (9) acquit themselves well enough, with Texeira's fully painted job on 3 particularly noteworthy. 0-3 of the second series are portions of the 'Deathwatch 2000' story-line, of which we're still awaiting the concluding part, and 4-7 part of 'The Rise of Magic'. Far more significant is the work of Ernesto Infante, an artist as talented as he is shamefully unknown. Incoherent as the story is, issues 0, 1 and 3-6 are worth buying for his art alone.~DAR

Marvel Super-Heroes MEGAZINE

Marvel: *6 issues 1995*

The best of Marvel's 1980s output collected in a value-for-money package. In each issue there's Frank Miller *Daredevil* (159-164), John Byrne's *Fantastic Four* (232-237) and Hulk (314-319), and *Iron Man* by Michelinie and Layton (115-120). If you've not read the originals, this is worth a shot.~WJ

MEGATON MAN

Kitchen Sink: *10 issues 1984-1986, 3 issue miniseries ('The Return of') 1988, one-shot ('Meets the Uncategorizable X+ Thems') 1989*
Fiasco: *One-shot ('vs. Forbidden Frankenstein'), one-shot (0) 1996*
Image: *2 issue microseries ('Hardcopy') 1999, one-shot ('Bombshell') 1999*

Don Simpson's satirical and parodic *Megaton Man* is well sustained over ten issues, though the contents start to become what they're commenting on before too long, however funny they might be. Trent Phloog is secretly Megaton Man and meets the Megatropolis Quartet, who're soon down a member when the See-Thru Girl is liberated along with Trent's reporter partner Pamela Jointly (who used to fall off skyscrapers). The search for the Cosmic Cue Ball takes up most of what passes for plot, but the stories are none the less fun for all that. 6-10 contain the first episodes of Simpson's 'Border Worlds'. A less heavily rendered and more naturalistic style makes this a turning point in Simpson's artistic growth. It progressed to its own title after continuing in The Return of Megaton Man, in which, trying to retire, Megaton Man is reactivated by the government only to find himself thoroughly merchandised. In the meantime the See-Thru Girl is pregnant and her ex-boyfriend, Rex Rigid, has revived the Golden Age Megaton Man with a view to getting revenge on the current version. Tighter scripting and a plot help make this more consistent and entertaining than the previous series.

The Kitchen Sink one-shot introduces Ms Megaton Man (supposedly the result of a sexually transmittable mega-serum) during a battle against god of war Mars in the Collision of All Conceivable Comic Book Universes at Once Wars. 'Forbidden Frankenstein' is a meeting between Simpson's *Bizarre Heroes* characters and those from his Eros series, though they're played as 'straight' super characters. 0 is a sort of synopsis of everything that's gone before, and part of the continuing *Bizarre Heroes* storyline, which gets more and more complex and less like a parody the longer it continues. On the other hand, the ridiculous nature of the strip doesn't preclude a desire to see where on earth Simpson will take the series next. After 0 (also numbered as *Bizarre Heroes* 17), Simpson continued his series on the Internet. Ninety strips from 1996-1997 are printed in 'Hardcopy' with a few new pages in 2, which also features a guest appearance by Wolff and Byrd. The 'Bombshell' issue is new material, but the series then returns to cyberspace, though some strips are printed as backups in *Savage Dragon*.~NF

Recommended: 6-10, 0

MEGAZZAR DUDE

Slave Labor: *One-shot 1991*

Spinning off from Andy Garcia's *Oblivion City*, this features a day in the life of that Metropolis' epileptic and hyperactive superhero. He endures a TV interview, a rival super hero's attempt to steal his job, a comic store signing, an assault by the villainous 'Toilet Duo' and the crazed attack of a mother who thinks he knocked up her daughter. Magnificently wacky.~WW

Recommended

MEKANIX

Marvel: *6 issue miniseries 2002-2003*

Former X-Man Kitty Pryde is at college in Chicago, a city where anti-mutant sentiment runs high. Then there's the additional problem of the new mutating Sentinels paying a visit. Yes, Chris Claremont gets to run through anti-mutant hysteria as a plot yet again, although dealing with it in microcosm is effective. The major problem with the series is Celia Calle's hideous covers, which surely dissuaded many a prospective reader. That's a shame, because pencil artist Juan Bobillo makes a few mistakes, but has a broadly appealing style.~WJ

MELODY

Kitchen Sink: *10 issues 1988-1994*

The autobiographical stories of Sylvie Rancourt, and how she became a nude dancer under the name Melody. Initially from a small French Canadian rural community and living with her wastepail boyfriend Nick, Melody encounters hostility from all around for pursuing a sexually hedonistic lifestyle. Moving to Montreal, she finds it harder to make ends meet, and Nick's contribution is to suggest she takes a job in a strip bar. Sexual content is high, but as drawn by Jacques Boivin astonishingly unarousing and antiseptic for a comic salaciously cover-blurbed "The true story of a nude dancer". That being the apparent reason for publication, and characters other than Melody and Nick being largely ciphers, it makes for dull comics.~FP

Havok and Wolverine: MELTDOWN

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1988-1989**

Confused attempt to blend political intrigue with superheroics as the eponymous mutants, fall victim to a plan by insidious Soviets to recreate their previous success at

Chernobyl by sabotaging an Indian power plant. After 'killing' Wolverine with bubonic plague bullets, the Russians trick Havok into 'uncovering' the scheme, intending to use his powers to absorb the radioactive energy and redirect it into the mutant Meltdown. Grossly overwritten by Walter and Louise Simonson with muddled and inappropriate painted art by Jon J. Muth and Kent Williams, this takes nearly 200 pages to tell a twenty page plot, substituting ludicrous chase movie clichés and gratuitous violence for story content. For absolute die-hard fans only.~WW

MELTING POT

Kitchen Sink: *4 issues 1993-1994**

A harsh and brutal planet is populated with the worst specimens of assorted alien races. Daily survival is the best most can hope for, and the biggest and baddest rules the roost. Eric Talbot and Simon Bisley provide Corbenesque art over Kevin Eastman's script, but story content is slim.~WJ

MELVIN MONSTER

Dell: *10 issues 1965-1967*

In the town of Monsterville, Melvin, green-skinned and with a pointed head, lives with his Mummy (bandaged) and Baddy. In the garden, home to Cleopatra, a crocodile that tries to eat Melvin each issue, Baddy constructs various entertainments for Melvin, including a slide (into thorny bushes), a swimming pool (inhabited by a very large, and hungry, fish) and a sandbox (quicksand, that is). Melvin isn't quite the monster his parents want him to be; each issue he tries to enrol at Miss McGargoyle's school, but she's not ready to start accepting pupils after a lifetime's perfect record of non-attendance and does all she can to discourage him, including hiding the school building itself. Melvin also has difficulty with flowers (he's not supposed to like them, but builds himself a garden on the roof) and his best friend, the young witch, Little Horror, from whom he just about manages to hide his real feelings. With effortless cartooning, John Stanley has created some timeless tales that speak of alienation in a humorous manner without being preachy, and tell their jokes with perfect timing.~NF

Recommended: 1-10

MEMORIES

Marvel/Epic: *One-shot 1992*

One-shot publishing Otomo's first major story, a lyrical science-fiction thriller in which a crew investigating a derelict ship in the shape of a rose discover that it's filled with physical recreations of its dead mistress' memories, kept alive by the ship's computer. Simply drawn, but well plotted.~FJ

MEMORY MAN

Emergency Stop Press: *1 issue 1995, 5 issues 1995-1996*

Paul Rainey's downbeat, lugubrious story of the thirteen year old masked defender of Victoria City is one of the undiscovered gems of the short lived 1990's 'indie Brit' comics publishing flurry. Stephen Gore has access to all his ancestral memories, enabling him to do anything they could do, and possibly anything in the history of the human species. But you don't need to know that. What you do need to be told about is the skilful characterisation; Stephen, his family, school friends and enemies are all convincing characters you can empathise with. Their own eccentricities, longings and frustrations are laid bare, and it's shockingly appealing. The art, let's be truthful, is crude, and will deter many casual browsers. It's oddly appropriate, though, to the adventures of a superhero who shops at Netto and has to go home from patrol on the No. 7 bus. Very soon, you get used to it, and when a technically more accomplished artist helps out with part of 5, you balk at the 'improvement'. A unique take on the teen superhero story, and a genuine sardonic pleasure. The first issue 1 was a tryout, and successful enough for a rapid second issue 1.~HS

Recommended: 1, 1-5

MEN IN BLACK

Eternity: *3 issue miniseries 1990*, 3 issue miniseries 1991*

Three tales of the ultra-secret government agency dedicated to keeping us safe and ignorant. Lowell Cunningham's scripts are competent but any chance of tension is ruined by the pitiful artwork of Sandy Carruthers. Unlike the film, which is loosely based on issue 2 but played strictly for laughs, the stories are intended to be horror/action adventures with the two agents, dealing with drug cults, aliens and demons from Ouija boards. Cunningham and Carruthers return with another set of mysteries for the darkly sartorial non-Government non-agents in the second series. Seen it. Done it. Bought the tee-shirt.~WW

MEN IN BLACK: The Movie

Marvel: *One-shot 1997, one-shot ('Retribution') 1997*

So-so adaptation of the blockbuster movie. What was the point? Surely not just the money? 'Retribution' is yet another quick cash-in, this time spinning directly off from the movie adaptation and with that bimbo rather than Tommy Lee Jones sitting next to Will Smith.~WW

Golden Age MEN OF MYSTERY

AC: *36 issues + 1996 to date, one-shot ('Spotlight Special – The Nedor Heroes') 2001*

Reprints of 1940s material concentrating on superheroes and costumed crimefighters, but finding room occasionally for horror, science-fiction and westerns. Although a few people may still be able to enjoy the scripts taken at face value, most readers will perceive them ironically and take momentary fun from silly names and concepts: Golden Lad the battlin' junior antique dealer, Mr Scarlet and Pinky, a Batman and Robin rip-off, Dynamic Man Versus the Tangerine Terror (which given the rather straightforward plotting of the period could very well have been Earth menaced by giant citrus fruits) and The Fighting Yank against Chilli Con Carnage, the Mexican Commie bandit princess! They really don't make them like that anymore, and therein lies a lot of the charm. The other reason to pick these up is the artwork. There's something of note in each reprint but quality is often mixed and the last few issues show signs of severe barrel scraping. Editor Bill Black produces various themed issues with essays accompanying the strips (10 – at the movies, 12 – Quality Comics, 15 – Simon & Kirby, 19 – Space, 21 – Fawcett, 25 – Green (as in Lantern, Llama ,Mask), 33 – Patriotism inc The Eagle, The Dart and Ms Victory, 34 – Halloween). However be warned that in some there's more essay than reprint, and no Green Lantern in the Green special, no Captain Marvel in the Fawcett issue.

Particular high points are rough and ready Sekowsky Captain Flash strips in 1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 13, 22, 24, a bunch of good stuff from Will Eisner, Lou Fine, Jack Cole and C.C. Beck in 12, extremely loose and impressionistic art on Golden Lad by Mort Meskin in 3, Krigstein in 19 (which also has a colour section), Steve Ditko Mysterious Traveler stories in 31 and 34, and a gorgeous Reed Crandall pen and ink strip in issue 27. Black has the sense to recognise that even though its Foreign Legion theme is outside his remit it's a gem that needs to be treasured.~FJ

Recommended: 27

MEN OF WAR

DC: *26 issues 1977-1980*

DC tried to prolong war-genre comics with this title featuring Code Name: Gravedigger, a black soldier used as a special agent. The earlier issues, written by David Michelinie, are worth looking at, but overall nothing too special. Back-up features included Enemy Ace, Dateline: Frontline and Rosa, Master Spy.~HY

MENACE

Awesome: *1 issue 1998*

Awful outing for actress/producer Jada Pinkett who teams as scripter with Dan Fraga to tell an "urban horror story" that nonetheless still has a sassy chick mysteriously turned into a semi-clad super-vixen just in time to get caught in the ever-popular eternal battle between Heaven and Hell. Total waste of paper and ink.~WW

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* Available in a collected edition

Penthouse MEN'S ADVENTURE COMIX

Penthouse International: *4 issues 1995*
General Media Communications: *3 issues (5-7) 1995-1996*

Encouraged by the success of *Penthouse Comix*, editor, George Caragonne, decided to launch this magazine as a return of the pulp adventure strip, but, naturally, adding a more sexual flavour, with all stories written by himself and Tom Thornton. Strips include Miss Adventure (1, 3-6) and Hericane (1-2, 4, 7), both superheroines spun off from strips in *Penthouse Comix*, drawn by the Marshall Rogers-like, Cary Polkovitz and Kevin Maguire respectively. 'Actions Figures' is more naked superheroines, by Jason Pearson (1-2, 4, 7) and Maguire (3), and there's western parody 'Slim & Nun' by Dan Barry (1-2, 4-6), 'Pirate Hearts' (2-3, 6-7) by Russ Heath, 'LA-X', by Les Edwards, which parodies TV shows like *Baywatch* (2) and *The X-Files* (4), and the *X-Files* derived 'Salem', by Doug Gregory (1, 4). With Caragonne's suicide, Dave Elliott became editor, and a few new strips and writers were introduced. Barry continued 'Slim & Nun', here and, later in *Penthouse Comix*, Jan Strnad and Heath completed 'Pirate Hearts', and Miss Adventure was left dangling by Keith Giffen. Buzz Dixon and Gray Morrow introduced 'Bill Shakespeare's Black Rogue' (5-7), and from a plot by Caragonne, Mike Collins and Alan Davis presented the science fiction 'Kraken's Wake' (7). On the whole, this was a fun, well presented series, full of varied, humorous, sexy tales.~NF

MEPHISTO

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1987*

The Marvel Universe's Satan-lite works his way through four superteams, the Fantastic Four, X-Factor, the Avengers and the X-Men, trading up souls. It's a pitifully laboured analogy to comic collecting, including "Mystic Mylar" bags in which to store his acquisitions.~HS

Mark Hazzard: MERC

Marvel: *12 issues, 1 Annual 1986-1987*

No, Mark Hazzard is not an expensive German car, he's a mercenary. The comic is eager to convince you he's also a modern-day saint: all those emerging alive from an encounter with Mr Hazzard thereafter give high priority to sitting around and telling each other how Mark changed their lives and saved their souls. It's all completely objectionable, and yet...there's always enough happening in each issue to make you pick up the next one. It's at its best with Peter David's writing (1-4), when there are fleeting moments of ambivalence, but once Doug Murray takes over from 5, it's full speed ahead for canonisation.~FC

MERCEDES

Angus: *15 issues 1995-1997**

Elements of these stories about a fearless psychic able to read the past by contacts with objects from it are very good indeed, not least the largely unsympathetic and surly title character. Mike Friedland's writing can veer into preaching at the drop of a hat, but these are three well constructed tales about the unsavoury aspects of humanity coupled with supernatural threats, occupying 1-4, 5-10, and 11-15. The art is more problematical. Although having the basis of a nice style, Grant Fuhst's misproportioned figures are all the more glaring in a conversation heavy comic and he doesn't help himself by rarely bothering with backgrounds to distract attention. His painted covers are his best work, imaginative and experimental, but as such more likely to repel than attract in the world of comics.~FP

The MERCENARY

Norma: *3 volumes 1984*
NBM: *Series one 3 volumes 1986, series two 8 volumes + 1988 to date*

Vicente Segrelles' long running and popular fantasy series doesn't fare well in its numerous English language incarnations. Although appearing all over Europe in serial magazine form or compilation albums and initially being well received in the pages of *Heavy Metal*, the actual volumes are ponderous and confusing. The original (Norma) volumes were English language run-ons, sloppily translated, of the Spanish editions with almost illegible lettering that floundered despite the worldwide fantasy boom. They were acquired by NBM, relettered, repackaged and re-released. Two years later they did it all over again, combining early volumes into bigger, longer adventures and having yet another shot at rescripting and relettering the fully painted artwork. Thus ' The Cult of the Sacred Fire' is combined with 'The Formula' and 'The Trials' now also encompasses 'The Sacrifice'. The continuing volumes are titled 'The Fortress', 'The Black Globe', 'The Voyage', 'Year 1000: The End of the World', 'Lost Civilisation', and 'Giants'. Although the illustration is lush and lavish - if perhaps somewhat static – the plots are bland to the point of tedium. They involve a soldier of fortune roaming a more or less mediaeval world on the back of a furry, flying bat-dragon, having adventures ranging from the metaphysical ('Cult of the Sacred Fire') to outright science fiction ('Year 1000: The End of the World'). There is never a sense of drama, threat to the central character or even the various clients or bystanders he encounters. Fantasy art lovers will swoon, but it feels like a waste of all those letterers' time.~WW

MERCHANTS OF DEATH

Eclipse: *4 issues 1988*

Magazine dedicated to adventure strips from Europe and America. Each issue features a colour episode of 'Soldier Of Fortune' by Grassi and Breccia. The stories are hard-hitting but not particularly outstanding, featuring a taciturn mercenary hero, and the awful colouring does not improve matters, but the pared-down artwork survives it. Less exciting is 'Ransom', an adventure story set in Europe, written by Kurt Busiek with art by Rick Howell and the young and rather rough Dan Brereton. You can see the bones of Brereton's style, but overall the art is rather chunky and clumsy. Ransom's a secret-agent type hired by a mysterious Rumanian to steal back a family heirloom. At least, that's what he's told. Rounding out the issues are shorter pieces written by Trillo and illustrated, in a fine line style, by José Luis Salinas, set during the American Civil War; and there's a French Foreign Legion strip, also by them.~FJ

MERIDIAN

CrossGen: *30 issues + 2000 to date*

Fantasy adventure spliced with social economics and political intrigue. The central story concentrates on privileged teenage Sephie, pitted against her Cadadorian Uncle Ilahn commanding the forces that occupy Meridian. Both fiefdoms are among several sky cities floating above a scorched planet, each sustained by specific trades. The backstory to the family conflict is revealed in *CrossGen Chronicles* 3, while the scenario is complicated by both Sephie and Ilahn having been bestowed with a prominent sigil endowing them with abilities they discover as the series progresses. It's seemingly CrossGen policy to keep the pot perpetually simmering, so writer Barbara Kesel provides few resolutions as she cranks up the pressure on Sephie for the first two dozen issues. This is not as frustrating as might be assumed. There is a wide cast, although some seem thus far to have little purpose, and elements of most issues are highly enjoyable. Sephie's visits to assorted societies are diverting and there are also some unexpected twists (7 has a shocker). Artistically the comic does initially suffer from the removal of first penciller Joshua Middleton's open art nouveau influenced style after 6. While not bad, replacement Steve McNiven's more traditional comic approach lacks the previous finesse to begin with, although he develops tremendously as the series progresses.

Just as repetition becomes a problem, things start building to a climax prompted by the well-conceived and horrifying events in 19. By this time one of the First has been dabbling, and 20 has a guest appearance from *Sigil*'s Samandahl Rey. Issues leading to a resolution to many of the main threads in 25 are very well worked, but the resolution brings its own problems, which predominate thereafter. As *Meridian* presents continuing chapters of a larger story, recommending any individual issue over another is problematical, although almost all should appeal to fantasy fans looking for a title with a strong leading lady. The title has a greater appeal to women than most comics, and perhaps the best place to start is with one of the collections through which all but the most recent issues are available.~WJ

Recommended: 23-26

MERLIN

Adventure: *6 issue miniseries 1990-1991*

A well-researched retelling of the early life of Merlin by R.A. Jones, hampered by lacklustre art. The series follows Merlin from his reconception to his first love and the eventual sacrifice he makes to gain his magical abilites.~WW

MERMAID

Viz: *Mermaid's Forest 4 issues 1994*, Mermaid's Scar 4 issues 1994*, Mermaid's Promise 4 issues 1994*, Mermaid's Dream 3 issues 1994-1995*, Mermaid's Gaze 4 issues 1995*, Mermaid's Mask 3 issues 1995**

Very dark and disturbing stories from Rumiko Takahashi, better known for her lighter material. Partaking of the flesh of a mermaid renders one both immortal and immune to harm. This is discovered the difficult way by Yuta, who's been around for centuries. Unfortunately it only works for a few, and a horrible demise awaits the failures, although there's no shortage of those willing to try. The mermaids aren't necessarily the glamorous and friendly sirens of myth either: they're altogether more unfriendly and vicious, particularly when it's apparent that their flesh is at stake.

Mermaid's Forest continues from material published in the manga magazine *Animerica* (incorporated in the collection) with Yuta having rescued Mana, a fellow-immortal raised in isolation by mermaids to become one of them. Separated from Mana, Yuta finds her again captured by two sisters, one of whom is also immortal, but at a price. The story delves deep into murky motivations, and ought to surprise with its conclusions. Unfortunately, with minimal changes, that's also the plot of *Mermaid's Promise*, and the impact is very much diminished by repetition. The intervening series, though, is another shocker, playing off the innocence of youth against the horrific consequences of consuming Mermaid's flesh. It's padded towards the end, with 3's *Home Alone* sequence jarring, but there's just enough momentum to see the story through.

Mermaid's Dream is two individual stories, with the better of them being 'The Ash Princess' in 2 and 3. It's a powerful and spooky tale of life, legend and trickery, and the best of the *Mermaid* canon. By the time of *Mermaid's Gaze* one begins to wonder just how many people aren't familiar with mermaids and their legend, as Yuta and Mana unerringly home in on those that are everywhere they visit. Containing the requisite mixture of threat and horror, it's functional, but familiarity dilutes the idea. *Mermaid's Mask*, though, is a partial return to form. Lacking the complexity of previous tales, and relying once again on childhood innocence as a counterpoint to grim events, it incorporates a resonant and gruesome streak of horror.

If there's a theme to *Mermaid* it's that immortality comes at a price, and those who lust after it rarely attain it in the form they desire. It also strays far from the whimsy and adventure so associated with Japanese comics, yet for all her individuality in approach, Takahashi is distressingly traditional when it comes to presenting role-models. The female Mana is always the abducted victim and the male Yuta her rescuer. Takahashi's delicate artwork is far removed from the cartoon exaggeration of Ranma$^{1/2}$, and if on occasion there's a little too much wide-eyed innocence it all serves to contrast the horror of the stories. Largely underrated, *Mermaid* is well worth anyone's time, and is particularly recommended to people not usually very keen on Japanese material. *The Mermaid's Scar* collection also takes in *Dream* and *Promise*, and *Gaze* additionally collects Mask.~WJ

Recommended: Mermaid's Forest 1-4, Mermaid's Scar 1, 2, Mermaid's Dream 2, 3

MERMAID

Alternative Comics: *One-shot 1998*

There's no middle ground regarding James Kochalka's work. His fans lap up the charming naivety, the molasses-like pace at which his stories unfold and general mood established. Everyone else shouts "King's new clothes", citing the general lack of plot or point and that even at an overly generous three panels to a page there's plenty of wasted space.~FP

MERTON OF THE MOVEMENT

Cocoanut Comics: *1 issue 1971*

Bobby London would later draw, and famously be sacked from, the *Popeye* newspaper strip, and turns out two one-pagers in the style E.C. Segar. For the title strip, though, he's aping George Herriman for a discursive romp about the hapless Merton, always overtaken by fate. London also provides an autobiographical strip detailing early career run-ins with counterculture magazines and their expectations of cartoonists. The issue is rounded out by Shary Flenniken's Trots and Bonnie, Ted Richards' Dopin' Dan, and Pollyanna Pals by Gary Hallgren, who delivers a very good Cliff Sterrett impersonation. Nice art, but not compulsive reading.~FP

THE MESSENGER

Image: *One-Shot 2000*

X-Files-flavoured hokum about a tortured, mind-reading vigilante who uses his powers to bump off unrepentant criminal scumbags. The first half originally appeared in *Action Planet Comics*, and Jerry Ordway undermines the appeal of his own traditional drawing style with some cloth-eared dialogue and ham-fisted plotting.~AL

META 4

First: *3 issues 1991*

Altogether lacklustre attempt at incorporating Fortean topics into comics. Stefan Petrucha would go on to write far better material along the same lines for *X-Files*, while artist Ian Gibson obviously couldn't give a toss.~WJ

The METABARONS

Humanoids: *17 issues 2000-2002, one-shot ('Alpha/Omega') 2002*

In the Metabunker, invincible fortress and sanctuary of the Metabaron, robots, Tonto and Lothar, discuss the tragic history of the Castakas family, which has resulted in the current baron being unnamed. Alexandro Jodorowsky here supplies background on the character that first appeared in his and Moebius' *Incal*. With characteristic invention, Jodorowsky tells a complex science fiction saga that spans generations, exploring the lives and loves of the various Metabarons, as well as various cosmic upheavals and genetic advances. These ensure regular changes in the universe and even in the nature of his characters. Juan Gimenez' artwork captures the scale, loneliness and grandeur of Jodorowsky's script, though the storytelling can seem detached. 'Alpha/Omega' contains several short stories, including the origin of the Metabarons' tattoo and some pages left out of 1 for continuity reasons (both by Gimenez). There is also a story, drawn by Moebius, from the original version of the *Incal* and a preview of forthcoming adventures of the current Metabaron by Jodorowsky and Travis Charest. There are three collections reprinting 1-14.~NF

METACOPS

Monster: *3 issue miniseries 1991*

Historical characters like The Queen of Sheba, Jimi Hendrix and Albert Einstein didn't die, they were recruited into a time-travelling police force. Humorously re-creating and distorting the past, *Metacops* is just a bit of fun with history. Unfortunately it's rather wordy (courtesy of Link Yaco) and the artwork (by John Heebink) is both fussy and unappealing.~NF

METAL GUARDIAN FAUST

Viz: *8 issue limited series 1997**

Little girl Rushiha is just learning to cope after the loss of her father, Saburoh, when she is attacked by killer robots and saved by another robot, Mr Faust, who appoints himself bodyguard to her and her widowed mother, Mitsuko. But as the attacks escalate, Mitsuko begins to suspect that Faust is much more than it seems. Intriguing if predictable manga from Tetsuo Ueyama.~WW

METAL HURLANT

Humanoids: *3 issues + 2002 to date*

When introduced in France in 1975 Humanoids' *Metal Hurlant* changed the face of European comics with stunning art breaking away from the ligne claire style in mode for decades. The ripples reached across the Atlantic when *Heavy Metal* appeared, supplementing strips licensed from France with similarly well illustrated material from homegrown creators. While not quite as influential, the irony is that the imitator has so far outlasted the original by fifteen years. Humanoids Publishing survived if their flagship did not, and we now have a new international publication. It follows the *Heavy Metal* template, and although comic-sized, is more lavishly produced. Encouragingly, while to date there's nothing astonishing, the art is excellent and the "Where's the story?" syndrome is so far avoided, mixing writers best known for American work (Kurt Busiek, Geoff Johns) with European artists. The primary writer is Jodorowsky, equally capable of mystical rubbish and banal throwaways, yet with a prodigious imagination exemplified by 'Megalex', serialised in parsimonious chunks each issue. It's the story of an anomaly in a well-conceived controlled society, illustrated by Fred Beltran, who makes far better use of computer elements than anything previously seen in the USA for a spectacular visual treat. Contrasting the illustrative art, every issue also presents the lovely, simple cartooning of Pierre Wazem. Unfortunately he doesn't have much to say, unlike Jean-Pierre Dionnet, a founder of the magazine, whose endearing ramblings on popular culture run from 3. So far, a case of watch this space.~FP

METAL MEN

DC: *56 issues 1963-1970 (1-41), 1973 (42-44), 1976-1978 (45-56), 4 issue miniseries 1993-1994*

One of DC's most endearing creations, the Metal Men were introduced via four try-out strips in *Showcase* 37-40, before being granted their own series. Government scientist, pipe-smoking and orange-checked-jacket-wearing Dr Will Magnus manufactures a bunch of robots each with the ability to mimic the chemical properties of the metal they were constructed from. All were also implanted with a "responsometer", enabling them to have human characteristics to complement their respective metals. Gold, the dependable leader of the gang, can stretch himself for miles, the hot-tempered Mercury can melt himself at room temperature and the female Platinum, nick-named Tina, proves tough and resilient. The stocky and dense Lead always acts as a good barrier, especially against radiation, while Iron is the strong-man of the team, and the flexible and stuttering Tin the weak spot.

Creator Robert Kanigher worked in perfect harmony with artists Ross Andru and Mike Espisito to produce some wonderful light-hearted tales. Most Metal Men adventures dealt with other robotic adversaries: there were robot amazons, spider-robots, robot dinosaurs, etc., and then there were foes made from plastic: Plastic Perils, The Gas Gang (belch), not forgetting the giant chemical creature, Chemo. And we mustn't forget the other elemental robotic creations – Barium, Zirconium, Sodium, Osmium, Gallium, Iridium and the like. Who says comics aren't educational? Chemistry lessons in school would've been a lot more fun if *Metal Men* had been part of the curriculum!

The adversaries played their part, but the core of the series was the interaction between the group, all of whom were disturbingly human. Platinum was in love with Doc Magnus, while poor Tin often felt out of things, so even invented his own stuttering girl-friend, Nameless, who shared some of his abilities. On the downside, the formula plots, charming as they were, ensured a predictability. This slowly began to change with 29, when the creative team of Otto Binder and Gil Kane arrived. Things took a further step up when Mike Sekowsky took over the art with 33, and Kanigher returned to write. In an obvious attempt at stopping declining sales *Metal Men* was given a new direction. Sekowsky continued the plot when he also became writer with 37, his first act being to put the Metal Men on trial and have them destroyed. During this time Doc Magnus was in a coma, and the team are rescued by the mysterious Mister Conan in 37, a billionaire who wants to use his wealth to combat chaos around the world. In order for the Metal Men to act successfully and covertly they're given human disguises. Gold becomes Guy Giden, a philanthropist and Wall Street genius; Platinum becomes Tina Platt, a beautiful model; Lead and Tin become Ledby Hand and Tinker, a singing sensation; Mercury becomes the red-haired, red-bearded, temperamental artist and sculptor, Mercurio; and Iron becomes successful construction engineer Jon 'Iron' Mann. Don't you just love Sekowsky's sense of humour? Oddly, though, there was nothing humorous about this group. *Metal Men* was now played straight, and it worked. The issues concluding the first run came to a head with Doc Magnus coming out of his coma, but with a decidedly different personality. He's now a would-be despot, constructing robots to take over the world, which forces his original creations into conflict with him. Sadly, this interesting plot was never concluded, as the axe fell.

The title returned in 1973 featuring reprints to see if the group had any pulling power. Apparently not, but they were revived in *The Brave and the Bold* 103 in their original robot bodies, and would return a number of times to team with Batman before their title picked up again with new stories from 45. Writers Steve Gerber and Gerry Conway kicked off proceedings with the excellent stylised art of Walt Simonson, and Doc Magnus regains his sanity. Slightly wackier stories emerge from the mind of Martin Pasko (52's 'Dr Strangelove and the Brain Children' is a good example), but artist Joe Staton fails to impress as much as Simonson, despite his cartoony style. Conway returns for the last three issues and once more tries to humanise the team, but it proves a failure.

Besides the occasional guest appearance not a lot was heard from the Metal Men until the 1993s miniseries. Without giving the plot away, let's just say the Metal Men were far more than they seemed to be, as were their alleged 'responsometer'-granted personalities. Mike Carlin's plot added considerable depth to the Metal Men's origins and characters. Artists Dan Jurgens and Brett Breeding held their end up, and the miniseries was the most enjoyable run since the Mike Sekowsky stories.~HY

Recommended: 6, 10, 13, 21, 31-33, 37-41, 45-47, miniseries 1-4

METAMORPHO, The Element Man

DC: *17 issues 1965-1968, 4 issue miniseries 1993*

After trying out in *The Brave and the Bold* 57-58, Metamorpho moved into his own title, a fine, light-hearted, inventive and somewhat tongue-in-cheek series written by Bob Haney and originally drawn by Ramona Fradon. An ancient artefact changed Rex Mason into Metamorpho, a striking but freakish-looking character able to transform his body into any element or structure. Along with some adversaries of decidedly bizarre appearance, the series featured a great supporting cast. Sapphire Stagg was Metamorpho's naïve, poor-little-rich girlfriend; Simon Stagg her wealthy, scheming father who tried to use Metamorpho for his own purposes; Java a stone-age man restored to life by Stagg and also in love with Sapphire; and there was Metamorpho's female counterpart and other 'romantic' interest, the beautiful green-haired Urania, the Element Girl. This entertaining series was unfortunately cancelled halfway through a story. Metamorpho popped up some years later as a back-up in *Action Comics* (413-418) and World's Finest (218-220) and was a regular in *Batman and the Outsiders* and later *Justice League Europe*, but it wasn't until 1993 that he was given another title. Scripter Mark Waid continued the saga well, though he concentrated on the darker elements (no pun intended) of the turbulent relationships between the major characters, with plenty of surprises. Alas, no Element Girl. Her final fate was revealed in *Sandman* 20.~HY

Norm Breyfogle's METAPHYSIQUE

Eclipse: *2 issues 1992*
Bravura: *6 issues 1995*

The Eclipse issues prove that Norm Breyfogle can turn out nicely drawn *House of Mystery*- style stories with the best of them. The Bravura series is an entirely different kettle of fish. A group of people continually plagued by deeply disturbing nightmares are to participate in a project exploring their dreams, only all is not what it seems. The story plays with the mystique of dreaming, uniting the experience with virtual reality, setting up an interesting scenario amid a plethora of contrived buzzwords, with the mysterious vanished superhero Metaphysique apparently at the centre. Sadly, though, Breyfogle cops out and we're left with an interesting, but fatally flawed, superhero title.~WJ

METEOR MAN

Marvel: *One-shot, 6 issues 1993-1994*

Feeble follow-up to Robert Townsend's movie, transforming Meteor Man into a typical angst-ridden, self-doubting, Marvel-style superhero. The preceding one-shot is a dashed-off movie adaptation.~FP

METROPOL

Marvel/Epic: *Series one 12 issues 1991-1992, series two 3 issues 1992*

Although some readers may find Ted McKeever's religious allegory *Metropol* perplexing, take heart from the fact that it is considerably less obtuse than his previous series *Transit* and *Eddy Current*. Characters from *Eddy Current* turn up throughout *Metropol*, and Transit's storyline is concluded there. McKeever depicts the transformation of a grim, ugly city whose inhabitants have lost faith in themselves into a primeval battleground for angels and devils. As a plague rips through the populace some individuals find themselves reborn as angels, and others as devils. Unfortunately there are 80,000 demons, and only five angels to protect the remaining humans. McKeever writes, pencils, inks and colours all issues (except for the Eddy Current back-up strip in 9-11, drawn by Mike Mignola), allowing him very close control of the look of the book. His style here is more blocky and powerful than earlier, very confidently inked with flowing, heavy lines. His colouring is excellent; flat colours slightly dulled with black are used to suggest an environment that is dirty at the edges.

In the second series, titled *Metropol AD*, a year and a half has passed since the demons overran the city, one of the angels has given birth (!) and the few surviving humans are planning to try to break through the wall which was erected around the city in the first days of the plague to contain the contagion. Also, the angels are beginning to show dangerous signs of human weakness. *Metropol* is an extraordinary piece of symbolic writing in which Milton meets Kafka, built up from short, seemingly unrelated incidents, dream fragments and visions.~FJ

Recommended: 1-3, 8, 12

METROPOLIS S.C.U.

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1994-1995*

An intelligent and entertaining use of supporting characters from *Superman*. Lois Lane joins the Special Crimes Unit, the team that deals with Metropolis' supercriminals, to investigate the death of an officer. Maggie Sawyer, commander of the S.C.U., is having increasing trouble separating her personal and professional lives, a situation exacerbated by the fact that her girlfriend Tobie, also a journalist, is jealous of Lane's access to the S.C.U. Throw in Maggie's ex-husband and a crazed eco-hermit and you've got a thoroughly readable miniseries, courtesy of Cindy Goff and artist Pete Krause.~HS

Recommended: 1-4

MEZZ: Galactic Tour 2494

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1994*

This spin-off from *Nexus* features the most popular band in that universe as they gig around the galaxy and discover that there has never in all of space and time been a fair and honest manager. Legally swindled out of their own names and appearances, they strike back by becoming the support band for their replacements. Mayhem and carnage abound, but it's by no means the best work from writer Mike Baron, and artist Mike Vosburg is workman like but lacks the polished whimsy of Steve Rude. For dedicated fans only.~WW

MIAMI MICE

Rip-Off: *4 issues 1986-1987*

If you're busting a gut laughing at the idea of a rodent-infested TV parody this is the comic for you. And if you're a *Cerebus* completist you'll have to pick up the fourth issue.~WJ

The New Crime Files of MICHAEL MAUSER, Private Eye

Apple: *1 issue 1992*

From the pages of *E-Man* comes Michael Mauser, a rat-faced private detective with a mauser gun. This was the first full-length story after he'd appeared as back-up in Charlton's *Vengeance Squad* and made guest appearances in E-Man. Scripted and drawn by co-creators Nicola Cuti and Joe Staton, this one-shot, in the tradition of Mike Hammer, concerns Mauser's attempt to find a serial killer who may or may not be himself. Staton's art looks great in black and white.~NF

MICHAEL MOORCOCK'S MULTIVERSE

DC/Helix: *12 issues 1997-1998**

As long ago as 1962 noted English author Michael Moorcock came up with the idea for the Multiverse as "a quasi-infinite series of worlds, each a fraction different from the next". This series, containing three different, but quasi-related serials, marks the concept's first extended outing in comic form. The lead strip, 'Moonbeams and Roses', features characters adapted by Moorcock from his 'Second Ether' trilogy of novels, published a few years prior to the comic, and is exquisitely drawn by the ever-modern Walt Simonson. Unfortunately it's also written in such a baffling, clever-clever style that the task of extracting any kind of sense or meaning from the narrative could well prove impossible for readers not already well-schooled in the author's obscure 'universe'. There's a lot of wearisome sci-fi argot, interdimensional tomfoolery and weird cosmic barges, anyway. 'Metatemporal Detective', is a much more straightforward Victorian detective pastiche, badly let down on this occasion by Mark Reeve's crude artwork. The third and final strip gives us a new, slightly dull adventure involving Moorcock's most famous fantasy character, the albino warrior Elric, rendered on this occasion by the ever-reliable John Ridgway. In the final issue, the storylines are to some extent intertwined and resolved in a full length tale by Moorcock and Simonson, who turn up themselves for a gratuitously postmodern cameo appearance. This air of self-congratulatory insiderdom and faux-hipsterness rather infects the whole comic. This makes it difficult to share an opinion in the letter column of 9, that Multiverse "...may turn out to be the best comic series ever published in the mainstream, perhaps anywhere", although such a quote does perhaps indicate the polarity of opinion on this particular title.~AL

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* Available in a collected edition

MICKEY AND DONALD

Gladstone: *18 issues 1988-1990*

As you would expect from a Gladstone title, Carl Barks is represented in each issue, mostly by stories reprinted from *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories*, though he also illustrates Mickey Mouse in 17. With the *Mickey Mouse* title reprinting Floyd Gottfredson's *Mickey Mouse* newspaper strip, this title offered an outlet for later Mouse artists, Bill Wright (1, 5, 9-11, 15), Jack Bradbury (2, 3, 11, 13, 14), Romano Scarpa (6-8) and Paul Murry (1, 12, 17). Of these, Scarpa's 'The Blot's Double Mystery' is an excellent Phantom Blot story. Gottfredson is also represented with 'The Man of Tomorrow' (3, 4), 'The Santa Claus Bandit' (13) and 'The House of Mystery' (18), as well as by various one- and two-page gag strips. William Van Horn (2, 9, 17), Daan Jippes (2, 5) and Don Rosa (1, 17) contribute good examples of their work but they are really quite slight strips.~NF

Recommended: 3, 4, 6-8, 13, 17, 18

MICKEY MANTLE

Magnum: *2 issues 1991-1992*

A decent biography of the Mick's early years in 1, with 2 devoted to the 1951 World Series and the 1952 season. The real treat, though, is the charming sight of Joe Sinnott's pencils, rarely seen since, well, Mantle retired in the early 1960s. Equally good back-up strips focus on lesser known major league players, inked by Sinnott and pencilled by Joe Orsak, and for a snigger don't miss the publisher's gushing first issue introduction. This is of possibly restricted interest to fans of Sinnott and baseball, but wholeheartedly recommended to them.~FP

MICKEY MOUSE ADVENTURES

Disney: *18 issues 1990-1991*

This is well-produced material that will entertain young children, but it only once takes that leap up into the best Disney material. The exception is 10, with Bill Wright's adaptation of a Floyd Gottfredson story 'The Sky Adventure', reprinted from *Mickey Mouse* 105. A coloured version of the original later appears in *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* 583. For the sake of space Wright makes a few changes, but the sense of wonder and danger shines through Gottfredson's plot about a genius scientist and the attempts to possess his inventions. It's also the exception to the general formula of two or three adventures per issue. From the better-known names involved, there's good art from Stephen De Stefano in 1, 2, 7-9, and 11, the latter mistakenly credited to Mike Royer, who pencils 12-14, a John Byrne cover on 8, stories from Michael Gilbert in 1-4, and Marv Wolfman in many issues between 5 and 14. 16 has rare latter-day art from John Costanza, better known for his lettering, on a story written by Kurt Busiek. Overall, though, unexceptional.~WJ

MICKEY RAT

LA Comics: *1 issue 1971*
Kitchen Sink: *1 issue (2) 1972*
Last Gasp: *2 issues (3-4) 1980-1982*

Mickey Rat was Robert Armstrong's amoral, beer-swilling antihero whose adventures comprised the bulk of the issues. The first two are entertaining enough, though lacking in focus, but by 3 Armstrong had matured into a fine satirist and the writing is much sharper. Mickey Rat's exploits are utterly reprehensible, but thoroughly compelling at the same time, never more so than when shared with the Couch Potatoes. This TV-addicted group of losers proved popular enough for their own feature in 4, and *The Official Couch Potato Handbook* was published in 1983. Another back-up strip, the jazz-based Dizzy Ratstein, never quite comes to life, but overall the last two issues make fine reading.~DAR

Recommended: 3, 4

M.I.C.R.A.

Comics Interview: *6 issues 1986-1987*

The acronymically titled Mind Controlled Remote Automaton is experimental technology used by a woman paralysed in a terrorist attack. It's initially designed merely as a form of mobility for her, but she's gradually applied as a weapon, and manipulated by army officers keen to learn the technology. Manga-influenced long before it was common in the USA, M.I.C.R.A. was a decent blend of mystery, action and soap opera, that started well and improved. The premature cancellation was a shame.~FP

MICROBOTS

Gold Key: *1 issue 1971*

Jeff Micron emerges from cryogenic freezing to a new world, accompanied by miniature indestructible working robots allegedly designed by his father. This being the days before video and toy tie-ins, they actually look like they were designed by a three-year-old with building bricks. Dull.~FP

MICRONAUTS

Marvel: *Series one 59 issues, 2 Annuals 1979-1984, series two ('The New Voyages') 20 issues 1984-1986*

The Micronauts were a curious set of toys to give to small children, including as they did human/animal hybrids, a race of insectivoid hominids and all sorts of other strange figures. And those were just the good guys. In a superpowered take on Land of the Giants a group of royal rebels from various planets in the Microverse escape into our huge universe and then discover they're trapped. Back on their own plane the evil Baron Karza takes over planet after planet, filling them with his evil bodybanks, where he grows hideous, mutated dog soldiers.

For a comic based around a set of toys, *The Micronauts* wasn't bad. Possibly inspired by the art of the then unknown Michael Golden, his drawing heavily influenced by Berni Wrightson, on the first dozen issues, Bill Mantlo turned in the finest scripts of his career, quickly establishing the scenario and putting in plenty of excitement. The characters are visually striking but their characterisation remained vague and shifted to suit the plot. Bug, the insectivoid member of the team, has a speech impediment in place of a character, and most of the others aren't much better. Later inclusions to the line included Devil, a big red hairy alien, and in the second series Hunter, a big knobbly alien. Things would no doubt have been better if most of the villains weren't lumpen plastic things created by toy designers rather than writers. Since the bodybanks could turn out all sorts of mutations, ludicrous villains that matched each hero were the constant order of the day. And for some reason, instead of swapping and fighting menaces not specifically grown to neutralise their power, the Micronauts duly took them on in order.

The origin of the Microverse is revealed in 35 as being the creation of a race of various aliens who'd banded together to seek sanctuary, and in the process of creating the microscopic universe had also imprisoned the demons then ruling Earth. Once the team are back there the series builds to an epic climax as the Micronauts' leader, Commander Rann, attains god-like powers along with his arch-enemy, but rejects them. Rann is a rather pompous philosopher, who tends to spend a lot of the series deep in thought, in trances, or floating around in space capsules doing cosmic things. At one point he even joins spirits with Dr Strange to become Captain Universe! Mantlo has great fun with the fact that he never seems to notice his mate, Princess Marionette (those names, huh?), being seduced left right and centre by his friends.

'The New Voyages' carried on where the first series left off. One suspects Marvel were hoping to refresh the book's audience by offering a new first issue, but the plots are very similar, with the war still raging, and the Micronauts continually having problems staying in their universe. Peter Gillis' scripts are not particularly inspired. He has the Micronauts irradiated inside a giant insect, visiting their various home planets – to find their friends too busy fighting local wars to help in the coming struggle – and trying to come to terms with the mysterious Scion. He pops up out of nowhere, claims their leadership and appears to be willing to die to get them back through the space-wall into the Microverse. Kelley Jones' art was undeveloped, although by comparison to some of the later 'creators' let loose on the first run he's a definite improvement. There were artists of note in the first series (Howard Chaykin from 13-18 and a hurried Gil Kane), but there was also the likes of Danny Bulanadi to come to terms with.

The *Micronauts Special Edition* simply reprinted 1-12 of the original series.~FJ

Recommended: Series one 1-12

MICRONAUTS

Image: *4 issues + 2002 to date*

Puzzling relaunch of the toy tie-in title. While Acroyear and Karza are present and correct in their opposing roles, and Biotron is around, it's otherwise largely a new bunch of characters with the focus on Earthman Ryan Archer. He's transported to the Microverse, where his skin pigment mysteriously changes from pink to brown, and he rapidly learns how things are. The strangest aspect so far is that what made the Micronauts unique, their status as minuscule warriors on Earth, has so far been ignored, making this just another space fantasy.~WJ

MIDDLE CLASS FANTASIES

Cartoonists Co-Op: *1 issue 1973*
Keith Green: *1 issue (2) 1976*

The cover illustrations display Jerry Lane's clean art style, which masks a quirky mind very much rooted in the past. The exception is his 'Frogman' strip in both issues, which would have been very much at home in early 1980s issues of *Heavy Metal* with the silent frogman of the title floating through the air and the issues. 1 also has a long Marx Brothers homage and a bizarre George Reeves story, while the meat of 2 is provided by a prom night story set in the 1960s and a funny animal western. Lane's strips' reliance on cultural touchstones should provide an appeal beyond a lot of underground titles, but be warned the come hither title hardly reflects the content.~FP

MIDNIGHT EYE

Viz: *6 issues 1991-1992**

Set in the technologically advanced future so ubiquitous in Japanese comics, the Midnight Eye is Gokü, whose right eye has been replaced with a device permitting him to interface with any computer in the world. A Japanese take on the hard-boiled detective, with stories named after the featured female lead, it's a well drawn title, but ultimately unmemorable.~FP

MIDNIGHT MASS

DC/Vertigo: *8 issue limited series 2002-2003*

Adam and Julia Kadmon are celebrity paranormal investigators. A clash with monster Magellan goes badly, leading to their hiring an assistant, Jenny (1-3). An artefact collector, Harmon, diverts the Kadmons with the Four Sisters while he tries to loot the vault in their house (4-6) and Jenny's own mysterious link to the supernatural is revealed (7-8). Writer, John Rozum, concentrates on the emotions of his characters. There's the obvious affection between Adam and Julia as well as their bickering over the divisions of labour, and the experiences of Jenny in a strange, new environment, but little sense of anything happening in eight issues. Jesus Saiz' artwork can be quite stylish despite the occasional lack of detail and inconsistency in his normally realistic approach.~NF

MIDNIGHT MEN

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

Very familiar territory indeed for creator Howard Chaykin as his square-jawed, fallible hero Barnett Pasternack discovers he's inherited a role as the latest of a long line of protectors of Hollywood throughout the century. There's also a nutter on the loose slicing out thyroid glands, and tied in with a rich businessman. It's sharply observed, well plotted, tautly dialogued with added quirky bits and somewhat sketchily illustrated, but one gets the impression Chaykin can knock this stuff out in his sleep by now. It's about time he changed his tune, and it's about time the rest of the comics industry caught up.~WJ

MIDNIGHT MYSTERY

ACG: *7 issues 1961*

This is a science-fiction and supernatural themed anthology. None of the stories are exactly strong, but they have more humour than most of their kind. The best is 'Spacemen against the Supernatural' (2), featuring a man with no grasp of science who makes inventions by bolting things together any old how, and doesn't realise that they only work because of the magic charm he inherited from his uncle. His shining self-confidence is nicely handled. And there's 'Clem Never Does Anything Big' (6), which pits a Kentucky hillbilly against an alien invasion. Don't devote any time to finding them, but skim through them if they come your way.~FC

MIDNIGHT NATION

Image/Top Cow/Joe's Comics: *12 issue limited series 2000-2002*

"I'm your guide. Until they find you. Until they kill you. Or until you turn. Which is when I'll kill you." These words are spoken by the enigmatic Laurel to Homicide Detective David Gray after he awakens from an attack by a strange, inhuman creature. He has entered a twilight world. Everything looks much the same, at least at first, but he can neither communicate with most people, nor touch most objects. He has crossed the threshold to the place in between; the repository of the dispossessed, the homeless, the abandoned, the lost, coexisting with, but invisible to, the everyday world. Gray's fate, however, is worse than theirs as his soul has been stolen, and the only way to retrieve it is to walk across the country, from Los Angeles to New York, to reclaim it. If he fails, or if he doesn't get there in time, he becomes one of the inhuman, sadistic creatures that attacked him, and who continue to pursue and harass himself and Laurel on their journey. J. Michael Straczynski's plot contains few actual surprises, but the journey is an absorbing and compelling one, not only because of Laurel and Gray's burgeoning relationship, but because of the individuals they encounter along the way. Straczynski's deft touch with dialogue generates empathy for the characters, and Gary Frank's illustrations present the protagonists as attractive (but not implausibly so) people who are materially affected by their ordeal. A satisfactory and thought-provoking read.~HS.

Recommended: 1-12

MIDNIGHT PANTHER

CPM: *12 issue limited series 1997-1998, 5 issue miniseries ('School Daze') 1998, 5 issue miniseries ('Feudal Fantasy') 1998-1999, One-shot ('Breaking up is Hard to Do') 1999*

Kei, Lou and Sonya are the Pussycats, a popular idol group, but also shape-shifting assassins. The first series establishes their backgrounds, explains the attempt to kill King Bad, Lou's brother, and introduces their travelling companions, Father Adam (also known as Sid) and a demon panther, Kei's lover. In 'School Daze', they're hired to rid an all-girls school of a dream demon that gives the students horny fantasies, by Reika, who happens to kill any man she finds on the grounds. 'Feudal Fantasy' sees the Pussycats betrayed after accepting an assignment to kill on behalf of a magistrate. When several are jailed, the others must rescue them. The one-shot features a dragon, but is really about establishing that all the girls have boyfriends. Yu Asagiri's comedy adventure has a romantic heart, quickly moving away from the less moral aspects of their profession, but taking every opportunity to expose the flesh of her nubile characters. The artwork is accomplished, but the whole just never really seizes the reader's attention.~NF

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* Available in a collected edition

MIDNIGHT SONS Unlimited

Marvel: *9 issues 1993-1994*

Midnight Sons was the collective name applied to Marvel's supernatural and horror characters in the early 1990s, and this oversized title featured all of them either teamed or in individual stories with framing sequences. Despite the use of some popular creators, the content hardly rises above bland, and only 7 possesses any spark, featuring the return of Brother Voodoo in a touching tale. 9's story of the Blazing Skull provides welcome relief from the unrelenting grim earnestness to most of the material, which is rarely leavened by any humour. Should you care, the crossover 'Siege of Darkness' story concludes in 4.~WJ

MIDNIGHT SURFER

Quality: *One-shot 1986*

Very sympathetic re-jigging permitted a Cam Kennedy story drawn for a different page-size and spread over several short episodes to be presented in a single American-sized comic in seamless fashion. Although nominally a Judge Dredd story, writer John Wagner, as ever, is more interested in the supporting characters and their escapades, and Chopper is the star of the show. He's a participant in the illegal sky-surfing world championship which is occurring in Dredd's Mega-City One, and as well as completing a difficult course he must evade the Judges attempting to bring him down. There's very little plot, but this is strangely poetic for a Judge Dredd story, and Wagner was to return to the theme several times afterwards.~FP

MIDNIGHT TALES

Charlton: *18 issues 1972-1976*

One of Charlton's innumerable horror titles, this was as anaemic as its companions, although occasionally enlivened by some nice art. Each cover and much of the contents were provided by notorious Wally Wood imitator Wayne Howard, though Tom Sutton and Joe Staton were usually also present. The most notable artist to contribute was Don Newton, whose art in 11-14 is quite gorgeous.~DAR

Milton Knight's MIDNITE The Rebel Skunk

Blackthorne: *2 issues 1986-1987*

Milton Knight brings the madcap world of 1920s animation to comics with his stories of a female skunk protector of the good. Knight's art leaps off the page, and in 2 he draws a testosterone factory of a superhero, but once you've got past how stunning the art is, there's very little else to his tales of the glamorous sex-bomb skunk.~WJ

MIGHTY BOMB

Antarctic: *1 issue 1997*

Thoroughly likeable superhero pastiche in the manner of old Hanna-Barbera cartoons. The Mighty Bomb is a third generation superhero prone to winning his battles the simple old-fashioned way: by throwing grenades at his enemies. In between he has to listen to lectures from his grandfather, World War II's Blue Bomber, and cope with his daily job as a dustman. It's silly and it's fun.~FP

THE MIGHTY BOMBSHELLS

Antarctic: *2 issues 1993*

Manga superheroics as the men of superhero team The Vanguards are enslaved by the alien Queen, Xeblezweita Sondum, and it's left to a group of female heroes from around the world (Red Dragon, Fireball, Blitzkrieg, Cherry Blossom, Dynamite Girl and Ms Liberty), to save the day. Yujin Ishikawa's artwork is similar to that of John Byrne, and he writes with some humour, but there's not enough here to establish any rapport with the characters.~NF

MIGHTY CARTOON HEROES

Karl Art: *1 issue (0) 1996*

The daft anthropomorphic antics of 1970s Hanna-Barbera cartoons are a major influence here, although labelling the strips 'Cartoon Heroes' when they've not been animated is deceitful. There was no expense spared from having Jack Davis and Al Jaffee provide cover illustrations, to the lush paper stock. Unfortunately it was all wasted on comics squarely aimed at the junior end of the market, and therefore better priced at below a dollar than $2.95. The content is also odd, with a long prequel to the Space Bananas squeezing Chameleon Kat into a few pages and restricting the cover featured Aquahounds to a page of sketches. An interesting failure.~FP

MIGHTY COMICS PRESENTS

Mighty Comics: *11 issues (40-50) 1966-1967*

Archie's attempts to emulate Marvel moved into high gear as they cancelled *Fly-Man*, but continued the numbering with a changed title to feature revivals of a whole host of obscure 1940s superheroes. Back came the Black Hood, The Fox, The Shield, Steel Sterling, The Web and several more, each of them with a personality interchangeable with the others, being fast-mouthed crime-fighting athletes. The appalling art (take a bow, Paul Reinman), ludicrously contrived plots and camp dialogue make for a chucklesome read at the comics rather than with them, and the only strip displaying a modicum of genuine humour is the Web (in 40, 43, 45, 46 and 50). The camp superheroics are present in full quantity, but the scenes of the superhero returning home to be henpecked by his wife and having to dodge the mailman on his way out to fight crime have an acceptable slapstick quality. Overall the run isn't quite as preposterous as the Mighty Comics' stab at the Mighty Crusaders, but there's plenty of cheap laughs to be had.~WJ

THE MIGHTY CRUSADERS

Mighty Comics: *7 issues 1965-1966*

The Mighty Crusaders was an unashamed attempt to cash in on the twin successes of Marvel's superheroes and the Adam West Batman. Superman creator Jerry Siegel gathered together Archie Comics' superheroes Fly Man, Fly Girl, The Shield, The Black Hood and The Comet for this bizarre version of a superteam comic. Siegel and 'artist' Paul Reinman may well have been sending up Stan Lee's bickering, neurotic loser heroes, but their attempts to be swinging and camp are pitifully middle-aged and ungroovy. Not that this stops *The Mighty Crusaders* from being a wonderfully dopey piece of 1960s kitsch. Who could resist lines of dialogue like these deep musings from troubled superspook Mr Justice in 5: "Ah, yes... There is so very much I know...an overvoid awareness of the infinitum intermingling of timelessness, everlastingness and grandeur parellsected by diabalkarm trogs culminating in a terrible awareness"! Outta sight, Daddy-o! Although 3's villain has a great silly name – The Deathless Smiler – 5 is probably the 'best' of the series. It features a ludicrous parade of "guest appearances" from such heroes and villains as D.E.M.O.N. ("the code-name of the international terror organization which furthers Destruction, Extortion, Murder, Oppression and Nefariousness"), The Fox, The Web and Captain Flag, aka The Ultra-Men, The Agents of A.U.N.T.I.E. ("Amalgamated Universal Network To Inhibit Evil"), The Spider, The Terrific Three (Steel Sterling, The Jaguar, the aforementioned Mr Justice) and chief baddie The Nameless One, all in nineteen dense pages. Forget about the final issue, in which the Crusaders are displaced from their title by the witless Steel Sterling, but otherwise *The Mighty Crusaders* is about as 'authentic' as *The Monkees*, and nearly as much fun.~AL

Recommended: 5

The MIGHTY CRUSADERS

Red Circle: *5 issues 1983-1984*
Archie: *8 issues (6-13) 1984-1985*

After the camp triumph of the 1960s incarnation there's an immense disappointment when beginning to read this series. Oh yes, there are daft plots and daft characters, particularly The Brain Emperor (a guy with a transparent dome covering an otherwise exposed brain), but this is an attempt to play the characters straight from creators not able to transcend mediocrity. Bizarrely, though, instead of forgetting the previous series entirely, there are attempts made to reconcile the continuity of a twenty-year-old, universally ridiculed comic. Fans of the 1960s material shouldn't despair, though, because in the final issues Rich Margopoulos tries his level best to write a 1980s equivalent. You are referred to 12's splash page featuring the Crusaders' building-block flying train, and 13's lump of red-rock villain. The dialogue is gloriously pompous and expository, and only the competent, although far from exciting, art of Dick Ayers and Chic Stone prevents a total lapse.~WJ

THE MIGHTY HEROES

Marvel/Paramount: *One-shot 1998*

The return of the 1960s cartoon series in comic form, presumably to test the waters. It's well produced and true to the inept superheroes and pastiche nature of the original material, but hardly compelling to anyone over the age of 12.~FP

The MIGHTY HERCULES

Gold Key: *2 issues 1963*

This curious, angular Hercules starred in a kids' TV cartoon, and the stories reflect the juvenile origins.~FP

MIGHTY MARVEL WESTERN

Marvel: *46 issues 1968-1976*

Weedy Marvel Western more like, as there's little in this collection of reprints, culled from 1950s and 1960s titles, to set the heart racing. There's a longish Rawhide Kid story in every issue, and shorter Two Gun Kid (every issue), Kid Colt (1-24) and Matt Slade (25 on) back-ups. Perhaps of interest, though is 44, featuring what Gil Kane considered his favourite of the covers he drew for Marvel.~FP

THE MIGHTY MITES

Eternity: *1 issue 1986*

There was nothing wrong with the idea, as Marvel would later appropriate it for their *X-Babies* specials, and the artwork is appealing enough, if lacking in background. No, the problem is the writing. This X-Men parody goes for the obvious joke every time, most honing in on the prolix tendencies and soul searching of the source material as it then was. More issues were planned, but none were forthcoming.~FP

MIGHTY MORPHIN POWER RANGERS

Hamilton: *6 issue miniseries 1994-1995*, 4 issues 1995, 3 issues (Saga) 1995*

It was a pedestrian TV show, and it produced pedestrian comics, although Gray Morrow drew the first issue and a strip in 6. The first miniseries and ongoing issues are slightly better by virtue of being self-contained, but if you want the origin and other bits of background information, they're to be found in the sketchy and never completed Saga.~WJ

MIGHTY MOUSE

Marvel: *10 issues 1990-1991*

Tongue-in-cheek comics parody series using the award winning TV show produced by Ralph Bakshi as a vehicle to poke fun at comic book trends. Utilising Mighty Mouse as an Everyman character, writers Michael Gallagher and Glenn Herdling are effective and humorous critics, and the art of Ernie Colón and Milton Knight is a sharp mix of cartooning and dramatic drawing. Of special note are the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (4-5) and Todd McFarlane *Spider-Man* (6) parodies. A good read for collectors with a sense of fun.~WW

MIGHTY SAMSON

Gold Key: *31 issues 1964-1970 (1-21), 1973-1976 (22-31)*
Whitman: *1 issue (32) 1982*

Post-holocaust adventure with Samson and his companions Mindor and Sharmaine. The resemblance to the later *Hercules Unbound* from DC is too strong not to be mentioned, although the quality of this title is considerably lower. Early issues are drawn by Frank Thorne, but thereafter Jack Sparling hacks out one issue after another. The 1970s issues are reprints, as is the 1982 Whitman comic.~SW

MIGHTY TINY

Antarctic: *5 issue miniseries 1990**

These days best known for his manga-esque stories, it's surprising to see Ben Dunn trying his hand at furry animal science-fiction and pulling it off. Set after mankind has died out and rodents have evolved to sentience, there's a leering Victorian melodrama style-villain with military aspirations and only young Gunther and young Stuart and Ms Tiny stand in the way of his plans for military domination. A decent enough read for kids as well.~FP

MIGRAINE BOY

Slave Labor: *2 issues 2000*

Pages and pages and pages of humourless cartoons stretched out beyond bearing. The average six panels break down as silent meeting, call, response, "witty" retort, pause and violence. Even a potentially funny idea like one-panel gag cartoons for Christians lacks any humour, although those at least prove the primitive art elsewhere is just a style. Redeeming feature? It only lasted two issues.~WJ

Mickey Spillane's MIKE DANGER

Tekno: *11 issues 1995-1996*
Big Entertainment: *10 issues 1996*

Before he came up with Mike Hammer, Spillane outlined a cartoon series, which Tekno saw fit to dig up, with Max Allan Collins in charge of the scripts. Tough guy P.I. Mike Danger wakes up in the future, where he's told he's been in suspended animation. And people start trying to kill him. Obviously all is not what it seems, you say to yourself, and by the end of the series you discover you were right. In this synthetic, carefully controlled world Danger's the only 'real' man around and women start falling all over him. Eduardo Barreto, who provides most of the early artwork, plasters the strip with Betty Page lookalikes and deals with the action in a workmanlike fashion. Unfortunately there's not a lot of it – several pages of explanation followed by an attempt to kill Danger is the usual form. When Peter Grau takes over with 7 the art turns slippery but simultaneously wooden. Disappointing overall.~FJ

MIKE MIST MINUTE MYSTERIES

Eclipse: *1 issue 1986*

A collection of single-page puzzlers by Max Allen Collins and Terry Beatty, where the idea is to guess who did it before reading the final panel, upside down. Fine as a back-up in Collins and Beatty's *Ms Tree*, slight and sometimes unconvincing here.~NF

MIKE REGAN

Hard Boiled: *1 issue 1991*

Lovingly crafted but sadly over-ambitious pastiche of 1930s two-fisted action and spicy adventure tales as tough guy Mike Regan sets out to foil the evil plans of the Iron Lotus and her insidious Tiger Claw Tong.~WW

MILK!

Radio Comix: *31 issues +, 3 Specials 1997 to date*

This erotic anthology aims to offer a variety of strips, whether in terms of sexual content (comedy, softcore and hardcore), or the art styles accepted, although initially contributions are primarily manga or 'Ameri-manga'. On the whole, anthropomorphic strips are left to companion title, *Genus*, however. The best of the regular contributors are Richard Moore (9-10, 13, 16, 19, 21, 30), and Daria McGrain with Sara M. Williams (6, 12-13, 16, all reprinted in Special 2), but also of note are Locke (24-25), Gary McCluskey (15, 17), Fred Perry (2, 5, 11, and subject of Special 3), Nozomu Tamaki (3) and Paul Way (5, 8). Other interesting, but less consistent regulars include Alejandro Gutierrez Franco, Nureruru (subject of Special 1), and Kjartan Arnorsson. Most issues are good fun (especially those with Moore strips), but the overall quality of the title has been slipping in the last year.~NF

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* Available in a collected edition

MILK & CHEESE

Slave Labor: *7 issues 1991-1997*

Pity creator Evan Dorkin, the poor lad probably has a huge psychiatrist's bill. Anyone with his madcap, zany, sick and violent sense of humour, needs some help. Yes, Milk and Cheese are a "carton of hate" and a "wedge of hate" and they don't need any excuse to beat you up – in fact, expect it! They are dairy products gone bad and society is to blame. How true. Dorkin is having a right old time satirising all that is good and bad about Americana, within one and two page rants. While there's an element of overload, rationing is advised because some may find the repetition is a bit monotonous, but it's worth the effort to receive Dorkin's, *ahem*, subtle message. The satire extends to the cover numbering, with issues being labelled 'second number one', 'first number two' and '666', but confusion can be avoided by picking up the nice *Fun With Milk and Cheese* collection. Read it slowly over a period of time otherwise you might be tempted to turn into a vegan (look it up, it's got nothing to do with *Star Trek*).~HY

Recommended: *Fun With Milk and Cheese*

MILLENNIUM

DC: *8 issue limited series 1987*

Yes, it certainly read like it. This was a long haul. The premise for DC's 1987 company-wide crossover was the emergence of a three-billion-year-old android cult, the Manhunters. Originally created as a force for good by the Guardians of the Universe, they turned bad and had now returned etc., etc. An interesting facet was that a few long-standing DC characters turned out to be androids, or human acolytes serving the Manhunters. In order to defeat them ten humans had to be advanced and... oh, it's too tedious to bear repetition. If you like to see dozens of DC heroes drawn by Joe Staton in every panel this is the series for you, but both he and writer Steve Englehart had seen better days.~HY

MILLENNIUM FEVER

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1995-1996*

Millennium Fever starts off as a comic about the everyday worries and joys of a young student's life. Of mixed parentage, his mother's going off the deep end after the death of her baby and his father's turned into a brick wall. He wishes either of his grandmothers were alive to advise him, and worries that he'll never lose his virginity. Eventually he answers a personal ad and meets the perfect partner. Until, that is, she turns out to be an embodiment of the soul of the universe, or something like that.

Nick Abadzis' script scores highly for authentic street language and emotional honesty, but loses points for getting wrapped up in ecological mysticism towards the end. His propositions are no odder than a common-or-garden *Sandman* story, but by being so convincing in the early pages he leaves the reader unprepared for the weird shit. The story uses long chunks of narrative to progress and comment on the behaviour of the characters, rather than dialogue, which makes it text-heavy in parts. Duncan Fegredo draws modern people in a modern style and by this stage has learnt to control some of the scribbly excesses of his early work. He suits the tone of the story well, able to draw cosmic encounters as well as London street scenes with conviction. Pity he wasn't left to do a bit more of the work.~FJ

MILLIE THE MODEL

Marvel: *207 issues, 10 Annuals 1945-1973*

The misadventures of daffy blonde model Millie Collins, her photographer boy-friend Flicker Holbrook, her red-haired rival Chili Seven, and their friends delighted generations of comic-reading girls (and more than a few furtive boys) for generations. Switching styles between cartoon comedy and semi-realistic soap as tastes changed, Mil lasted through the desert years of the 1950s with minimal alteration. Her boyfriend's name was changed to Clicker when it was pointed out that the second two letters of 'FLICKER' might run together on the printing press to unfortunate effect, and her rival Chili's surname was changed to Storm for no reason at all. Our heroine remained serenely untroubled, dispensing wisecracks and fashion tips in her own comic and the companion titles *A Date With Millie* (7 issues 1956-1957 and another 7 issues 1959-1960), *Life With Millie* (13 issues, 1960-1962), *Mad About Millie* (17 issues, 1969-1970, 1 Annual, 1971), and *Modelling With Millie* (33 issues 1963-1967). Unlike Patsy Walker, Millie was never mixed into the Marvel Universe proper, only sticking her head into guest-shots in *Defenders* and *She-Hulk*. It's become fashionable to belittle frivolous 'girls' comics' like *Millie* and *Patsy*, but without the dollars they brought in, Marvel wouldn't have survived until the 1960s to usher in the "Marvel Age of Comics", so all you little mutant zombies better show some respect, you hear?~HS

MIND PROBE

Rip-Off: *1 issue 1995*

Did Rip-Off ever publish a shoddier comic than this? Unlikely. In attempting to create a gloomy atmosphere, artist Luis Ramirez, whose story of a CIA undercover operation occupies over half the issue, appears to have airbrushed in dark gray tones with white highlights. A fair enough experiment, but when it returned from the printers with pages so dark as to render the story incomprehensible the publishers, for once, lived up to their name and issued the comic anyway. The content is otherwise enthusiastic and not quite professional daft horror.~WJ

MINDGAME GALLERY

Mindgame Press: *1 issue 1990*

Disappointing anthology of short stories from a normally high calibre cast of creators including Steve Bissette, Rick Veitch, and Bernie Mireault rounded off with some of Joe Matt's poorer one-pagers. More of a curiosity than a keepsake.~WW

Witchblade/Aliens/The Darkness/Predator MINDHUNTER

Dark Horse/Image/Top Cow: *3 issue miniseries 2000-2001*, 2 issue microseries (Overkill) 2000-2001*

The first multi-franchise all-action effort has sub-sitcom dialogue and unfeasible tits and ass plus bondage, and is bad even of its kind, right down to the colours. The 'villain comes back from the future to stop time and space or does he?' routine is pretty tired. Most entertaining caption is "The buggers' sucking hive!" *Overkill* is not as badly drawn, but almost as confusingly incomprehensible. 2 is based on the 'joke' of male anal penetration. As bad as a comic can be without being funny.~GK

MINIMUM WAGE

Fantagraphics: *One-shot (Book One) 1995, 10 issues 1996-1999**

Bob Fingerman works a fair amount of autobiographical experience into his stories of Rob Hoffman, struggling New York cartoonist specialising in obsessing over trivia, and being a damning silent critic of humanity's foibles (as all good cartoonists should be). Many of the tribulations depicted are seemingly common to half of New York, but the level of charm and wit, and occasional sequences of gut-busting hilarity, ensure that otherwise mundane events are promoted beyond their status. Despite the attractive, clean cartooning style, the grime and sleaziness of some characters still oozes off the page, which is a remarkable achievement. Densely written to the standard of a quality sit-com, this differs from similar material in that it's largely an upbeat title. Rob is relatively content with his lot and has an attractive partner, and much of the humour stems from the misfortunes of others. By the end of the run, though, publication frequency imploded and issues began to feature a shorter lead strip backed-up by strips from other cartoonists. While not bad, they were presumably not what readers wanted. The introductory one-shot is excellent, but expensive, so sampling is best begun with the stand-alone issues of the regular series. 1-5 are collected as Book Two and 1-10 are later collected as *Beg the Question*.~FP

Recommended: One-shot, 1-6, 8, 10

MINISTRY OF SPACE

Image: *2 issues + 2001 to date*

Warren Ellis creates a scenario in which the Nazi rocket scientists defected to Britain instead of America, thus putting the UK at the forefront of the post-war space race. Set in a world that belongs to *Boy's Own* adventure strips of the 1950s, the series could have been a serious take on what might have been; in-joke laden nostalgia for the weekly adventure strips that once graced our newsagents' shelves; or light-hearted, Ealing comedy style farce. Unfortunately, it's none of the above. Bogged down by pointless sneering at chinless wonder airmen stereotypes who never really existed anyway, Ellis tries too hard to be clever and ends up simply being tedious with plots and dialogue that are overdone rather than funny. It's really no loss then that issue 3 is yet to appear, despite Ellis' assurances that artist Chris Weston (whose beautiful artwork is wasted on this drivel) has the script and will deliver the final chapter.~JC

THE MINX

DC/Vertigo: *8 issues 1998-1999*

Anna Schwartz lives in a world much like our own. Except, that is, for the influence of a test astronaut monkey who has contacted God in space. Many people, including Anna, are now receiving mental communiqués from the ape who has been asked to compile a progress report on Humanity. Mrs Schwartz then chooses a family funeral to reveal that she's concealed the identity of Anna's father from the family. Donning her dad's punk jacket, Anna begins to take on the rebellious aspects of a powerful alter ego named The Minx. Along the way Anna, her friends and family encounter zealot hermaphrodite Sex Death and adversary Angus McAnguish, an incredibly vain President and eventually The Monkey himself. There follows a textbook open/non ending to the series. Writer Peter Milligan takes a commonplace of comics, the alter ego, and sidesteps the bore of a skintight costume, powers, or an origin. Sean Phillips' unexaggerated verité style is, for once, thoroughly suited to the story, even if it is marred by inept colouring throughout. If you like your comics cerebral then this is definitely worth seeking out.~SW

MIRACLE GIRLS

Tokyopop: *19 issues 2000-2002**

Mika and Toni Morgan are identical twins trying to lead separate lives. They attend different schools, have different friends and seemingly don't get on. However they share a secret that increasingly draws them together – incredible psychic powers that keep getting them into trouble. Nami Akimoto's shojo (girl's story) adventure is generally a rambling, fluffy, tension free-affair, but as more people discover their secret (boyfriends, teachers, Mad Scientists) and try to exploit them, the girls lives become progressively more complex. Engaging but lightweight.~WW

The MIRACLE SQUAD

Upshot: *4 issues 1986-1987*

Apple: *4 issue miniseries ('Blood and Dust') 1989*

Set in late 1930s Hollywood, this is a fast-paced adventure strip based around Miracle Studios. The first series introduces Sandra Castle searching for her twin sister and involving the studio and its boss, Mark Barron, in a takeover battle with gangster Sweets O'Hanlon. 'Blood and Dust' sees the studio trying to make a film about the poverty of dustbowl America and encountering Ku Klux Klan-type prejudice. Briskly written by John Wooley, who knows his period, and cleanly drawn by Terry Tidwell, there's humanity in the stories but it lacks a little sophistication.~NF

MIRACLEMAN

Eclipse (with Quality, 1-6): *24 issues 1985-1993*

Starting out life in the 1950s as a blatant Captain Marvel rip-off, Mick Anglo's *Marvelman* was the recipient of an Alan Moore overhaul in the enormously influential British anthology comic *Warrior*. The story was reprinted by Eclipse under the title Miracleman to stave off threats of legal action from *Marvel Comics*.

In Moore's hands, the innocent 1950s hero grew up into an unsuccessful and insecure freelance reporter whose memory of his powers existed only in dreams. When reawakened, Mike Moran's alter ego makes the mistake of contacting his former sidekick, who has used his own abilities to build up an incredibly powerful multinational corporation. Things go from bad to worse. Kid Miracleman is an unbalanced sadist with the powers of a god, and the steps taken to stop him send Moran down an irreversible path that leads to him assuming absolute control of Earth. Along the way, startling revelations about his origin further destroy the cosy world he thought he knew, and the more he embraces the god-like side of his nature the further removed from reality (and his own humanity) he becomes. Miracleman may be a benign dictator, but neither the reader nor the character are allowed to forget that he has chosen to place himself above the mortals. When Moore brings his story to a conclusion in 16, the Miracleman he leaves not only knows what he has gained, but is all too painfully aware of what he has lost. Sadly, the artwork doesn't always live up to the consistency of Moore's writing. Early episodes, drawn by Gary Leach and later Alan Davis for reproduction in black and white, do not always take colour well. There are some ugly issues by Chuck Beckum when the reprint material runs out, and it is not until John Totleben comes on board with 11 that the title re-acquires a consistent look.

Despite a rocky publishing history (the first sixteen issues are spread over more than four years), the critical acclaim and high standards ensured the title's survival and cemented Moore's reputation in the American market. It is perhaps regrettable that Eclipse chose to continue the series after Moore's departure. Neil Gaiman and Mark Buckingham did an admirable job, presenting a series of vignettes (17-22) exploring what the world Miracleman has remade in his own image is like for those who have to live in it, not all of whom necessarily want him as their god. But the central character is noticeably absent, and there is a feeling that even they have admitted that Moore's act is impossible to follow, although their obvious love for the character carries them through.

From 23, Gaiman and Buckingham begin continued stories, once again focusing on the title character, now more god-like, omnipotent and self-absorbed than ever. Production problems continue to be the book's main fault and, by 1993, the numbering had progressed only as far as 24. It says something about Miracleman's history that his readership is prepared to wait for 25 onwards, and still believes they will come. In the meantime all issues to 22 are collected over four volumes.~JC

Recommended: 1-16

MIRACLEMAN FAMILY

Eclipse: *2 issues 1988*

Reprints of Mick Anglo stories from the 1950s, heavily influenced by the golden age *Captain Marvel* comics that inspired the characters.~JC

MIRROR WALKER

Now: *2 issue microseries 1989*

An interesting experiment that falls some way short of its aim. Cartoon figures are laid onto photographed backgrounds for a comic fantasy. The contrast is jarring, and Marv Wolfman's story lacks the charm and effort to enable a reader to be drawn into it and ignore the anomalies.~FP

MIRRORWORLD:RAIN

Big Entertainment: *2 issue microseries (1-0) 1997*

Genetically modified humans are sent on a one way trip to an other-dimensional planet known as Mirrorworld. It's an interesting scenario, but of little relevance to the bulk of the tale, which is, despite the few otherworldly trappings, a Western. Rain is an Amazonian style warrior occupying a decent, but hardly compelling, story competently illustrated by Fred Harper. It all seems rather pointless unless there's a major fan base for writer *"New York Times* Best-Selling Author" Tad Williams. To confuse collectors, the zero issue actually follows the first.~WJ

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* Available in a collected edition

MISERY

Image/Top Cow: *one-shot 1995*

Fresh from an abortion, crushed by her father's hatred and deserted by her married lover, Lydia O'Rourke is emotionally unstable. When the villainous Cyberdata corporation decides to terminate her father's employment (along with his factory and himself), she is completely unprepared for a manifestation of latent psychic powers. Written and pencilled by Brandon Peterson, this is a literate, character-driven thriller that outlines the origin of the *Cyberforce* villainess, Misery.~NF

Recommended

THE MISHKIN FILE

Fantagraphics: *One Shot 1993*

The retired director of a mental institution tells the story of Ted Mishkin: a brilliant animator and creator of the mischievous cat Waldo. During the 1930s whilst recovering from a nervous breakdown he commenced a series of murals where the products of a disturbed imagination melded with suppressed desires and facts. What we're presented with is an unsolved whodunnit, an incidental result of Dr Reinman's account of Mishkin's life. Author Kim Deitch's distinctive, puppet-like style and that of the murals doesn't vary. The tableaux are carefully presented, showing their disturbing details as the Doctor's "real world" narration raises our suspicions. A masterful complement to 'The Ship That Never Came In' from *Pictopia* 2 and 'The Boulevard of Broken Dreams' from *Raw* (volume 2, number 3).~SW

MR A

Comic Art Publishers: *1 issue 1973*
Bruce Hershenson: *1 issue (2) 1974*

Mr A was the venue through which Steve Ditko expounded his views on life, society and politics. Mr A himself most closely resembled Ditko's Charlton character The Question, but that strip was at least hemmed in by thoughts of commerciality. These strips, many of them reprinted from fanzines, make no such concession. Ditko's philosophy was a form of right-wing absolutism, or, as Mr A says in 1, "A is A. A thing is what it is. No man can have it both ways. Only through black and white principles can man distinguish between good and evil." And so on. And on. And on. And on. To anyone not sharing Ditko's views, which, let's face it, is most of us, this is all completely mad. At the same time, though, it makes compulsive reading and Ditko's art is absolutely top-notch throughout. The second issue is actually number 4 in 'The Ditko Series', 2 and 3 being *The Avenging World* and *Wha...?*~DAR

MR. BEAT

Moordam Comics: *One-shot ('Adventures') 1997, one-shot ('Two-Fisted Atomic Action Super Special') 1997, one-shot ('House of Burning Jazz Love') 1998, one-shot ('Superstar') 1998, one-shot ('Babes and Bongos Annual') 1998, one-shot ('Elite Mr. Beat') 1998, one-shot ('Existential Cool 0') 1998*
Comics Library International: *3 Volumes (The Complete Mr. Beat) 2000-2001*

Chris Yambar's Mr. Beat is "God's 'agent of cool' in times of crisis on other worlds and in other dimensions", working from his coffee shop, the House of Burning Jazz Love. This after dying before his time, when he was accidentally dropped into the sea in a barrel of cement. The first part of an Elfquest team-up appears in 'Adventures', while the 'Two-Fisted Atomic Action Super Special' features Levi Krause's Levi's World and Roswell by Bill Morrison. 'House of Burning Jazz Love' contains the first part of a Mr. Beat/Levi's World/Cray Baby crossover, completed in Levi's World and World's Funnest. Mr. Beat's origin is covered in 'Superstar', which also has the first part of a Patty Cake crossover as the pair face an alien invasion – continued in the 'Babes and Bongos Annual'. That has a Spy Girls backup by Kevin Thomas, which is continued in Certified Cool. 'Elite Mr. Beat' reprinted 'Adventures' together with the *Elfquest* part of the crossover (Volume 2, 9). 'Existential Cool 0' is a flip book with Art Baltazar's Gyro-Man 0, and Blindwolf Comics released a 'Mr. Beat/Cray Baby/Weirdsville Post Halloween Leftover Monster Thanksgiving Special'. The third volume of 'The Complete Mr. Beat' contains a CD of live beatnik music, including the 'Mr. Beat Theme' and 'Dangerous Coffee'. Mr. Beat is caffeine-fuelled commentary on art (Lichtenstein, Warhol), comics, death and Jesus, with support from poet, Bambino Boy and Dippy the Biscotti Dog. It's all quite raw, but the overall effect is one of someone having fun with cartoons.~NF

MISTER BLANK

Amaze Ink: *15 issue limited series (0-14) 1997-2000**

You know you're onto a winner when Christopher Hicks has the nous to name his hero Sam Smith after a great beer. This is a stylish and well-designed work, starting each issue with the concluding page from the previous time on the inside cover plus a synopsis. Sam is an office worker who confronts two prowlers when working late. Tackling them upends his life, yet he proves remarkably adept at avoiding death while learning a lot about the company he's employed by and more besides. There are clones, robots, nutty scientists, a mime able to distort reality and other oddities, and by halfway through there's an amazement at how Hicks manages to up the ante each issue. This continues until the end, by which time mythological elements, giant robots and biblical legends have also been incorporated. Hicks is a fine stylist who brings a manga sensibility to his art, making for breathtaking action sequences. This does also ensure a quick read, and while occasionally there is the feeling that the story is running away from him, it isn't. Close in spirit to *Madman* or early *Mage*, it's a relatively original adventure comic worth investigating.~FP

MR DAY AND MR NIGHT

Slave Labor: *1 issue 1993*

Previously seen as the back-up in *Paris, Man of Plaster*, this is a superhero spoof (sort of) written by Glen Dakin and drawn by Phil Elliott. Ponderous in places, but builds up to some good points about the value of scepticism.~FC

MISTER E

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1991*

How can a comic about a psychotic blind psychic, whose father scooped his eyes out with a spoon when he caught him reading a nudie mag, confronting his guilt and repression be so stultifyingly dull? That's the only mystery here.~FP

MR. FIXIT

Apple: *2 issues 1990*

As different areas of the USA slip into different time-zones it's up to the best mechanic in the country to put things right. Old-fashioned and light-hearted, competently written and drawn, there's nothing outstanding here, and as such it's only worth investigating as a bargain-box cheapie.~WJ

Neil Gaiman's MR HERO, The Newmatic Man

Tekno: *Series one 17 issues 1995-1996, series two 1 issue 1996*

Museum curator Jenny Hale discovers a Victorian steam-powered robot, Mr Hero. It has two personalities according to which of its two heads is fitted. There's the simple blue-collar protective type, and the logical and superior detective. The downside is that Mr Hero is the property of the terrible Mr Henry Phage, other-dimensional dictatorial dinosaur with influence everywhere, and, retaining only his left hand, he wants Mr Hero back. Generally a fun title with appealing pencils from Ted Slampyak.~FP

MR. MAJESTIC

WildStorm: *9 issues 1999-2000**

Given that this is WildStorm's version of *Superman*, the approach applied focuses on what that character could do freed from locked-in editorial attitude. 1, for instance, has Mr Majestic reconfiguring the solar system over two decades. You don't see that in every comic. There's a great variety in tone throughout making for an interesting title.

* Available in a collected edition

Where it will fail for some is in the shorthand storytelling of Joe Casey and Brian Holguin and that Mr Majestic's character remains a largely blank slate, even through the emotional events of 4. 2 is also a heartbreaker. Of the artists, the cartooning of Ed McGuinness, who would go on to draw *Superman*, is more pleasing than the jagged stylings of Eric Canete from 7.~WJ

MISTER MIRACLE

DC: *Series one 25 issues 1971-1974 (1-18*), 1977-1978 (19-25), one-shot 1987, series two 28 issues 1989-1991, series three 7 issues 1996*

"Mister Miracle. He cheats death! He defies man! No trap can hold him! The making of a Legend!" exclaimed the first issue's cover, while tucked away in the top corner was one of the great understatements of the comics century: "Kirby's Here". Inside we're introduced to Thaddeus Brown, an escape artist who's trying to make a comeback, and a mysterious young man Scott Free – Kirby always had a way with names – and his mysterious technology. When Brown is executed by gangsters Scott assumes the mantle of Mister Miracle, super escape artist, assisted thereafter by Oberon, short, feisty and middle-aged. It's your basic superhero story with Kirby's art magnificent, even inked by Vince Colletta, although the infinitely more sympathetic Mike Royer inks from 5, completing the dynamic flair of the series. The first issue makes little reference to the connected story Kirby was also telling about the world of Apokolips and New Genesis in the pages of *New Gods* and *Forever People*, but Scott Free was an integral part of that story.

2 steps right in with the boots on as gruesome pensioner Granny Goodness turns up. Granny heads up the Apokolips orphanage from which Scott Free has recently escaped, and since he's the first ever to do so Granny is out to punish him. 2-10 introduce an amazing gallery of Apokolips villains still used to this day. Besides Granny we have Dr Bedlam, a mind-manipulating scientist with a host of bodies, Kanto the assassin and Virman Vundarbar, a mock-Prussian military genius. Then there are Granny's élite soldiers, those Female Furies, Lashina, Stompa, Bernadeth and Mad Harriet. Into this mixture Kirby throws a thinly disguised parody of his former Marvel partner Stan Lee, here named Funky Flashman. 7 and 8 have Mister Miracle back on Apokolips and really show Kirby at his storytelling best, with great action and marvellous dialogue. 9 temporarily pauses the action for one of the best-ever superhero comics, 'Himon', relating the story of Scott Free's parentage, his Apokolips upbringing, and how he escaped with the aid of Big Barda. Once head of the Female Furies, she was introduced in 4 as Scott's love interest, the cover proclaiming "Big bonus! Big Surprise! Big Barda!", and she certainly is, especially with her megarod. After 10, with the backstory told, Mister Miracle becomes a straight superhero adventure title, but that doesn't stop the Kirby creativity, and, with the Female Furies on Earth, he just can't stop the fun. Adversaries for the next few issues included The Floating Head and, as proclaimed on 14's cover, "The weirdest villain ever seen in comics: Madame Evil Eyes", alas never seen again. Unfortunately, the marvellous Female Furies were ousted as supporting characters by the son of the original Mister Miracle, and a young kid, Shilo Norman, an irritating little runt, but the catalyst for a few good adventures. 18 returns the Apokolips crew for Scott and Barda's wedding in Kirby's (and the series) finale. These Kirby issues are reprinted (poorly) in two black and white collections and offer a cheap alternative to the originals.

Mister Miracle returned in magnificent form in 1977. It's not easy to outdo Kirby, but writer Steve Englehart and artist Marshall Rogers had a good stab. The action centred on the Apokolips villains, with Granny Goodness still holding a grudge. The stories had a grittier feel, but the team didn't last long, Englehart even being so dissatisfied with 22 he was credited under an alias. Steve Gerber and Michael Golden are in place for 24, and produce two very good issues, but were unable to prevent cancellation halfway through a story. The creators on this run had very different approaches from Kirby, but do justice to his character. A decade later a *Mister Miracle Special*, appeared written by Mark Evanier, at one time an assistant of Kirby's, and beautifully illustrated by Steve Rude and Mike Royer. Very much in Kirby style, it was an amusing story featuring Darkseid, and Funky Flashman.

The next series outlasted the previous two runs put together. Written by J.M. DeMatteis, it was intricately connected with the new Justice League, of which Mister Miracle was a core member, also written by DeMatteis. The stance here was domestic comedy of sorts, as Scott and Barda set up home in a quiet town, but there's never anyplace quiet when the inhabitants of Apokolips and New Genesis are involved. Ian Gibson illustrated 1-7, but obviously didn't enjoy it, and DeMatteis forced the humour too far for what had until now been an adventure title, taking liberties with previously noble characters, particularly the Highfather. Keith Giffen and Len Wein take the comedy even further, but in better conceived stories, and Joe Phillips' art from 8 is an improvement. Wein begins a plotline with lots of ramifications in Justice League as Mister Miracle signs a binding agreement for an interplanetary tour that runs in 13-18. Back on Earth in 19 Shilo Norman returns, less annoying than before, training to become a new Mister Miracle in 20-22. Scott and Barda want to live as a normal couple, but Barda needs to work and becomes a wrestler, turning up the amusement factor another notch. Inevitably successful given her background, Barda wins a championship and creates a new group of Female Furies, wonderful busty, colourful wrestlers. Everything comes to a head in the final issue, with Scott and Barda realising that a comfortable suburban existence isn't possible: Scott has to fulfil his New Genesis heritage. Overall there weren't too many bad issues, but neither was this Mister Miracle as originally intended.

The 1996 series from Kevin Dooley and Steve Crespo continues where the previous run left off, more or less. There's trouble in New Genesis when Scott decides perhaps he doesn't want to become a god after all, preferring to live up to his name rather than have his destiny plotted out for him. Along the way there's a trip to the land of the dead and marital problems for Scott and Big Barda. She leaves for Wonder Woman's Paradise Island, while Scott joins Oberon's Miracle Workers, a charitable organisation assisting people in need. The series was prematurely cancelled, but the plotlines continued in the *New Gods* title.~HY

Recommended: Series one 1-10, 18-21, *Mister Miracle Special*, series two 13-18

Doc Stearn... MR MONSTER

Eclipse: *10 issues 1985-1987*
Dark Horse: *8 issue limited series 1988-1991**
Tundra: *3 issue miniseries ('Attacks!') 1992*
Caliber: *3 issue miniseries ('Presents Crack-A-Boom!') 1997*
Image: *One-shot ('vs Gorzilla') 1998*
TwoMorrows: *One-shot ('His Books of Forbidden Knowledge Volume Zero') 2001*

Michael T. Gilbert's Mr Monster is in large part a revival of a 1940s Doc Stearne, Mr Monster who appeared in *Super Duper Comics*. Mr Monster is played for laughs as a gung-ho superhero who shoots first, and kills all known monsters. His beautiful assistant, Kelly, sometimes has to stop him killing his own patients in this quest to rid the world of evil creatures. Artistically you might be forgiven for thinking Gilbert the president of the Will Eisner Appreciation Society. His work is a little more ornate than Eisner's, but he gets a lot of help from his friends. Bill Messner-Loebs draws 1, and several others chip in as the series progresses (Keith Giffen in 6, Don Simpson in 6 and 10, Mark Pacella in 7, 8 and 10, Bill Wray in 8, Gerald Forton in 9 and Batton Lash in 9 also – a delightful *Wolff and Byrd* crossover). Gilbert writes most scripts, but he's not afraid to hand over the typewriter to the likes of Alan Moore (3), and often co-scripts stories. It's all good, outrageous fun. 10 is in 6-D (because it's twice as good as ordinary 3-D), 3 has a Basil Wolverton reprint, 4 reprints a Jerry Grandenetti Dr Drew story and 6 contains a reprint of Steve Ditko's first comic work from 1954.

Anyone who'd read the Eclipse series was not well prepared for Mr Monster's return at Dark Horse. In place of the humour, 'Origins' is two hundred highly serious pages delving into the legacy of Mr Monster. There's always been a monster fighter in the family, but Mr Monster's dad was seduced into renouncing his monster-slaughtering crusade by a vampiress who couldn't have children. Or that was the theory, anyway. Entirely Gilbert's own work, 'Origins' sees his artwork move away from pure Eisner into P. Craig Russell territory, more ornate, but still dark. It's an ambitious saga, not entirely without humour, but a far cry from the gruesome hilarity of the first series. The two known Mr Monster tales from the 1940s are reprinted in 1 and 2, with another Dr Drew tale by Grandenetti filling out 6.

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* Available in a collected edition

The Tundra issues return to the boisterous antics of the Eclipse series, with the emphasis on space monsters. Collaborations are back too. Dave Gibbons contributes to 1, Sam Kieth does 2, and Simon Bisley and Dave Dorman both work on 3, among many others. A Kelly solo story, drawn by Tom Buss, was a prelude to her own miniseries from Image. Artistically Gilbert himself shows signs of continued development, although his writing disappoints after the darker 'Origins' storyline. The Caliber series is an anthology of horror strips with a lead Mr Monster story from Gilbert. Bob Supina's 'Monster Boy' crops up more than necessary, but is a good foil for Gilbert's own L'il Doc! (2-3), and Wolff and Byrd reappear in 2. Much better, and funnier, is the Image issue by Gilbert and Ken Bruzenak, in which Mr Monster travels to Japan to take on Gorzilla. The TwoMorrows volume collects the Mr Monster strips from *Dark Horse Presents*, the Caliber miniseries and *A-1*, but also includes an unpublished team-up with Trencher by Gilbert and Giffen from the abortive *Blackball Comics*. An earlier 'Books of Forbidden Knowledge' collection reprinted strips from 1984-1986, including his first appearance in *Vanguard Illustrated*.~NF

Recommended: Eclipse 3, 4, 6, Dark Horse 1-8

MR MONSTER Specials and One-Shots

Although not numbered as such on their covers, everything in this entry is identified as an issue of *Mr Monster Super Duper Special* in its indicia. All were published by Eclipse in 1986 and 1987. The name of Mr Monster is procured from an obscure 1940s hero, and many of these specials hark back to the past, with Mr Monster introducing reprints of horror, crime and science-fiction stories. The 3-D 'Hi-Octane' special reprints the first 3-D horror story, by Joe Kubert, dating from 1953, plus Bob Powell's 'The Blind, the Doomed...and the Dead!' from 1952. The other is full of classic tales by George Evans, Jerry Grandenetti and Basil Wolverton. *Mr Monster's True Crime* 1 and 2 concentrate on the work of Jack Cole. His true-crime tales are thrilling and entertaining but most certainly prove that 'crime does not pay'. Hi-Voltage Super Science features Bob Powell's Vic Torry and his Flying Saucer (originally a Fawcett one-shot from 1950 and less dumb than it sounds), while *Hi-Shock Schlock* 1 and 2 contain stories "too weird or silly to fit anywhere else", including Flatman (1), Dick Briefer's 'Frankenstein and the Mummies' (1), Norman Nodel's Toni Gay (and her friend Butch Dykeman. No, this is for real) and Frank Thomas' 'The Eye Sees', a 1940s tale about a floating eye. The final special is Weird Tales of the Future, all Basil Wolverton reprints from the series of the same name from 1952-1953, including such classics as 'The Brain Bats of Venus' and 'Nightmare World'. Quite apart from the appeal to *Mr Monster* completists, these comics reprint classic stories and are well worth looking for.~NF

Recommended: 1-8

Will Eisner Presents: MR. MYSTIC

Eclipse: *1 issue 1990*

Eclipse tried hard to reintroduce past classics to a new readership through a number of reprint series. The reprints of Mr Mystic, created as a back-up to the *Spirit* newspaper sections in June 1940, did not generate a huge demand for further issues but then the company were running into trouble by this time. This issue reprints the first five Mr. Mystic stories, distinguished by the artwork of Bob Powell who would also later be the strip's writer. Mr. Mystic is described as "all-powerful" by the Himalayan monks who give the-man-known-only-as-Ken his powers. These appear to mean that anything he wants he need only wish for, but since he never seems to be able to defeat the bad guys too easily, there must be some limitations he keeps to himself. Due to the dated scripts and youthful artwork, this is really only an interesting artefact for Powell fans and comics historians.~NF

MR NATURAL

San Francisco: *2 issues 1970-1971*
Kitchen Sink: *1 issue (3) 1977*

By the time Robert Crumb's legendary Mr Natural graduated to his own title he was already an underground veteran. Whilst the first issue is credible enough, full of Natural's obdurate homilies, by the second Crumb was beginning to grow disenchanted with the hippie movement. Much of the comic pokes fun at cults and movements in a rather jaded way, although 'Mr Natural Does the Dishes' is almost worth the price of admission on its own. After a gap of six years 3 collected the complete run of the character's weekly strip in *The Village Voice*. Coming so many years after his heyday, the character had inevitably become an anachronism, but for all that Crumb invested it with a vigour and intelligence lacking in the earlier comics. To top it all off the art is absolutely terrific. Mr Natural was revived in the early 1990s in the pages of *Hup*.~DAR

Recommended: 3

MR NIGHTMARE'S WONDERFUL WORLD

Moonstone: *7 issues, 1 Special 1995-1997*

Since Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* the flip side of a keeper of nightmare has been an obvious idea, but picked up by no-one else until the introduction of Mr Nightmare. He's a billiard ball headed flip side to Sandman in both senses of the term. Consistently eye catching covers are a trademark and Dave Ulanski's cartooning is great, but his stories too quirky and prolonged to sustain interest. The special features art by Ron Frenz among others, but is inessential, so try the self-contained 7 before deciding whether or not to investigate further.~FP

MR T. AND THE T FORCE

Now: *14 issues 1993-1994*

You may have thought (hoped, even) that the ex-wrestler festooned with gold chains who delighted many very small children in *The A-Team* years ago would not warrant his own comic book in the 1990s, especially one co-written and drawn by Neal Adams and his studio. You reckoned without the power of Saturday-morning cartoons, which extended Mr T's shelf life. Yo, Suckas! as the man with the bog-brush hairstyle would put it.~FJ

MR TRIANGLEHEAD

Caliber: *1 issue 1992*

Pretentious rubbish from J. Calafiore ostensibly returning God to the ghetto to check up on humanity. Portentous captions and scratchy art accompany seemingly pointless vignettes, and the best part of the issue is the gimmick studies of a horse's head decaying page by page outside the panel borders. It may have all pulled together given time, but this is all that remains.~WJ

MISTER X

Vortex: *Series one 14 issues 1984-1988, series two 12 issues 1989-1990, one-shot 1990*
Caliber: *4 issues 1996*

Dean Motter's brainchild, *Mister X* is a confounding, slowly-paced series, where style is often as important as content. The mysterious central character, a bald, mirror-shaded junkie who never goes to sleep, returns to Radiant City because he believes he has created an environment which twists its inhabitants. The city's underworld is controlled by Mr Zamora, a crooked businessman who seems unreasonably interested in the anarchic architect. 1-4* are by the Hernandez Brothers, with stunning covers by Paul Rivoche on the first three. Gilbert and Jaime give us a 1950s vision of the future, with finned flying cars, benevolent servant robots and slick suits. After this the title was beset by difficulties throughout the first series, as artist after artist joined and then left suddenly, although Motter's scripting provided continuity. The story is as twisted as the architecture, and as we meet more and more characters claiming to know who Mister X is and who he once was, the 'save the city' plot is soon subsumed by the mystery of his identity. Although this never becomes clear, some light is shed on his motivations by Pete Milligan and Brett Ewins' bizarre one-shot, 'Mister Insect X' Mister X substitutes the sound of insects for the noises he associates with his most traumatic experience in the dreams he creates with a dream machine he's building, and while this isn't much plot for a special, Milligan works it very well.

The third series is written by Deborah Marks in a manner guaranteed to confuse even those familiar with the series, as Mister X investigates the strange phenomenon of people becoming transparent and then disappearing completely. The artwork by Gene Gonzales is clean and simple, but isn't as stylish as it wants to be. Basically, it lacks atmosphere and tries to make up for it in mystery.~FJ

Recommended: Series one 1-4

MISTY

Star: *6 issues 1986*

Young Misty Collins struggles through the trials of a high-school student and teen model's life, although in the last department she has an advantage: her aunt is the world famous Millie the Model! Produced by writer/artist Trina Robbins for Marvel's short-lived line of children's comics, Misty's adventures are lightweight, but affable.~HS

MOBFIRE

DC/Vertigo: *6 issue miniseries 1994-1995*

A Mafia-style London Godfather dies leaving his empire in son Jack Keller's hands. Jack's guilt feelings and desire to dissolve the Mob are complicated by his inheritance of right-hand magician Bocor, whose loyalty to the son is somewhat cooler than it was to the father. The gritty, sardonic, jet-black story by British creators Gary Ushaw and Warren Pleece makes no concessions to its native audience. How many American readers appreciated the crossed hammers and WHUFC graffiti on issue 2's cover? This British version of *Reservoir Dogs* takes a turn for the perpendicular half way through when the mystical elements kick into gear; these sit ill with the gangland setting. Pleece's artwork is ugly, yet still fails to match the script's mood. Has its moments. 18 certificate.~APS

MOBILE POLICE PATLABOR

Viz: *6 issue miniseries 1997*, 6 issue miniseries ('Part 2') 1997-1998**

A pedestrian story of a near future world where crime is so out of control that the constabulary are forced to wear great big metal suits, normally used in the construction industry, just to keep up. Not exactly a waste of space, but this has been done so often that you can't help being bored. For die-hard manga tech-freaks only.~WW

MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM WING

Viz: *4 issue miniseries ('Ground Zero') 2000*, 4 issue miniseries ('Blind Target') 2000*, 8 issue limited series ('Episode Zero') 2001**

Mixx Manga/TokyoPop: *12 issue limited series 2000-2001**

Tokyopop: *5 issue miniseries ('Battlefield of Pacifists') 2002*, 4 issue miniseries ('Endless Waltz') 2002**

The forty-nine episode Japanese animation series on which this title is based chronicled a war between the oppressive Earth Allied Forces and five space colonies revolting against their rule. The major asset the rebels have is five giant battesuits, known as Gundams, piloted by pre-pubescent boys (although often drawn in strangely feminine fashion). The 12 issue Tokyopop series is set squarely within this period, but the problem is that combat between giant battlesuits provides spectacular animation, but dull comics. Thankfully series creators Hajime Yatate and Yoshiyuki Tomino allowed for the boys to become rounded characters, but that's diminished by poorly dialogued translation. It's still a rollicking good adventure, but don't set your expectations high. Each issue also features a number of strange four panel comedy gags about the cast.

The Viz series are better, the first two set in a period after the conclusion of the original series and before its sequel 'Endless Waltz', using concepts established there. At this point, with peace having broken out all over, there is the question of whether or not there is a need for warriors and battlesuits. These are very much character based plots, with the suits hardly seen, and the cast are certainly eccentric enough to sustain interest, although act way beyond their supposed ages. 'Episode Zero' is a series of well-constructed segments revealing the backgrounds of the main characters.

'Battlefield Pacifists' is an alternative extrapolation of events between animated series and video. It's touted as more legitimate than the Viz efforts by virtue of being written by Katsuhiko Chiba, who contributed to the TV series, but whether it's better or not depends on what you want from the comic. It's possibly more in tune with the animation, but the plot is just more of the same on a smaller scale, as is 'Endless Waltz', which features another rebellion.~WJ

Tales Mutated for the MOD

Kitchen Sink: *1 issue 1981*

Terry Beatty edits an old-fashioned underground anthology, either writing or drawing most strips himself, and proving adept at aping other styles. There are also early Bob Burden strips, and the comic is rounded out by Bill Griffith and Zippy the Pinhead. Chuckles rather than belly laughs are on offer, but there's plenty worse out there.~FP

MODERN LOVE

EC: *8 issues 1949-1950*

Supposedly based on real-life experiences, this now offers a glimpse at the social attitudes of post-war USA, with EC there to stab at the small minded and hypocritical. The highlight is 7's 'They Wouldn't Let Me Love Him', foreshadowing later EC tales. No-one wants a doctor to treat them as he's married to a Mexican girl, so she reluctantly leaves to preserve his career. 'Too Busy For Love' in 5 and 6's 'Career Girl' offer the prevailing view that women can't handle a job and have time for romance or raise a family. 'Flame In My Heart' (8) even has the heroine offer to resign as hubby doesn't believe in working wives. Prejudice and snobbery are raised in 3's 'Our Families Clashed', where the parents of our lovers disapprove of the relationship as he's from a farming family and she from mining stock. Elsewhere sex had to be subtly implied. 5's 'Shame' lets a handsome hunk have his way with our young heroine then dump her! The swine. But the boy next door who's loved her years, marries her, and so rescues her from shame. 'Bad girls' had their day as well in 'Dime-A-Dance Hostess!' (1) and 'I Was A B-girl! in 4. Both spotlight young women entertaining men at night clubs. Say no more. The series ended with a parody of romance comics, but it isn't as funny as 'Love Must Be Earned' in 3. Here our young hunk spanks our heroine as she nearly runs him down, with the spanking panel the most badly drawn in the whole series! On the whole, the stories are carefully crafted, the better ones usually by EC mainstay and cover artist, Al Feldstein, who was the creative lynchpin. Other notable artists included Johnny Craig (working with Feldstein as F. C. Aljon), Graham Ingels, before he became 'ghastly', and early Wally Wood, usually working with Harry Harrison. Harrison was a decent solo artist himself, and Bill Fraccio completed the regular team. For the gist of a typical story here's a caption: "For a moment... that seemed like an hour... we did not speak! His kiss was still warm on my lips... his eyes holding mine! I swallowed hard..." *Ahem*.~HY

MODESTY BLAISE

DC: *One-shot 1994*

Surely a must for all Modesty Blaise fans, written by creator Peter O'Donnell and illustrated by Dick Giordano. It's the usual espionage adventure associated with the "sexy...seductive... deadly..." (so the back cover blurb tells us) crime boss. Modesty is lured out of retirement to rescue her old chum Willie Garvin. Naturally she does so with ease, and in return for their help, she in turn must help the British secret service on one of their missions. And that's when all the fun and action start. Fans of Dick Giordano's art won't want to miss this. His style is spot-on for the genre and very reminiscent of the wonderful Diana Prince, *Wonder Woman* stories he illustrated in the early 1970s.~HY

Recommended

MOEBIUS COMICS

Caliber: *6 issues 1996-1998*

If you think Moebius is one of the greatest artists comics have yet produced you'll be interested in this collection of intriguing odds and sods. If you're not so sure, go and read some of his masterpieces. Highlights include the follow-up to 'The Man From Ciguri' (itself the follow-up to the seminal 'Airtight Garage of Jerry Cornelius'), a labyrinthine, confounding tale that you have to let wash over you rather than try to understand. Plus there's old *Arzach* roughs, pencilled and inked by an interesting variety of artists, including Bill Stout in 1 and Steve Leialoha in 5. Less promising is the serialisation of the storyboards for 'Internal Transfer', a proposed animated science-fiction film expounding the philosophy of French parapsychologist and New Age guru Jean-Paul Appel-Guéry, whose ideas have influenced Moebius' work since the 1980s. In general, credos that are best put over as science-fiction epics are probably laughable, but make your own mind up. The series stopped publication with 6, promising to return when Moebius had done enough work to fill more issues, leaving the serials unfinished.~FJ

MOEBIUS Graphic Novels

Marvel/Epic: *12 volumes 1987-1995*
Dark Horse: *1 volume (0) 1992*
Graphitti: *1 volume 1991*

The career of French artist Jean Giraud neatly divides into two halves. As Gir he is the artist of the phenomenally successful Western series *Lieutenant Blueberry*, and as Moebius he is a more experimental science-fiction artist. Books 1, 5, 7 and 9 of the Epic series comprise the lengthy 'Gardens of Aedena' serial and all too potently illustrate Moebius' principal failing: he may well be a superb artist, but his stories all too frequently succumb to unfocused meanderings and unreconstructed neo-hippy waffling.

Luckily Epic's other albums are far better. *Arzach* (volume 2) contains some of his most breath-taking artwork and rather more incisive writing. Its eponymous pterodactyl-riding hero is also one of comics' most potent icons. *The Airtight Garage* (3), later reprinted as a miniseries by Epic, might well meander, but it's exquisitely drawn, while *The Long Tomorrow*'s (4) lead strip benefits from a terrific Dan O'Bannon script and an unusually dystopian feel. *Pharagonesia* (6) mops up the remaining science-fiction strips drawn by Moebius in the 1970s, and is generally a less essential purchase than its predecessors, though the short 'Rock City' tale is particularly good. By contrast, 8's *Mississippi River* is a Western written by *Blueberry* scribe Jean Michel Charlier, and although the art is rather rushed, the story is top-notch.

Elsewhere Dark Horse's *Horny Goof* (0) collects Moebius' more risqué material, while Graphitti's *Early Moebius*, numbered ½, effectively mops up the leftovers. Both are for completists only, although that's not to say there's nothing of interest. Of wider appeal are the three Epic volumes not comprising part of the numbered series, *Chaos*, *Metallic Memories* and *Fusion*. These are lavish collections of his art that are never less than amazing. Whatever his shortcomings as a writer, Moebius has always possessed an extraordinary technical ability, and one of the most unfettered imaginations in the business. For those uninterested in his writing these collections are the best place to appreciate his art.~DAR

Recommended: 2-4, 8, *Chaos*, *Metallic Memories*, *Fusion*

THE MOJO ACTION COMPANION UNIT

Exclaim Brand: *1 issue 1997*

Frightful old rubbish. The art is functional in sub-early Crumb style, but the strips have nothing to say and take a long time not to say it. At the risk of sounding like your parents, this is best read (if at all) under the influence of the mind-expanding substances with which it may well have been created.~FP

A MOMENT OF FREEDOM

Tome Press: *One-shot 1997*

Philip and Michel are devoted cousins who use the church to advance themselves only to drift apart as their vocations take them in different directions. Philip scales the Ecclesiastical ranks as Michel becomes an experienced Templar warrior. They are reunited when they independently uncover a church conspiracy to murder the Pope, leading the Templar to his own Crusade in a vainglorious attempt to tear down the corrupt Catholic system and replace it with God's real Religion. Ambitious, if pompous and heavy-handed historical thriller from writer/artist Michael Larson.~WJ

A MOMENT OF SILENCE

Marvel: *One-shot 2002*

Of all the comics so far prompted by the events of September 11th 2001, this is, surprisingly, the best. Tying in with Marvel's otherwise largely disappointing "Nuff Said" month, when all their comics told stories without dialogue, this offers dignified emotional snippets that never descend into saccharine sentimentality or chest-beating. Creators on hand include Mark Bagley, Brian Michael Bendis, Igor Kordey, Joe Quesada, John Romita Jr and Kevin Smith, and you'd have to be an extremely callous individual not to be affected by their work.~FP

Recommended

MOM'S HOMEMADE COMICS

Kitchen Sink: *3 issues 1969-1971*

Of historical interest as the first Kitchen Sink comic, 1 was a solo outing by Denis Kitchen, but a very tepid affair indeed. 2 featured a couple of nondescript non-Kitchen strips, so 3 remains the most interesting of the run. By then Kitchen had developed into a fine cartoonist and his fellow-contributors had grown to include Skip Williamson, Pete Poplaski and the underrated Jim Mitchell. Sadly, the writing was uniformly poor, making this one for completists only.~DAR

MONA

Kitchen Sink: *1 issue 1999*

A last gasp for Kitchen Sink, this Robert Boyd-edited anthology was published knowing that a second issue was unlikely. The main (though not compelling) reason for buying it is the reprinting of two mid-1970s Harvey Kurtzman humour strips from the French magazine, *L'Echo des Savanes* ('Dracula' and 'Women!'). Fans of Lorenzo Mattotti may also enjoy 'The Thinker's Secret', a pen-and-ink study of dream images. Of the rest, Tom Hart's Hutch Owens and 'King Bee' by J. Bradley Johnson are offbeat satires while Matthew Guest's 'I Sold My Soul to Satan' could be anything. Disappointing.~NF

THE MONARCHY

WildStorm: *12 issues 2001-2002*

This was developed from *The Authority*, issue 21 of which introduced the concept. Unfortunately, whereas that comic contained gritty storylines, larger than life characters and a wry sense of pitch black humour, *The Monarchy* was dull, convoluted and incredibly pretentious. The unnecessarily complicated storyline features black-ops, alien invasion, demons, otherworldly artefacts and such like, but Doselle Young's writing is so hackneyed and the characters so stereotypical that there's no concern about what happens. The only worthwhile thing is John McCrea's pencilling, but sadly even that suffers from garish colouring. The first six issues were collected, but this is one to avoid.~JC

MONEY TALKS

Slave Labor: *5 issues 1996-1997*

Dallas and *Dynasty* on acid is a fair description of this power-play masterpiece by Shane Simmons. The series is illustrated by a collage of talking heads from various international paper currency, hence the title! Ingenious or crude? Definitely the former. The story centres on the building of a railway in a midwest town and its effect on the various rich town-folk. Simmons' dialogue is witty and acid-sharp, and his triumph is in creating wonderful rounded characters with expressionless images. Resistance is futile: you will laugh.~HY

Recommended: 1-5

MONGREL

Northstar: *1 issue 1994*

Available in two editions, we have the usual Northstar topic of gratuitously violent slash and bash horror, this time with were-dogs on the loose with a grudge against each other. What makes the comic worth mentioning, though, is the expressive fine-lined artwork of Andrew Kudelka. Here is the work of a considerable talent in the making, and the making was obviously outside comics. Some guides list further issues, but we have been unable to verify their existence.~FP

MONICA'S STORY

Alternative Comics: *One-shot 1999*

Sly and ironic adaptation of the Monica Lewinsky scandal that plagued the latter years of the administration of US president Bill Clinton. Jon Lewis and James Kochalka, taking the Starr Report to the US House of Representatives as the starting point, produce a spot-on shaft of satire that hits all the harder for its deceptive use of simplistic, ingenuous cartooning and children's story-book style. A hoot for the newswatchers in the audience.~WW

MONKEY JANK

Fantagraphics: *One-Shot 2000*

This well-crafted smut fest, by Bob Fingerman, reprints and re-jigs short gag strips that first appeared in the sticky pages of *Penthouse Comix*, along with some brand new material. In a post-apocalyptic wasteland, horny riot grrls Monkey Jank and Cleeva Dejoon search, always in 'vein', for a non-mutated male member that will help relieve their sexual frustration. Readers may feel equally frustrated by the fact that Fingerman recycles exactly the same plot in every strip, while his pun-strewn dialogue will either amuse or irritate. If lines like "Face it, you're just a quippy chippy with a trenchant penchant for prong" don't float your boat, this probably isn't the comic for you.~AL

MONKEY WRENCH

Iconografix: *1 issue 1992*

A latter day underground anthology edited by Ed Brubaker and Josh Petrin. There's a general philosophical world-weariness to the varied contents of this comic. Star turns include cover artist Lloyd Dangle's Detroit Punkography memoir, J.E. Fullerton's masterful cautionary story The 'Hand Of Glory' and Jason Lutes' disturbing silent strip 'Suck'.~SW

MONKEYMAN AND O'BRIEN

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1996, 3 issue miniseries 1996**

A laboratory accident creates a dimensional rift that pulls through a giant intelligent ape, and has the side-effect of transforming Ann O'Brien into an Amazon. The ape is called Tiberius, and, once he's learned to speak English, he and Ann concentrate on finding the means to send him home. Unfortunately, other matters keep cropping up, including an invasion of Earth by frog-like creatures and a humanoid shrew and his army of animals. It's all light fun stuff very nicely drawn by Art Adams, with heavy references to old Marvel monster comics. The one-shot collects the original stories from *Hellboy*, and the odd couple also appeared in *Dark Horse Presents* 80 and 118-119. It's the best talking-monkey-and-female-partner comic since *Angel and the Ape*.~FP

MONKEYSUIT

Monkeysuit Press: *3 volumes 1999-2001*

Published by creators with experience in the animation field, the first volume of this excellent anthology features Michael Foran's 'Rover', the wordless, enigmatic adventures of an alien that takes Polaroids, wandering an oddly populated landscape. Ben Edlund offers a story from a series of Profiles in Tenacity, 'She Married a Bogeyman'. Pat Giles' 'The Big Problem with Marshall', begins with a tale of urban paranoia as a squirrel leads to Marshall's arrest, when he leaves his brother in his apartment to wait for an exterminator. Chris McCulloch's Secret Santa, dressed in black, brings seasonal cheer to prisoners of war, while Prentis Rollins presents a realistically drawn story about an old man, his grandson and some neo-nazis. The time-travelling caveman, Kamikaze Joe, is humanity's last hope of preventing disaster in Miguel Martinez-Joffre's Peter Bagge-style tale, and Rex Steele appears in a nazi-smashing, pulp adventure by Bill Presing, drawn in a very elegant, animation style. Willy Hartland's Delmar Doody is a weird pseudo-autobiography, and Jonathan Royce's 'Keef & Bruno' is whimsical surrealism.

The second volume (a.k.a. *The Bride of Monkeysuit*), presents further episodes of the strips by Foran, Presing, Martinez-Joffre, Giles and Royce and new short stories by Rollins and McCulloch. New contributors include Mo Willems, Heather Heath, Fariba Adams, and R. Sikoryak, who takes on Voltaire in 'Candiggy'. Of note, however, are Miriam Katin's reminiscences on the aftermath of war and those who do not return and Enrico Casarosa's 'Mia 1931', an anthropomorphic battle of the sexes in biplanes, and a homage to the work of Hiyao Miyazaki. *Viva La Monkeysuit* continues the strips by Giles, Presing, Martinez-Joffre, Katin, Casarosa (terrific), Heath and Adams, with new material from Foran, Rollins, Willems and McCulloch. This volume contains a greater percentage of new contributors, and though none are poor, the overall quality is not as high. Andrei Poteryaylo's 'The Adventures of Captain Pure and his Cat Chernoslir (Black Plum)' is angry, but does have beautiful lines, and Amanda Saah Baehr's 'Dad, I'm Not Gay' does raise a laugh.

All of the strips by the recurring cartoonists are worth a look, with the best of artwork coming from Foran, Presing, Royce and Casarosa, and though not perfect, it's hard to imagine a better anthology, with as varied a line up, than the first volume.~NF

Recommended: Volume 1

MONNGA

Daikaiju Enterprises: *3 issues 1995*

This grew from editor J.D. Lees' *Godzilla* fanzine and his desire to produce an American version of Japanese weekly manga publications, each as thick as a telephone directory. These clock in at a minimum eighty pages each, offering plenty of room for several stories. Sadly, though, despite breathing space, there's little depth of plot, although giant monster fans should be satisfied. The best story overall is 'Titanic Omega', with Lees proving he's got that manga style down pat mixing monsters, high school and a mystery, while artist Hikari Takeda is adaptable and inventive within a sketchy style.~WJ

MONOLITH

Last Gasp: *1 issue 1972*

Larrys Welz and Sutherland exercise their joint obsessions of naked women, dope, and fantasy for a series of slim stories and under-developed artwork. There is a vague anti-pollution and anti-war subtext, but the whole amounts to no more than a curiosity from the man who now devotes his time to *Cherry Poptart*. She appears in a two page space fantasy in all but name, here called Trina Tron.~FP

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* Available in a collected edition

MONOLITH

Comico: *4 issue miniseries 1991-1992*

Daft plot, bad art and gratuitous gore make for a poor solo outing for the Elementals' Monolith, the 14-year-old able to transform into a three-ton stone giant.~WJ

Butler & Hogg's MONSTER

Slave Labor: *One-shot 1997*

'Vampire Love' is an unconvincing light-hearted tale set in a 19th century country house. It involves a little girl in a stuffy family, some weird sisters, a twerpish Belgian detective, and a huge were-hog with a big penis. It's weak stuff.~GK

MONSTER BOY

Monster: *1 issue 1991*
Slave Labor: *3 issues 1997-1998*

Grotesquely deformed, with one eye the size of a football, Bob Supina's Monster Boy has been a minicomics staple for over a decade. The strips are well drawn and funny without ever being compulsive, much in the manner of the TV show you'll watch if you're in the house, but won't set the video for if you're not. All comics feature Honko, extraordinarily surly clown pre-dating *The Simpson*'s Krusty, and the Slave Labor issues also have The Beer Bears, alcoholic cuddly toys.~WJ

MONSTER CLUB

Apcomics: *1 issue + 2002 to date*

Were Jamie Hewlett dead this would be the work of his reincarnation. As he's not, it's pretty shameless plagiarism of his style, right down to the almost non-existent plot, with a few thick lined manga touches thrown in. Kit Wallis has some talent, and he should be finding his own voice.~FP

MONSTER FIGHTERS inc.

Image: *One-shot 1999, one-shot ('The Ghosts of Christmas') 1999, one-shot ('The Black Book') 2000*

Five super-powered teenagers hire themselves out as monster fighters (once they've stopped quarrelling amongst themselves). Over the three issues, they face a comic fan's drawing brought to life, experience a variation on Dickens' 'A Christmas Carol' and try to protect a mystic bible from vampires, nazis, a gargoyle and a dragon, with help from a Mountie and some nuns. Writer, J. Torres offers something a little different from so many other superhero teams, but it's largely only glimpsed in these issues. The manga-style artwork is very muddy in the first, but Francis Manapul's artwork on the second two issues is cleaner and brighter.~NF

MONSTER FRAT HOUSE

Eternity: *One-shot 1989*

Heard the one about the manipulative werewolf, the put-upon vampire and the descendent of Frankenstein sharing a college room? No? Well this is the comic for you, particularly if you're also keen on seeing groups of college jocks get what many feel they deserve. There's the feeling of the creators having overdosed on 1970s Hanna-Barbera cartoons, and like them while this is no classic it'll provide a few laughs if pulled from the bargain box.~FP

MONSTER HUNTERS

Charlton: *18 issues 1975-1978*

Though there are exceptions, these horror stories are no better than average. Presented by Colonel Whiteshroud when the editors can be bothered, the hunters chase (or at least as often are chased by) a mix of traditional monsters and Lovecraftian elder gods. For fans there's decent artwork by Tom Sutton (2, 3, 8), Steve Ditko (2, 6, 8, 10) and Mike Zeck (4-7, 9) with all three occasionally writing as well. From 12, the series became reprint-only with the best issue being the all-Ditko 14. 9 is of most interest, with a full-length strip by Nick Cuti and Mike Zeck featuring a dark mansion and a mystery concerning the identity of a werewolf.~NF

Graham Nolan's MONSTER ISLAND

Compass Comics: *1 issue 1998*

A pair of pilots crash-land on a hidden island populated by monsters. Their relationship develops as they attempt to broach a solution to a conflict between two groups of them. The lead characters are appealing, and it's charmingly drawn by Graham Nolan, reliving the b-movies he watched on TV during his childhood. Wearing his influences on his sleeve however means there's nothing most readers haven't seen before, like as not several times.~WJ

MONSTER LOVE

Discovery: *One-shot 1993*

Part of Discovery's line of simple comics with 'good' messages for children, the one here being that everyone can have a loving relationship, no matter what they look like. It's recommended for ages 10 and up, but is probably more suitable for the under 10s and, anyway, they'd all be better off with Raymond Briggs's *Fungus the Bogeyman*.~GK

MONSTER MASSACRE

Atomeka: *One-shot 1993*
Blackball: *One-shot 1993*

The Atomeka anthology is stories pastiching 1950s and 1960s monster/superhero comics, with added 1990s gore and violence, from some of the industry's most noteworthy creators. Sadly, art by Dave Gibbons, Kev O'Neill and Simon Bisley can't compensate for awful scripts, although 'The Lords of Misrule'; short by John Tomlinson and Peter Snejbjerg is a little gem. The Blackball edition is a scaled-down and slapdash sequel featuring John Pain by Kev O'Neill, the truly awful Dagglok by Dave Elliott, Anthony Williams and Robin Smith, an unfathomable *Melting Pot* short from Kevin Eastman and Simon Bisley and a tedious cyberpunk heist story from James O'Barr and John Bergin. Big name rubbish.~WW

MONSTER MENACE

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1993-1994*

The brainchild of reprint editor Mort Todd, this anthology reprinted Stan Lee 'stinger' mystery stories from the early 1960s. Fans of Kirby, Ditko, Heck and Ayers could enjoy new drawings done by some of the surviving artists. Todd's imaginative packaging emphasised the kitsch appeal of pre-Marvel monster stories in the 1990s, including tongue-in-cheek covers by the likes of Kyle Baker to go with the title's over-the-top name.~SW

MONSTER POSSE

Adventure: *3 issue miniseries 1992*

Isn't it amusing that outside the major publishers it's always the most amateurish and inept creators who insist on their name being cover featured. Step forward Greg Boone, writer of overwrought rhyming captions and dialogue, and sketchy artist, whose loveable little tykes pray before a mission and see off nasty space monsters and a cowboy on his robo-steed. The bizarre decision to utilise rhyming dialogue throughout coupled with the strange morality puts one in mind of Edward Gorey, to whom the reader is directed to see rhyming stories about monsters turned out with talent.~FP

MONSTER WORLD

WildStorm: *4 issue miniseries 2001*

Five seven-year olds, in suspended animation during a twenty year space flight, are unexpectedly (and possibly deliberately), forced to crash-land on a strange world that shouldn't exist, populated by all of the monsters of human nightmares. Separated in the landing, the children must fight their way across the planet to be re-united, but do gain some allies along the way. Scott Lobdell's script is witty and captures the youthful heroism of the characters, whose

minds have matured faster than their bodies whilst in hibernation. Carlos Meglia's big-foot, anime-influenced artwork is splendid, full of depth and detail.~NF
Recommended: 1-4

Mike Manley's MONSTERMAN

Image: *1 issue 1997*

Monsterman walks the Earth afflicted by a curse that transformed him into a giant monster. It's adequately written and adequately drawn by Mike Manley, but deserves no more investigation. The treat of this comic is the back-up strip 'The Messenger' about a rogue psychic, with an intriguing script and some superb Jerry Ordway art. But then has he ever drawn a bad page? Both characters previously appeared in *Action Planet Comics*, and solicited further issues never appeared.~FP

THE MONSTERMEN

Dark Horse: *1 issue 1999*

Writer and artist Gary Gianni appears to have spent so long on his overworked inking style that he didn't have time to fashion a coherent or satisfying storyline for this turgid tale of demons, mystic skulls and the Himalayan Yeti. Readers previously unfamiliar with lead characters St. George and Benedict will still be none the wiser by the end of this meandering mess, which tries, but fails, to recreate the gothic ambience of such supernatural pulp thrillers as The Shadow and Doc Savage. The comic also features a slight but entertaining Hellboy back-up by Mike Mignola, which, in comparison to the lead feature, is a model of wit and clarity.~AL

Dark Horse MONSTERS

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1997*

A special that celebrates no-nonsense, no-plot monster mayhem, reprinting four stories from *Dark Horse Presents* 33 and 47. Other than Tim Truman, the strips are the work of relative newcomers and unknowns, and none of it is particularly inspiring.~WW

MONSTERS FROM OUTER SPACE

Adventure: *3 issue miniseries 1992-1993*

Will Jacobs and Gerard Jones dredge up memories of every piece of late night sci-fi silliness they've seen, then throw in some fine comic dialogue and extrapolation for a very amusing piece of nonsense. Naïve young lad Tommy is exploited by the capricious hero Space Fargo, a man with a secret, as the pair try to expel the aliens who conquered the Earth decades previously. Artist Gary Yap is not yet the finished article, but conveys the comedy well enough. This is the writers' second try at the plot, having first attempted with a very obscure title called *Tommy and The Monsters*, re-jigged for the first issue.~WJ

MONSTERS, INC.

Dark Horse: *One-shot 2001*

James P. ('Sulley') Sullivan is shaggy and blue and has a friend and assistant, Mike, who's pretty much all eye. Sulley's job is to leap out of the closets of children, capturing their screams to power the city of Monstropolis. Things start to go wrong for Sulley when a child enters Monstropolis (thinking he's a 'kitty') causing mayhem and thrusting Sulley into the midst of a plot by his rival to use a terrible machine to suck the screams out of children. This adaptation largely follows the animated film's look and humour, but compressing the action and so adversely affecting the pacing and sense in places. The comic's not bad, but can't compete with the film.~NF

MONSTERS ON THE PROWL

Marvel: *22 issues (9-30) 1971-1974*

The numbering continued from *Chamber of Darkness*, as the title slowly phased out new contributions to become another of Marvel's myriad 1970s titles reprinting their 1950s and early 1960s mystery shorts. What differentiated *Monsters*, though, was that the stories were slightly longer than the usual five-page shorts. And, of course, they had such magnificent titles as 'I Defied Godmdullah, The Living Mummy' (in 12 if you really want to know). The last vestiges of the new material were unremarkable shorts in 9-15, the latter being Steve Englehart's first published comics, and 11 being drawn by Ralph Reese. 16 has a Kull The Conqueror story, and thereafter it's reprints all the way, with Ditko and Kirby in most issues.~FP

MONSTERS UNLEASHED

Marvel: *11 issues, 1 Annual 1973-1975*

These are large-format, seventy-four-page horror comics, heavily dominated by werewolf stories. Only a few stories really stand out. The very best have artwork by Ralph Reese: 'Skulls in the Stars' in 1 (written by Roy Thomas) and 'The Roaches' in 2 (written by Gerry Conway). 'The Strange Children' in 6 (uncredited) puts an unsettling twist on the Pied Piper story, and 'Beauty's Vengeance' is a well-told tale about inner value versus outer glamour – it's a shame that the artwork has the two women looking almost identical (or is that the point?), but the story still works.~FC
Recommended: 1, 2

A MOON, A GIRL... ROMANCE

EC: *4 issues (9-12) 1949-1950**

The numbering is continued from that of EC's superheroine Moon Girl and the title changed to Weird Fantasy with 13. As one might expect from EC, even their romance titles courted controversy during their brief runs. Attempted suicide in 'I was Jilted and Had no Desire to Live' and a public spanking at the end of 'I was a Flirt' was accompanied by Moon Girl's last appearance in 9's 'I was a Heart Pirate'. The age taboo of 'I Thought I Loved My Boss' in 10 and the toyboy behaviour of a feckless ski instructor in 'Hearts Along the Ski Trail' in 11 continued the catalogue of touchy, well-observed subjects. Two jail-themed stories 'Prison Widow', about a woman being tempted whilst waiting for her convicted husband, and 'Not Worthy of Love', about an ex-con girl's lack of self-esteem, in 12 sat with the classic hospital drama 'Blind to My Real Love'. In terms of writing these are fairly decent romance scripts, which is to say they're wordy, sentimental and moralistic. Entertaining subject-matter and solid artwork make this a cut above the romance fare of the post-war period. Harry Harrison writes and lays-out for Wally Wood and there are surprisingly good stories by Graham Ingels in each issue, as well as work by Al Feldstein, Walter T.Johnson and others. The entire run is reproduced in a boxed set alongside Saddle Romances and Modern Love.~SW

MOON KNIGHT

Marvel: *Series one 38 issues 1980-1984, 6 issue miniseries ('The Fist of Khonshu') 1985, series two ('Marc Spector...') 60 issues, 1 Special 1989-1994, one-shot ('Divided We Fall') 1992, 4 issue miniseries 1998, 4 issue miniseries 1999*

Introduced in *Werewolf By Night* 32, to all intents and purposes Moon Knight was Batman in white. More Werewolf appearances led to numerous guest spots and a solo tryout in *Marvel Spotlight* 28-29 before a back-up slot was allocated in *Hulk Magazine*. Writer Doug Moench, who'd created Moon Knight, was teamed with artist Bill Sienkiewicz, then still very much the Neal Adams imitator, for stories reprinted as *Moon Knight Special Edition* 1-3. Another solo in *Marvel Preview* 21 prefaced series one, the best run, keeping Moon Knight detached from the Marvel Universe, and usually from costumed foes. 1-12 are okay and 14 and 15 a false glorious dawn, but stay well away from the extremely pedestrian 16-21. The series begins to peak with 22, by which time Sienkiewicz is inking his own pencils and developing into an artist of singular stature with a recognisable individual style complementing his always bold layouts. By this point there's an undercurrent of emotional tension, combined with startling plays on tired themes. Try 'Stained Glass Scarlet' in 14, 15's 'Ruling the World From His Basement' or 'Hit It' in 26 for very different stories, each imparting the feel of the series. Even after Sienkiewicz the artwork is class, with Bo Hampton on 34 and 36-38 and Kevin Nowlan making an excellent début in 31-32, but Moench's departure with 33 hurts.

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* Available in a collected edition

In the miniseries Alan Zelenetz reinforces Moon Knight's ties to the Egyptian Moon God Khonshu, a theme introduced towards the end of the first run, and reduces what was once a vibrant title to the mundane. The second ongoing series has Chuck Dixon, Sal Velluto and Mark Farmer (later Tom Palmer) conveniently forgetting the Egyptian mythology and returning Moon Knight to the streets. There's an emphasis on the costume and guest stars, and the introduction of a Robin figure is a definite mistake, but rectified in gruesome fashion. In 15-18 Moon Knight is tried for a crime committed when he was a mercenary, and those enjoying it will probably like any issue before 25. While Dixon turns out a good adventure yarn, characterisation's not his forte, so J.M. DeMatteis is a welcome change. 'Scarlet Redemption' in 26-30 closes the entwined destinies of Scarlet and Moon Knight in poetic fashion for the best story of the run, helped along by sympathetic art from Ron Garney and Tom Palmer. A sprightly one-shot return from Dixon in 34 paves the way for new writer Terry Kavanagh, under whom Moon Knight receives a new supporting cast and is transformed into a gimmick-laden, heavily armoured fighter. Maybe Kavanagh wanted to write *Robocop*, but missed out. That apart, his tenure features novel concepts, some of which work while others stink up the house (Frenchie's unknown past in 50, for instance: if his was an important, guarded bloodline would he really have been a mercenary?). Of the more workable concepts, 42 showcases alternate Moon Knights and 46 features a quest for a possible successor. Unfortunately, it's Knights Templar and demons galore that come to dominate, although Stephen Platt's distinctive art in 55-57 and 60 goes some way to compensating. The best Moon-Knight of this period, though, is Bruce Jones reprising *The Manchurian Candidate* in 'Divided We Fall.

Moench returns for the 1992 special, which is of greater interest to *Master of Kung-Fu* readers, and for the later Mark Texeira drawn miniseries. Both are seriously flawed but also partial returns to form, the 1998 series being well padded even if it does include all Moon-Knight's better known foes. The 1999 series weaves together numerous Fortean topics with alleged CIA experiments and conspiracy theories to dull effect.~WJ

Recommended: Series one 14, 15, 24-26, 31-33

MOONDOG

Print Mint: *4 issues 1969-1979*

A collection of tales of a post-cataclysmic world where few machines still work and humanity has adopted a variety of social structures to survive. The Moondog of the title and lead strips is a blind shaman on a quest for the mythical Western Lands. Along the way he undergoes various mystical experiences. George Metzger's idealistic hippie philosophy provides an individual viewpoint, but ultimately the scant compensation doesn't reward struggling through the awkward writing and art.~FP

MOONFIGHTING

Harrier: *1 issue 1988*

Beyond a brief admiration for their vocal dexterity, impressionists are rarely very funny. Their sources generally have better material and are better at putting it over. And so it is with homage comics. Exhibit A: this *Moonlighting* tribute set on the moon (get it?) in the 2080s with charmless drunken idiot Bruce Gillis and "Cybil". It's just like the real thing except feeble.~FP

MOONSHADOW

Marvel/Epic: *12 issue limited series 1985-1987**

DC/Vertigo: *12 issue limited series 1994-1995*, one-shot ('Farewell Moonshadow') 1997*

Dire piece of whimsy, mistakenly hailed as a work of genius by out-of-date Goths and mawkish fops everywhere. John J. Muth illustrates, rather than draws a comic, but this is unsurprising given the meandering nature of J.M. DeMatteis's script, which lends itself to paneless pictures and floating word balloons. The series' coda, 'Farewell Moonshadow', is more a story book, with full-page illustrations against pages of text. The tale's all about the wonder of childhood and escaping harmful reality through your own fantasy world until you reach your personal nirvana, and is shot through with references and endless quotes. Like so many others, DeMatteis had been impressed by Alan Moore's technique of enriching a regular comic story with the cultural baggage of western civilization via a medley of quotations. Unfortunately he can't tell the difference between an apposite phrase that replaces dialogue and a meaningless repetition of the narrative in someone else's words. Not that his own are up to much. Is '"Sometimes," Moonshadow replied, "I love you so deeply, I don't know where you end and I begin"' ironic, do you think? Or is it simply that in the 1990s rehashed 'Obsession for Men' commercials can aspire to high art? Probably the most pretentious twaddle ever produced in comics.~FJ

MOONTRAP

Caliber: *One-shot 1989*

Decent art from Gary Kwapisz stands out on this adaptation of a film about killer robots being discovered on the moon. It's fun in B-movie fashion, and it's not often that a screenwriter adapts his script for comics as Tex Ragsdale does here.~WJ

MORBID ANGEL

London Night: *One-shot 1995, one-shot (½) 1996, 3 issue miniseries 1997, 3 issue miniseries ('To Hell and Back') 1997*

Everette Hartsoe scripts the tale of Brandon Watts, who accidentally releases Anvil, The Devil's Disciple when he reads a spell from a magic book. He is transformed into a Morbid Angel, meaning his physique buffs up and he gets bat wings and the ability to create weapons out of thin air. He sacrifices himself and his soul to banish Anvil to Exile (sort of Hell's waiting room) where he has to stand guard to prevent demons escaping to Earth. Gives new meaning to the term God-forsaken.~WW

MORBIUS

Marvel: *32 issues 1992-1995*

Briefly the star of *Fear* in the 1970s, Morbius returns for a creatively more successful run. The series starts out as a standard slasher title, but around 5 penciller Ron Wagner seems to have read a stack of Russ Heath-drawn comics and the visuals get a great deal better. The attempts of Morbius to rid himself of 'Living Vampire' status and regain his humanity are genuinely poignant and some of the twisted individuals he encounters on the way disturbing in the extreme. Sadly the comic peters out in a slew of inferior artists and pointless crossovers towards the end.~HS

MORE THAN MORTAL

Liar Comics: *4 issues 1997-1998*, 3 issue miniseries ('Sagas') 1998*

Image: *6 issue minisries('Otherworlds') 1999-2000*

In the Liar series, reprinted two issues to a 'collected edition' by Image, 17th century Irish waif Derdre comes of age, rids herself of demons and learns of a connection to Ireland's protector. Series creator Sharon Scott delivers a story that may appeal to fantasy fans, if a little heavy on the inserted background research. Brian Holguin trawls Derdre through the realms of assorted other deities in 1-4 of the Image series, which is more enjoyable if an excuse for avoiding a plot. The joy of *More Than Mortal*, though, lies not in the story, but in the progress of penciller Steve Firchow. Beginning as a talented amateur, his sense of layout and design improves in leaps and bounds, and his absence after 4 is a loss, when it's back to the grand design as Scott returns. Unless you're completely seduced, avoid the two part teaming with *Lady Pendragon*.~WJ

MORGANA X

Sky Comics: *1 issue 1993*

A female assassin who's not a balloon-breasted bimbo is a novelty, and while two of the three stories here depend a little too much on a conveniently introduced surprise near the end, this is a decent effort with promising art from Allen Freeman. Planned to be a miniseries, this was the sole issue published.~FP

MORLOCK 2001

Atlas: *3 issues 1975*

Those looking for that elusive *Fahrenheit 451* / hideous-plant-creature crossover comic need look no further, though for less committed readers this remains a fun, if undemanding, title. 2 features mainstream comics' only *Clockwork Orange* tribute and 3 boasts the unique artistic pairing of Steve Ditko and Berni Wrightson!~DAR

MORLOCKS

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 2002*

At Marvel, the Morlocks are the more unsightly mutants who live underground, in this case in Chicago, a city that has regular Sentinel sweeps to root them out. Each of the team here has a mission to accomplish, with which they will be aided by the others. Once everyone's had their turn they'll part. Geoff Johns creates a diverse cast, and Shawn Martinbrough suitably dark artwork, and contrasting designs. It's not top rank, but certainly achieves its aim of being a decent mutant miniseries.~FP

MORNINGSTAR SPECIAL

Comico: *One-shot 1990*

Bill Willingham combines his love of superheroes and fantasy for a whimsical tale of revenge and ineptitude. Morningstar, the fire portion of The Elementals, is adjusting to life with her new husband who is the Merlin of legend, inhabiting a magical kingdom. Accompanied by the assassin Fantasia, Morningstar takes a tour of her husband's world in a slapstick adventure eschewing the predictable superhero trappings. Willingham's decorative art compensates for frequently defective figurework, but fans of his work in general will probably enjoy this.~FP

MORPHOS The Shapechanger

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1996*

Geneticist, Kyra, stumbles across the resting place of Merlin and is given a strand of hair with which to create an advanced human, who will save the world by being a brother to all creatures. The first of a proposed four issue series, both creators, Burne Hogarth and Harry Hurwitz, died before its completion, though the detailed plot for the remaining issues is included here. There's an urgency and delirium to the storytelling, which relies heavily on often unnecessary exposition, but Hogarth's almost psychedelic artwork is radiant.~NF

Terry Pratchett: MORT A Discworld Big Comic

Victor Gollancz: *One-shot 1994*

Mort is chosen by Death to be his apprentice and marry his adopted daughter. When Death is encouraged to take some time off, he leaves Mort to act in his place. So when Mort saves rather than takes the life of a princess, the scene is set for something to go horribly wrong as 'what should be' meets 'what is'. Adapted by Terry Pratchett from his own novel, this is a surprisingly melancholic comedy, though there's a lot of character and humour in Graham Higgins' artwork. On the whole it manages to avoid mawkishness and if the style of humour is new to the reader, may even elicit some laughs.~NF

MORT The Dead Teenager

Marvel: *4 issues 1993-1994*

Teenage life as seen by wrinkly Larry Hama and possibly not so wrinkly Gary Hallgren. Mort cops it in true teenage fashion playing chicken in his dad's car, but is returned to haunt family and friends. No classic, but some amusing moments. The best issues are the first, featuring Teen Death, and the last, in which Mort sees how his life would have turned out had he not died.~WJ

MORTAL KOMBAT

Malibu: *7 issue limited series (0-6) ('Blood and Thunder') 1994, 3 issue miniseries ('Goro, Prince of Pain') 1994, 2 issue microseries ('Tournament Edition') 1994-1995, 2 issue microseries ('U.S. Special Forces') 1995, 3 issue miniseries ('Rayden/Kano') 1995, 6 issue miniseries ('Battlewave') 1995, one-shot ('Kung Lao') 1995, One-shot ('Baraka') 1995, one-shot ('Kitana and Mileena') 1995*

Taking the characters from the favourite videogame punch-'em-up and attempting to give them life and motivation was never a promising idea likely to produce top literature or art, but it didn't have to be quite this dreadful. 'Blood and Thunder' 1 sets up a good vs evil scenario from a martial arts tournament, and from that point more characters are introduced in more series, and they fight. Appalling throughout, with no single redeeming feature.~FP

MORTAL SOULS

Avatar: *3 issue miniseries 2002**

Eric Sharpe's a detective hunting a woman who appears to be killing at random, but repeatedly. When he catches her and kills her, however, she passes on the ability to see the Qelipoth, the soulless but still walking dead. Steven Grant mixes genres (there's a bit of police procedural, detective, thriller and horror), but loses it trying for a comedy payoff. Phil Xavier's artwork, however, is moody, realistic and detailed with only occasional lapses.~NF

MORTY THE DOG

Starhead: *1 issue 1989*

Underground style comic strips from cartoonist Steve Willis featuring a surly, foul-mouthed talking mutt. Pedestrian stuff reprinted from Willis' self-published mini-comics, it's self indulgent and drearily unfunny.~WW

MOSAIC

Sirius: *5 issues 1999**

The story of Mosaic, a $6,000,000 patchwork man who is the most notorious mercenary in Hell City. It's a world populated by gangs, whores, hitmen, reanimated corpses, beasts, pimps and christians. Kyle Hotz' anally-rendered dance of texture and shadow evokes the preponderance of leather, tattoos, chains, stubble, ever-present cigarettes and perpetual bloodshed admirably. Moe finds himself protecting a customer and many of his prostitute friends from a person he murdered four years previously. Truly gothic with a hint of mysogyny.~SW

Green Lantern MOSAIC

DC: *18 issues 1992-1993*

Gruesomely ugly covers can hardly have been an inducement to buy the adventures of the third string Green Lantern, John Stewart, and neither can an almost impenetrable first issue. Furthermore Gerard Jones' writing is so florid you'd swear he was having an obscure joke, except it's a tiresome one after eighteen issues. A world is colonised by settlements abducted along with their environment in *Green Lantern* series two 14-17, and John Stewart is appointed to oversee this experiment in co-operation. The premise offers scope for novelty, political and social commentary and other items of interest, and Jones expended a considerable amount of effort on background, creating 40 new alien races complete with functions and social structures. Unfortunately his odd style of storytelling combined with Cully Hamner's plain unappealing pencils and the deliberately unsympathetic character accorded Stewart allowed little to flourish. Occasionally a stronger idea pushes through the mud, such as 4's story of inquisitive children, and 17's tour of the resident communities has some nice moments, but overall *Mosaic* is promise unfulfilled.~WJ

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* Available in a collected edition

MOSTLY WANTED

WildStorm: *4 issue miniseries 2000*

Well, should you be missing the anorexic space-nun issue of *Penthouse Catfights* or not be able to get hold of any version of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* or Red Dwarf, this might substitute. Contains some bondage, much obscenity, weak humour, a bit of *Thelma and Louise,* and, courtesy of Scott Lobdell, the worst transcription of Scottish since Moira McTaggart from Muir Isle: all the linguistic sophistication of Little Plum the Native American boy in *The Beano.*~GK

MOTHER SUPERION

Antarctic: *One-shot 1997*

A *Warrior Nun Areala* spin-off by Patrick Kelly, rich in the usual shotguns, demons, and split-skirt habits, but crudely illustrated with an unprecedented idiosyncratic colour sense. What Antarctic spent on paint, they could have saved by just vomiting on the thing, without greatly affecting the results.~GK

MOTHER'S OATS

Rip-Off: *3 issues 1969-1977*

A major drawback to some underground titles is the proselytising about mind-expanding substances by illustrations purporting to represent the experience of tripping. To a contemporary reader they just make f or bad comics. Of the two major contributors, Dave Sheridan started well and developed into an excellent cartoonist, best appreciated in more restrained mode in the 1977 issue. Fred Schrier is an even better artist, decorative and ornate, but his material is very much mired in the times it was created. Look, but don't read.~FP

MOTORHEAD

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1993, 1 Special 1994, 6 issues 1995-1996*

Introduced as part of the *Comics Greatest World* series, Motorhead saves the day in the Steel Harbour section, and his 1994 special is more a Steel Harbour special, featuring Wolf Pack and serving as an introduction to the *Barb Wire* series. Frank Fletcher is empowered by an alien presence in his head calling itself The Motor, and although Motorhead appears virtually all-powerful it comes with a price of constant cerebral chatter. For the series The Motor is personified as a sort of mental Joker, Fletcher is given an old-fashioned carnival as a supporting cast and there are regular glimpses into his past. Kudos to Dan Chichester, Karl Waller and Timothy Bradstreet for attempting something different, but the series is as irritating as it is innovative.~WJ

MOTORMOUTH

Marvel UK: *12 issues 1992-1993*

Foul-mouthed street urchin Harley Davis finds a new pair of sneakers with dimension-hopping capability. Yep, it's those wacky Mys-Tech evil scientists looking for test subjects again, with their loopiest scheme yet! Nicknamed 'Motormouth' for no particular reason, Harley rapidly acquires sonic powers as a result of Mys-Tech interference, and a sidekick looms in the form of lovable homicidal maniac Killpower, who shares cover billing from 5. Art by Gary Frank, in 1-4, doesn't save this ill-advised attempt at a superheroic Tank Girl from meandering to an early end.~HS

M.REX

Image/Avalon: *One-shot ('Special Preview Issue') 1999, 2 issues 1999*

Comedy adventure set in the near future when sentient machines choose the occasion of a charity cruise to declare war on humanity, targeting actress, Mia Moore and animal benefactor, Simon Babbage as the first casualties. Fortunately, White Knight and Six, of clandestine group, Providence, are on hand with their trained monkeys, but it takes young thief, Rex, to save the day using his newfound power to create and control machinery. The preview issue has background stories and information. Duncan Rouleau's anime-influenced artwork is bright and attractive, but writer Joe Kelly's cleverness is too often at odds with clear storytelling. Perhaps needless to say, this being an Image comic, but the story remains unfinished.~NF

MS FORTUNE

Image: *1 issue 1998*

In a rare instance of the comic market refusing to be suckered by a title blatantly pandering to adolescent hormones, *Ms Fortune* was drastically under-ordered, and further issues were never published. Breasts are globular and few nipples are left unaroused by Chris Marrinan, as his martial arts expert heroine resigns from her covert agency, but just can't avoid monsters, demons and former Nazis. It's intended as pastiche, but is so sleazy that you imagine Marrinan retreating to the corner of the studio with a towel after finishing each page.~FP

MS. MARVEL

Marvel: *23 issues 1977-1979*

Another of Marvel's attempts at a liberated superhero. Carol Danvers was a love interest in the late 1960s Captain Marvel series. In 1977 a near-fatal attack led to her dying wishes being fed into a nearby "Psyche-Magnitron". She became a female copy of Captain Marvel... but with bare legs and midriff. Hence the sobriquet 'Ms.', presumably. Now with super strength and flight, she also possessed a precognitive "7th Sense", possibly intended as a magnified women's intuition. The numerous similarities between this and DC's Supergirl (same surname, male counterpart, cheesecake costume, and penciller Jim Mooney) are hard to ignore. Scripter Gerry Conway should take most of the blame for the utterly unreadable early issues. Fortunately, he was relieved by Chris Claremont with 3, who gave Carol a family, a past and a supporting cast, and allowed her to come to terms with her Kree superpowers in 13. The subsequent build-up to 19's climactic meeting with Captain Marvel and the Kree Supremor displayed all of Claremont's skill as a weaver of subplots and characterisation. He also introduced many characters of later significance to his *X-Men,* which indeed also featured Carol herself, who eventually became The Starjammers' Binary before reverting to Warbird in *Avengers.* Villainesses Deathbird and Mystique (then known as Raven Darkholme) débuted in 9 and 16 respectively. Numerous guest appearances include The Avengers in 18 and Vance Astro in 23. Dave Cockrum stepped in with a spectacular redesign of the character in 20, but it was too late. What would have been 24 and 25, originally drawn in 1979, featured appearances by Sabretooth and Rogue and surfaced in *Marvel Superheroes* 10 and 11 in 1992.~SW

Recommended: 19-21

MS MYSTIC

Pacific: *2 issues 1982-1984*

Continuity: *Series one 9 issues 1987-1992, series two 3 issues 1993*

It's hard to believe that at one point comics fans 'in the know' thought that Neal Adams' *Ms Mystic* (announced years before it actually surfaced) would the be future of ground-breaking comics. Instead it was a load of New Age nonsense vaguely articulated by a superheroine who, despite coming to save the world, seemed to do nothing, exciting or otherwise. Neal Adams' Continuity Comics reprinted the Pacific issues before offering seven more tiresome instalments of her adventures. The second series was a 'Deathwatch 2000' crossover which looks like it was knocked out in a hurry, with more "Continuity Studios" than Neal Adams input.~FJ

MS TREE

Eclipse: *9 issues 1983-1984*
Aardvark-Vanaheim: *9 issues (10-18) 1984-1985*
Renegade: *32 issues, 3 Specials (19-50) 1985-1989*
DC: *10 issues 1990-1993*

Crime novelist Max Allen Collins is responsible for this hard-boiled detective strip, very much patterned after Mike Hammer but with a much greater emphasis on detection and mystery (as you might expect given the detective's name). Michael Tree's husband is a detective who's killed by the mob, specifically the Muerta family, and throughout the series her vendetta against them is a constant factor that provokes trouble with the law on several occasions. It culminates in an arrangement of sorts when Ms Tree's adopted son falls in love with Dominique Muerta's daughter and the two team up to rescue their kidnapped children. This running theme of vengeance helps maintain momentum in the strip, but doesn't distract from other, non-Mob- related cases that are often picked out as having a particular resonance at the time (crimes against children are a special bug-bear), and Collins regularly has to question Ms Tree's readiness to exact her own, lethal justice, even having her committed at one stage. Overall, an impressive series that's willing to tackle many different aspects of crime and punishment, always in an unsentimental but not detached manner. Terry Beatty's artwork is rather stiff and unexpressive but works well in context.

Mike Mist is also a detective, again by Collins and Beatty, whose back-up strip involves short mysteries which you're invited to solve before the final (upside down) panel reveals all. From 36, Johnny Dynamite was added for financial reasons. Unfortunately, Pete Morisi's tough detective, reprinted from the Charlton series, has dated rather badly. There are also three specials, *1950's 3-D Crime* (1987), primarily Johnny Dynamite in 3-D, *Rock & Roll Summer Special* (1986) and *Ms Tree 3-D* (1985), both of which feature Mist and Tree together. They're all worth reading, though none stand out as being exceptional.

At DC the title changed to *Ms Tree Quarterly*, giving Collins and Beatty the time and space to produce single (but not completely unconnected) stories for each issue. Leaving aside most of the Mob connections, Ms Tree is still involved in murder mysteries but there's also a haunted house, Ms Tree's pregnancy and her subsequent fight to keep the child from its grandfather (4-10). 'Midnight' was revived as a back-up, written by Ed Gorman, but it's hardly compulsive reading. 1-3 include illustrated text stories: Batman by Denny O'Neil and Mike Grell in 1 and The Butcher by Mike Baron and Shea Anton Pensa (2-3). 6 is probably a good place to start and is less reliant on knowledge of Ms Tree's past.~NF

MUKTUK WOLFSBREATH: Hard-Boiled Shaman

DC/Vertigo: *3 issue miniseries 1998*

Written by Terry LaBan with artwork by Steve Parkhouse, and based on the ideas in LaBan's short stories in *Cud* 1 and 7. Muktuk is a hard-boiled detective who is also a Siberian shaman, and his cases involve fighting demons and entering trances to descend to the Lower World for negotiations with the Great Mother. At eight pages a piece in *Cud*, this was exciting, mind-expanding stuff, but it founders as a miniseries. There are few ideas that were not in the original stories, and the pacing is too slow to make it work as a pastiche of the hard-boiled style.~FC

John Jakes' MULKON EMPIRE

Tekno: *6 issues 1995*

Industrial sabotage and dynastic manoeuvring in outer space. As with other Tekno series the name in large print on the cover, Mr. Jakes, is present only as a figurehead. Kate Worley, who sadly evinces none of the charm and wit characteristic of her *Omaha* work on this lumpy, ponderous object, does the actual writing. John Watkiss' fine pencils are slaughtered by Alex Niño's gloppy inking.~HS

The MUMMY

Monster Comics: *4 issue miniseries 1991*

Scott Beaderstadt produces a loving, if not particularly entertaining homage, to the Boris Karloff/Universal Pictures Mummy movies, full of brooding monochrome, trenchant stares, monomania and reincarnation. For bandage boosters only.~WW

MUNDEN'S BAR

First: *2 issues 1988 & 1991*

Annuals spun off from the popular back-up in First's *Grimjack*. 1 features a Fish Police crossover by Steve Moncuse, plus some nice art by Steve Rude and Brian Bolland, while the second has both Omaha and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle stories.~FJ

THE MUNSTERS

TV Comics: *2 issues 1997*

Plots and dialogue are so faithful to the TV show, you can almost hear the canned laughter as the pages turn. The cartoony art also suits, and as the TV show's been cancelled for thirty years this is the nearest you'll come to new episodes.~FP

MURCIÉLAGA SHE-BAT

Heroic: *3 issues 1993*
Studio G: *3 issue miniseries 2001, 1 issue + 2002 to date*

Heroic Comics 1 contains reprints from *Robo-Warriors*, in which Murciélaga is introduced as one of the Reiki Warriors, a team of young fighters recruited by Sifu, an ancient Asian teacher fighting the drug dealers of Baboso. Murciélaga, real name Mega, has super-hearing and martial arts skills, and uses them to fight injustice in her local community. The miniseries is a bilingual flipbook, with English language strips on one side and Spanish language strips on the other. 1 recaps her origin after she's fought an arsonist, and introduces her friend, Soliloquy Jones. The Spanish story concerns three witches, the Tribruxa (printed in English in 3). The English strip in 2 is a reprint of a fight against Gams (she has very good legs), while the Spanish strip reprints the English one from 1. The English strip in 3 is the Spanish one from 1, while the Spanish strip is the English story from 2. Sifu returns in the new series. Creator, Dærick Gröss Sr (stylistically mixing Will Eisner and Marshall Rogers) is responsible for most of the writing and artwork.~NF

MURDER

Renegade: *3 issues 1986*

Actually a continuation of Robin Snyder's *Revolver, Murder* is a showcase for some of Steve Ditko's early to mid-1980s short, EC-style stories and Rich Margopoulos' adaptations of Poe's 'Eleanora', 'Ligeia' and 'Morella' (mainly text with illustrations by Dan Day). Single-page strips by Henry Boltinoff seem out of place but are good for a bit of nostalgia, while Alex Toth's two-pagers on the nature of drawing in 1 and 2 are slight but gorgeous. 3's 'I Wonder Who's Squeezing Her Now' by Wally Wood, Nick Cuti and Ernie Colón turns the predictable shock ending on its head and is the highlight of the series, even if it is reprinted from 1984.~NF

MURDER BY CROWQUILL

Amazing Montage Press: *1 volume 1999*

This huge black and white anthology of mostly short strips on a loose mystery theme, was issued in hopeful aid of the Comic Book Legal Defence Fund. It's a very smelly potpourri, including tales of noir crime, jokey media-created serial killers and their fans, paranoid fantasies about government agencies, EC homage horror, tedious would-be clever stuff about the 200 year old Sherlock Holmes, a silly Batton Lash updating of Hamlet with psychic lawyers, and some sentimental whimsy, mostly pretty amateurishly drawn. Inevitably there are a couple of standouts: A nasty four-pager about a dog, a cat, and a baby by Joe Lansdale and Tim Truman, and Jesse Reklaw's wry 'Spaced Out', which treats analogues of the Scooby Doo crew as if they were real 1970s kids and has authentic vintage underground flavour, even beyond the sex and drugs.~GK

MURDER CAN BE FUN

Slave Labor: *12 issues 1996-1999*

Hit or miss comic strip adaptations of articles from John Marr's fanzine of the same name, devoted to the weird and scandalous demise. Themes include Disasters (1), Dead Celebrities (2, 5), Post Office Workers (3), Bizarre Murders (4), Zoo Deaths (6), American History (7), Cheerleaders from Hell (8), Sex and Death (9), Sports (10), Holidays and Seasonal Slaughter (11) and Theme Park Disasters (12). Poorly rendered gutter flavours and not to every one's taste but with the saving grace of some cool artwork from the likes of Andi Watson (3, 7, 8, 10, 11), Johnen Vasquez (2), Zander Cannon (2) and Evan Dorkin (1, 7, 8).~WW

MURDER ME DEAD

El Capitan: *9 issue limited series 2001**

As the title indicates, we're deep in hardboiled territory here. Writer and artist David Lapham has fashioned a story of greed, lust and revenge that allows him to play with just about every crime genre convention going – cocktail bars, hitmen, mobsters, crooks, sleazy private investigators, drop dead gorgeous femme fatales, suicide, guns and so on. Things start promisingly enough. The dialogue is sharp and snappy, the ambience straight out of Nicholas Ray's 1950 film noir masterpiece 'In a Lonely Place', the drawing a pleasing combination of the realistic and the cartoonish. Unfortunately as the series progresses the plot grows ever more ludicrous and shapeless, and the artwork noticeably deteriorates when Lapham begins to needlessly pad out his unsatisfying denouement with extended silent sequences. Because it lacks the carefully finessed structures of the best crime stories, *Murder Me Dead* ends up being little more than an accomplished piece of genre pastiche, rather than the real, raw thing.~AL

The MUTANT BOOK OF THE DEAD

Starhead: *1 issue 1994*

Absolutely demented stuff from Mack White about the community of Chester County, Texas. It's populated by the mutant offspring from generations of inbreeding, resulting in horned women, pencil-neck geeks, and a brute with a smaller speaking head on each shoulder. White's stories rip right into the hypocrisy of rural communities, and stand a good chance of offending most people somewhere along the way. Excellent.~FP

Recommended

MUTANT CHRONICLES

Acclaim: *4 issue miniseries 1996**

The role-playing game of luckless humans against mutated demons comes to comics. Some slapdash Simon Bisley covers hide better Alex Horley art within, but it's hack and slash all the way. If you want imaginative monsters and no plot, give it try by all means.~WJ

MUTANT EARTH

Image: *4 issue miniseries 2002-2003*

An incredibly dull fantasy, with overly muscled characters in one fight scene after another after aliens invade Earth and mutate humans. The strip appearing as a flip-book is about cat beings in charge of Paradise, and is marginally better drawn, but more incoherent.~NF

MUTANT, TEXAS

Oni Press: *4 issue miniseries 2002-2003**

In this spin-off from *Jingle Belle*, Ida Red lives in Mystic, Texas, a place where arcane properties, in conjunction with a comet and nuclear power plant, have created a town of mutants (animal and vegetable). Owner of the plant, Sherman Rusk, now a huge rattlesnake and full of hatred for his condition and the town, conspires with Sheriff Brunt, equally disgruntled, to kidnap and sell off the inhabitants as freaks. When Ida's electrical powers manifest themselves, she sets out to solve the mystery of the missing townspeople. Paul Dini's scripts are funny, but compassionate and the basis for a stirring adventure, while J. Bone's artwork is cartoony, in a heavily-rendered, visually inventive style.~NF

MUTANT X

Marvel: *32 issues, 3 Annuals 1998-2001*

Just when you think the last thing Marvel needs is another X-title, *Mutant X* comes along to prove there's an exception to every rule. Blasted onto an alternate Earth by an explosion that should have killed him, Alex (Havok) Summers finds himself swapped with his counterpart in that dimension, the leader of a darker, slightly warped group of mutants called The Six. Of course, The Six have no way of knowing that this isn't 'their' Alex, and he soon cottons on that his best option is to pretend he is while he tries to find a way home. 1-12 form a tightly plotted and highly entertaining story arc as the readers and Alex uncover this world's secrets together; who can be trusted and who can't, the balance of power, and how all the other main characters of the Marvel Universe fit in. Its real skill is that all the alternate versions are only half a step away, and their every difference can be traced back to a single event from the 'real' continuity that diverted their destinies along a different path. As it unfolds, Alex grows fonder of the team, relishing his role as their leader, protector and perhaps, ultimately, saviour. After 12, the series flounders awhile, as if no-one expected it to last this long, but it finds its feet again around about 18 with a mutant-hatred storyline that Captain America fans shouldn't miss. Sadly, the series fell foul of the new millennium's streamlining of the X-titles, and the final issues feel rushed and anti-climatic; although the deliberately open-ended finale allows for a possible return one day. If the X-comics usually seem too much trouble, put your preconceptions aside and give this one a go. It's solid, original and surprisingly good, helped by the consistency of Howard Mackie's scripts and Andrew Pepoy's inks (over a variety of pencillers) throughout the entire run. A rare treat. ~JC

Recommended: 25

MUTANT X

Marvel: *One-shot ('Origin') 2002, one-shot ('Dangerous Decisions') 2002,*

It could be argued that no-one unfamiliar with the TV show will sample these comics, which is just as well because if that's the case you won't get much from them. 'Origin' sets out to explain the events behind the setting up of a corporate/semi-governmental project that first cracks, then reprograms the human genome. One of the scientists then rebels, sabotaging the records and setting himself up in opposition to the scheme. It's competent enough, but the underlying assumption that everyone reading it is familiar with the TV show leads to a very confusing, not to say uncomfortable read. 'Dangerous Decisions' compounds the problem with a tale of three potential recruits who are the target of both sides in some kind of power struggle, and a back-up purporting to be the untold origin of Shalimar Fox, which tells us nothing other than one day she had super-powers. Get a video before you read these.~WW

MUTANT ZONE

Aircel: *3 issue miniseries 1991-1992*

Early work from Dave Cooper, already a distinctive and accomplished cartoonist. This, however, is slim and unoriginal fare adding all kinds of amorphous tubular monsters to a *Night of the Living Dead* scenario. Still, it's not every day you come across the term 'fart-suckers' in a comic, or, indeed anywhere else.~WJ

MUTATIS

Marvel/Epic: *3 issue miniseries 1992*

On promise of a cure, an infected former police officer has to track down and kill three carriers of a deadly virus before they infect an entire city. Writers Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning write a script that sustains tension and create a well-conceived future world, and John Higgins' claustrophobically designed city completes a top-notch package.~FP

Recommended: 1-3

MUTIES

Marvel: *6 issue miniseries 2002*

Karl Bollers writes six unconnected stories about teenagers worldwide developing mutant abilities, and a variety of artists better known for work outside Marvel use widely differing styles. Charlie Adlard does a good job on 5, and some will be interested in 4's Brazilian story by Trent Kaniuga, but the best art is the traditional painting of Peter Ferguson over Salgood Sam's layouts in 1. Coincidentally, it's also the best story, with a twist in its portrayal of a persecuted loner. Sam returns in 6 with a completely different, but equally effective style for the final issue about an Irish farm boy. Editorially it may have been wise to step away from the universally bleak theme, but this is an interesting idea generally well handled.~FP

MY FRIEND DAHMER

Derfcity Comics: *One-shot 2002*

The mere title instantly prods that celebrity tittle-tattle magazine style illicit thrill button, but the comic's not about that. Cartoonist John Backderf (Derf) went to the same high school as Jeffrey Dahmer, and occasionally hung out with him in their mid-teens. His recollections of teenage eccentricity accrue a sinister weight with hindsight, but there's also some indication of the background that formed Dahmer, which makes for very uncomfortable reading. Derf's deliberately awkward style of cartooning adds to the unease. This is about as sensitive and unexploitative as you're going to get when dealing with America's most notorious serial killer, and it's still a scary read.~WJ

MY GREATEST ADVENTURE

DC: *85 issues 1955-1964*

The 1950s DC staff were experts at producing decent short adventure strips. This title offers lots of them, usually being narrated by the story's hero and with evocative titles such as 'My Cargo Was Death!', and 'I Jumped From Eight Miles Up!' Science fantasy stories are the norm from 6. How can you possibly resists stories such as 'I'm a Cop From Outer Space!' or 'I Became a Merman!'. Oh, those exclamation marks! Part of the reason for the success was that DC offered many of the best artists in that era. Nick Cardy, Mort Meskin and Rueben Moreira were regular contributors, as was Jack Kirby, filling his time before creating *Challengers of the Unknown*. Samples of his work can be found in 15-17, 20, 21, 28 and 43, while the artist's artist, Alex Toth contributes to 50, 60, 61, 81 and 85.

The popularity of the adventure anthology waned in the early 1960s, being overtaken by the re-emergence of super-heroes, a new and unusual team was introduced in 80. Originally billed as "The Legion of the Strange" in the previous issue, the renamed Doom Patrol created by writers Arnold Drake and Bob Haney with artist Bruno Premiani made an immediate impact. A wheelchair bound genius, The Chief brought together three mutilated misfits: the metal-bodied Robotman (originally called Automaton), but who still had his human brain, the high-growing and stretchable Elasti-Girl, and Negative Man whose strange energy body could do amazing feats. The comparisons with Marvel's *X-Men*, which was released three months later, are somewhat uncanny, and more coincidences would come. Drake soon became sole scripter and made the series DC's most Marvel-style super-team, shifting personalities centre-stage. Premiani may have been an unusual choice of artist, but provided a unique look while remaining within the parameters of the DC-house style. These early issues had our heroes fighting all manner of adversaries, with the immortal General Immortus being a recurring mainstay. The series proved so popular that the title was change to *Doom Patrol* from 86. These early adventures form part of the *Doom Patrol Archives* edition.~HY

Recommended: 80-85

MY LIFE WITH EDDIE

Chemical Brain Comics: *3 issues 1998*

Steve finds cryptic alternative rocker, Eddie Vedder (leader singer of Pearl Jam), passed out in the gutter and offers him a place to stay. Other than occasional glimpses thereafter, this is really about Steve's relationships with his friends, Sean and Dan (the latter calling at all hours of the night to try to talk Steve into going for a drink), and his neighbours, who include two young and pretty women and two permanently wrecked musicians. He also tries very hard to avoid mad Deeno, who is known to have the occasional kidnap victim tied up in his room. This is attitudinal, post-modern, politically incorrect, scatological and raw, but nowhere near as funny as it would like to be.~NF

MY LOVE

Marvel: *Series one 4 issues 1949-1950, series two 39 issues, 1 Special 1969-1976*

The first series, launched in the wake of Simon and Kirby's *Young Romance*, was routine moonlight-and-flowers fluff. The only noteworthy feature is that the model for 4's photo cover is the notorious Betty Page. The second series featured an initially strong and imaginative run of lovelorn tales from Marvel mainstays. Buscema, Colan and Heck all chipped in, and did creditable work on stories largely written by Stan Lee. Although intuitively in touch with the times in most respects, Lee's take on feminism in 10 is a total hoot. Soon, however, it became clear that the dwindling pool of romance readers didn't care whether all this effort was made or not, and the series became all-reprint from 11. The 1971 Special reprints the much sought after Jim Steranko romance story from *Our Love Story* 5.~HS

MY MONKEY'S NAME IS JENNIFER

Slave Labor: *4 issues + 2002 to date*

Kaitlin is a small girl from a wealthy family who've provided her with a chimpanzee as a playmate. The male chimpanzee, named Jennifer by Kaitlin, is less than overjoyed with his lot in life, so perpetually surly, although seems to bear the innocent Kaitlin no ill-will. Over four delightful issues the pair become involved with a mad scientist, an unusual guardian angel, and rhyming pirates. Ken Knudsen manages the rarely achieved trick of combining childhood innocence with a knowing worldview, played completely straight, so all the funnier. Jennifer's perpetual impotent rage is hilarious, and overall this is a gem.~FP

Recommended: 1-4

MY NAME IS CHAOS

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1992*

A reclusive scientist discovers a secret colony of genetically created superbeings, and is forced to take a moral stand. Creative reworking of *Dr Moreau* with sumptuous John Ridgway art.~HS

Bob Foster's MYRON MOOSE Funnies

Fantagraphics: *3 issues 1987*

Bob Foster is clever parody cartoonist, able to adapt his art to pastiches of almost any cartoonist you care to name. His small selection of original strips are also nicely drawn in varying styles. Beyond admiration at his adaptability, though, there's nothing memorable.~FP

MYS-TECH WARS

Marvel UK: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

This combines X-Men, the Avengers and various Marvel UK characters against the evil Mys-Tech organisation and its plot to control the world. The storyline is mindless (stuck for an idea? Send another character in to the attack) and the resolution pure technobabble, but there is some (small) entertainment value in seeing the various teams coming together, and then in monitoring the body-count. Still, you must have better things to do with your time.~FC

MYST: The Book of the Black Ships

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1997*

Lovingly rendered but vacuous tie-in to the highly successful interactive game. When heroic Altrus, last of the fabled D'ni teaches his sons Sirrus and Achenar the secrets of interdimensional travel, he doesn't realise that they've been corrupted by the Dark Cardinal of the Black Ship Fleet, which leads to his inevitable doom. Shoehorned between the first *Myst* novel and the original CD-ROM game, this merely illustrates an episode in the continuity that was considered too inconsequential to be included in either. For completists only.~WW

MYSTERIES OF UNEXPLORED WORLDS

Charlton: *48 issues 1956-1965*

One of Charlton's new wave of mystery anthologies launched as quarterlies in the late 1950s, becoming bi-monthly in 1959, and becoming *Son of Vulcan* with 49 in 1965. The usual disappointing artwork by the likes of Nicholas and Alascia, Molno, Trapani, Mastroserio dominate, illustrating scripts by the prolific Joe Gill, Ernie Hart and others. Thankfully the 1950s issues also run the occasional story drawn by Colan, Whitman, Giordano, and Reinman. There's also a plentiful supply of covers and stories drawn by Ditko in 3-12 including 4's 'Forbidden Room', which takes its lead from *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, 8's 'Adrift in Space' and 11's Kubert-influenced caveman story 'Oggo the Thinker', which is signed 'J. Kodti'. Ditko returned in 1960 to do stories for 19, 21-23 and 26. They show his growing mastery of the short strip, particularly 23's unexpectedly romantic 'The Quiet Little Men' about a writer on the verge of a breakdown. Between 1961 and 1965 there's really nothing worth looking at, as the standards of writing and artwork diminished in the 1960s.~SW

Recommended: 6, 23

MYSTERIOUS SUSPENSE

Charlton: *1 issue 1968*

Originally intended as a series of back-ups for *Blue Beetle*, the three chapters merge seamlessly, and creator Steve Ditko makes his points about what constitutes a hero without resorting to the didacticism that sometimes characterised his later work. The compelling nature of the comic is all the more remarkable considering the amount of text-heavy talking-heads panels used. Crusading TV journalist Vic Sage is the focus rather than his costumed alter ego the Question, as he comes under fire for refusing to accept a new sponsor. Sage knows the man to be associated with a gangster, and is prepared to sacrifice his job to prove a point as all around him bay for his head. A magnificent one-shot that sees Ditko at the peak of his creative ability.~WJ

Recommended

Tales of the MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER

Charlton: *15 issues 1956-1959 (1-13), 1985 (14-15)*

There are many storytelling hosts in comics but none was ever more elegantly woven into the tales he told, or had the sheer presence of, Steve Ditko's Mysterious Traveler. Usually, the only pleasure to be derived from Charlton's 1950s mystery and science fiction anthologies comes from the stories drawn by Ditko. This title is no exception but here we have the added attraction of watching Ditko's development of the host between 2 and 11. After simply introducing early stories with an opening panel, the Traveler is gradually insinuated into skies, mists and shady backgrounds throughout the story. He walks the gutters between panels sometimes splitting the whole page vertically. Some pages have a scatter of images held together by a huge shadowy portrait. 'Above the Top Most Peak' in 5 has the Traveler in every panel! There are too many notable Ditko stories to list, but 'Inside the Crystal Globe' in 11 is noteworthy for its experimental inking style (signed J. Kodti). Charlton revived the title in 1985 for 2 reprint issues with one rather stilted new Ditko story in 15. Interestingly, some of the reprint stories are told by Dr Haunt, Ditko's other horror host from *This Magazine is Haunted*, who has been recoloured to resemble the Traveler. A collection of Ditko stories was issued.~SW

Recommended: 4, 5, 6, 10, 11

MYSTERY DATE

Lightspeed Press: *2 issue microseries 1999*

Vary Krishna has two teachers, Hexoholoi Shar, a Laeske, and A. A. Zivancevic, who's blind and has the prosthetic legs of a Laeske. Vary and Zivancevic clash, but he appears to tolerate her for the sake of Shar. When they both accompany Shar into the desert to witness his race's mating ritual, however, a new understanding is formed. Carla Speed McNeil's heavy cross-hatching on her simple, direct drawings, provide a natural setting for this brief, yet complex, psychological profile.~NF

MYSTERY IN SPACE

DC: *117 issues 1951-1966 (1-110), 1980-1981 (111-117)*

In this sister science fiction anthology to *Strange Adventures*, a third of the first fifty covers feature images of Earth from space. Many stories follow a curious brief of placing the mundane in a science-fiction setting. The best examples are 'The Interplanetary Insurance Co' stories by Sid Gerson, drawn by Carmine Infantino in 16-25 and the longer-running Space Cabby in 21, 24 and then 26-47 by Otto Binder, drawn by Gil Kane and Bernard Sachs, with Sachs drawing the last few solo. There was also a brief attempt at a space military strip set in the 30th century called Knights of the Galaxy by Bob Kanigher and artist Infantino in 1-9, but the majority of stories were unthreatening stingers. Editor Julius Schwartz was also a literary agent for many science-fiction writers, a trend present in the SF pulps since the 1940s, enabling him access to the best in the field. Throughout the 1950s there are gradual changes in the writers as Bob Kanigher, Gerson, Joe Samachson and Jack Miller give way to a predominance of John Broome and Gardner Fox, who'd been there from the beginning. Similarly regular artists like Hal Sharp, Mort Drucker, Howard Sherman, Bob Oksner, Sy Barry and John Giunta cede to Kane, Mike Sekowsky, Murphy Anderson, Infantino and Sid Greene.

Adam Strange, the character most associated with this title, bears more than passing similarity to Knights of the Galaxy's Space Commando Lyle. Explorer Adam Strange is hit by a cosmic phenomenon called a Zeta Beam that instantly transports him 25 trillion miles to the planet Ranagar. Adam always seems to arrive just as some brain-teasing menace is threatening the city-state of Rann. Saving the planet is tough on his long-distance romance with Alanna, daughter of Rann's chief scientist Sardath, as is the Zeta beam's habit of returning him to Earth just as he's in a cozy clinch with his girl. Adam's adventures continue from his tryouts in *Showcase* 17-19, running from 53 in 1959 to 102 in 1965, all stories up to 91 being written by Fox. The artwork by Infantino is some of his most elegant and inventive with sundry inkers, but the most outstanding collaborations tend to be with Murphy Anderson. Despite being the cover feature, early stories are only nine pages long, but are beautifully realised. The story with the giant who keeps Adam and Alanna as pets in a birdcage in 57 is a good example as are 'The Beast With Sizzling Blue Eyes' in 62 and the twists and turns of 'The Fadeaway Doom' in 68. Longer stories of fifteen pages and more begin with 71. The series really hits its stride in 1962 with stories like 75's 'The Planet That Came to a Standstill' (a team-up with the JLA), 76's 'Challenge of the Rival Starman' and the classic 'Shadow People of the Eclipse' in 78. Alanna gets a new dress uniform in 88. The less said about the strips after 91 the better. Writer Dave Wood, followed by Jerry Siegel, failed to capture the charm of previous episodes despite having Lee Elias to draw their efforts.

The science-fiction shorts continued until late 1963, when the feature strips were allowed to dominate. A notable shorter feature was Star Rovers, Gardner Fox's occasional strip in 66, 69, 74, 77, 80, 83 and 86 (also in *Strange Adventures* 159 and 163). Beauty queen Carol Sorensen, novelist Homer Glint and millionaire Rick Purvis are presented with mysteries, dilemmas and puzzling phenomena to deal with. Despite a tendency to compete, they usually find themselves pooling their ideas to resolve the problem. Lovingly drawn by the underrated Sid Greene, these characters were central to Howard Chaykin's revisionist Twilight in 1990. Hawkman shares 87-90. Since Adam and Alanna are on Ranagar and Hawkman is a winged policeman from the planet Thanagar, Schwartz tried this brief oil and water mix of superhero and SF in 1964. Enduring DC villains The IQ Gang debut in 87 and 90 features a team-up of the Hawks with Adam.

After Schwartz left in 1964 to nurse Batman back to health, the editing fell to Jack Schiff from 91, and his issues really disappoint. He installed Rick Starr, the Space Ranger, alongside Adam Strange. The Ranger's pedestrian adventures (continuing from *Tales of the Unexpected*) were written by Dave Wood and drawn by Phil Kelsey (succeeded by Howard Purcell), and 94 and 98 are team-ups with Adam Strange. In 100-102 we briefly meet Siegel and Kane's obscure secret agent Jan Vern. Ultra the Multi Alien is a creature divided into four quarters, each arm and leg from a different, super-powered race. Grotesque and ludicrous by turns, and resembling a lame copy of Metamorpho, Ultra's adventures were courtesy of Wood and Elias beginning in 103. He sees off the title after eight episodes.

Editor Len Wein's 1980s revival was a shadow of Schwartz's oddly stilted but charming self, with very little personality past a less-than-appropriate habit of assigning John Celardo to ink stories every issue. There are some good one-off strips from Charlie Boatner and Marshall Rogers' in 111, George Kashdan and Mike Golden in 113 and Gerry Conway and Tom Yeates' memorable 'Killing Time' in 114. Other contributors include writers Carl Wessler, Mike W. Barr, Arnold Drake and Bruce Jones and artists Joe Kubert, Brian Bolland, Infantino inked by Jerry Ordway, Steve Ditko and Don Newton. Two collections of DC's science-fiction stories have been published, one titled *Mysteries in Space* from Fireside in 1980, and DC's 1999 effort under this title. Three stories are common to both, and both capture this series' distinctive flavour with examples of nearly all of the feature strips and plenty of shorts.~SW

Recommended: 75, 76, 78

THE MYSTERY MAN

Slave Labor: *2 issues 1988*

These two issues intrigue and mystify, not least as to the identity of the Mystery Man of the title, who seems nowhere in sight. Stylishly drawn and inventively plotted by Scott Saavedra, sadly the story remained incomplete. This is a shame, not the least because few other comics have scenes with a cave leading to the bowels of the earth opening up behind the shower curtain.~WJ

Bob Burden's Original MYSTERYMEN COMICS

Dark Horse: *4 issues 1999*

Introduced in *Flaming Carrot* 15, and recurring in later issues, the Mysterymen were a novel idea: a bunch of blue collar crimefighters with limited resources and largely ineffective abilities. With a movie imminent Bob Burden wrote four stand-alone stories for this series, which was intended as ongoing. 3, featuring the odd Screwball, is the most similar to Flaming Carrot, with 4's all-villains issue a surprisingly dark story from the usually upbeat Burden. In 1 a team of Mysterymen hunt a monster, and 2 is the origin of Disc Man. There's a pastiche element to all of them, and seeing them well illustrated in straight superhero style by Stephen Sadowski (1-2), and Chris McLoughlin (3-4) is strange. Burden is a unique creator, and anyone's enjoyment of these will probably depend on how they respond to *Flaming Carrot*.~FP

MYSTIC

CrossGen: *30 issues + 2000 to date*

On the world of Ciress, where magic is a part of everyday life, there are seven major Guilds. At the head of each is a Guild Master, who serves as the living vessel for the spirit of the original Master. Genevieve Villard is about to become Master, when a stranger gifts her sister, Giselle (who's try to avoid magic in her life), with a sigil, and the spirit enters her instead. Giselle, however, has not just appropriated one spirit. Those of the other Guild Masters, attending the ceremony, have also been stolen, immediately putting her in conflict with them. This conflict is one of the primary plot elements thereafter, as the Guilds try to retrieve their spirits by freeing the vengeful, Animora (9-14), one of the First, and the person that the spirits originally formed the Guilds to combat. Ingra of the First also has an interest in Giselle, sending an agent, Darrow to seduce Giselle (from 4), though he eventually sides with Animora (18-20, 23-24). With the threat of Animora apparently over, Giselle is forced to approach each Guild separately to prove her worth to them and persuade the spirits to support her magic (from 25).

Initially written by Ron Marz (1-17), before being taken over by Tony Bedard, this is an engaging fantasy adventure with plenty of back story to support the major plots. It has a perfectly measured pace that doesn't rush into explanations or solutions, but still provides the reader with lots of action. The ornate artwork, firstly from Brandon Peterson (1-6, 8-11, 13-16, 18-20) and then from Fabrizio Fiorentino (17, 21-24, 26-30), only occasionally falls flat over details of features or heads, and is otherwise very attractive. The series is being reprinted in collections appearing roughly a year after the original printings.~NF

MYSTIC EDGE

Antarctic: *1 issue 1998*

Tits, arses and bondage ahoy, all in brightly coloured manga style. *Watchmen* it's not.~WJ

MYSTIC FUNNIES

Alex Wood: *One-shot 1997*

This title from Robert Crumb came out of nowhere, and his first colour comic in over thirty years as a cartoonist. The colour is handled very sensitively, and Crumb's art looks great, although otherwise this is unremarkable. This is another episode in Mr Natural's never-ending mental torture of his hapless acolyte Flakey Foont. There's all sorts of musings about identity and so on, but it's very much Crumb on autopilot however nice it may be to look at.~DAR

Adventures in the MYSTWOOD

Blackthorne: *1 issue 1986*

There's a charm, but little depth to the illustrations in this attempt at a fairy tale. A similar lack of depth ruins the story, which reads as if a child's dream.~FP

MYTH ADVENTURES

Warp: *10 issues 1984-1986*

Apple: *2 issues (11-12) 1986*

Based on the popular series of fantasy novels by Robert Asprin, this undemanding humour title might well appeal to fans of Terry Pratchett, *Red Dwarf* and other allegedly side-splitting genre comedies. 1-8 of *Myth Adventures* adapt Asprin's novel of the same name, 1-4 being magazine-sized. The story introduces sorcerer's apprentice Skeeve and his wily demon pal Aahz. Setting out to defeat evil wizard Isstvan, Aahz and Skeeve become caught in a series of tangles with dragons, unicorns, imp assassins and rapacious merchants. Writer/penciller Phil Foglio has a pleasantly cartoony style, occasionally undermined by slapdash inking and lettering from Tim Sale, but his reverence for the source material makes the strip unnecessarily drawn-out. 9-12 feature new artist Valentino, in a four-part story written by Asprin especially for the comic. The level of humour never rises much above feeble puns, vulgar slapstick and mystifying in-jokes. 11 includes a particularly obvious satire on comic-book conventions.~AL

MYTH CONCEPTIONS

Apple: *8 issues 1987-1989*

The further comic adventures of Aahz and Skeeve, a crusty demon and his bungling apprentice first seen in Myth Adventures. It's adapted from a novel by Robert Asprin; new writer and artist team Ken and Beth Mitchroney ensure that previous standards are maintained, if never exceeded.~AL

Robert E. Howard's MYTH MAKER

Cross Plains: *1 issue 1999*

Disappointingly dull adaptations, by Roy Thomas and assorted clunkists, of Howard's Poe-ish horror stories, with tormented gentlemen's storytelling club framing sequences. They're redeemed only by Richard Corben at his best, brilliantly well-suited to a tale of mindless lust and violence among cavepeople.~GK

MYTHOGRAPHY

Bardic Press: *8 issues 1996-1998*

This sixty-four page anthology, if not exactly breaching genre limitations, offers a modicum of well considered fantasy material. The downside is that it comes in small bursts from guest creators, while the regulars seem intent in perpetuating comic fantasy's poor reputation. 'Co-ordinator' Michael Cohen is the worst offender, seemingly having listed every genre cliché and worked out how to incorporate them all into his 'Empyrean Tales' strip. He's also credited for the first issue's very pleasing cover, but some mistake, surely, as the figures are in proportion for one thing. The best of the regulars is Andrew Pepoy, with short slices of well-drawn whimsy 'Simone and Ajax'. Artistic contributions of note come from Bill Willingham (1, with some poor writing in 4) and Mike Hoffman (2, 5), dinosaur sketches from Steve Bissette (2), and Trina Robbins adapting a gaelic legend in 3. Craig Taillefer isn't the finished article in 5, but his influences are the right ones, and there are good back covers from Bryan Talbot on 3 and 5, and an excellent one from Charles Vess on 2. Other contributors or characters with followings include Drew Hayes, who reworks 'The Raven' in 1, M'Oak in 2, the *Elfquest* characters on loan to Carla Speed McNeil for a vomit inducing bonding ceremony in 3, Roberta Gregory in 7-8, Steve Conley in 8 and the acquired taste of Scott Morse in most issues. The best single strip is a reworking of Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Little Match Girl' in 2 by Michael O'Connell and Jeff Curtis. Brief and disturbing, it's simplicity is a definite strength.~FP

MYTHOS:The Final Tour

DC/Vertigo: *3 issue miniseries 1997*

Adam Clay is a Rock God in waiting, playing dives with his band and dreaming of his less complicated childhood in a house full of (actual) Gods, ghosts and monsters. Then one day, a demonic record company decides that with the proper promotion, Adam could be the herald of the Apocalypse, and cause the end of Reality. Will the young wastrel save everything or just sell out, Maaan? Self-indulgent script from John Ney Rieber illustrated by a Who's Who of Vertigo 'Name' Artists with guest cameos from John Constantine and Black Orchid. Confused poseur nonsense.~WW.

S.A. King's NAKED EYE

Antarctic: *3 issues 1994-1995*

S.A. King's observations, recollections and anecdotes are drawn in a cartoon style reminiscent of a tighter Larry Gonick and generally raise a smile. Best of all are the overheard snippets of gross conversations. This is deserving of a wider audience than it probably received.~FP

The 'NAM

Marvel: *84 issues 1986-1993*

The 'Nam was conceived as an attempt to portray the Vietnam war as it was for American soldiers, progressing in real time with characters moving in and out, and little sentimentality when it came to killing the cast. In 1-11* Doug Murray and Michael Golden set the scene admirably, combining anecdote and experience, and by concentrating on a relatively small cast they're able to focus on emotion and fear as part of the larger picture. The first half-dozen issues are more action-oriented, convincingly conveying the suspense and tension of warfare, and thereafter the action is mixed with quieter moments as the characters come more to the fore. Wayne Vansant is the artist from 13 (after a fine John Severin fill-in on 12). His art's more static and less expressive, but he's none the less suited to the tone of the comic.

Once the parameters have been established the scope is broadened, and Murray's choice of occasionally referring back to Ed Marks, through whose eyes the scenario was introduced in 1, allows for different perspectives from outside Vietnam. More unusual events come to the fore, and it becomes apparent that there wasn't always an all-for-one attitude between the ground troops, with 18 depicting one way of dealing with unpopular officers. 1-20 are reprinted in black and white at two stories per issue in *The Nam Magazine*.

The major downside to *The 'Nam* is that it's one-sided, written very much from the viewpoint that the American presence in Vietnam was essential in seeing off the godless Commies, whereas hindsight tends to indicate otherwise. After 7's history lesson (an audition for Vansant) explaining why the Vietcong are fighting, there's no attempt made to suggest that, setting aside Communist ideology, the aim of freeing Vietnam from the remnants of colonialism was justifiable in its own right. Although never glorifying war, the subtext disturbs. To Murray's credit, though, he doesn't shy away from the unsavoury US tactics as in 35, and he's patently sincere in wanting to ensure his stories are as authentic as possible.

Unfortunately there was a shabby decline for this well-intentioned project during issues in the 40s. The idea of following a single troop and its changing personnel throughout the war was discarded, as the spotlight shifted to other branches of the US forces in Vietnam, and the chronological timescale was also shelved. 41's cover, prominently featured Marvel superheroes, and a story about how they might affect the war was sympathetically handled, but nonetheless an obvious attempt to attract new readers at the risk of alienating the old. Chuck Dixon's fill-in in 43 signalled the beginning of a more jingoistic stance, and from 46 Murray's more sensitive scripts are few and far between, with Dixon the most regular writer. The final straw was the Punisher in 52-53, albeit in pre-vigilante days and civilian identity, in a story based on the novel Sniper. It could have been fitted around any character, but declining sales demanded a high-profile guest star. The Punisher was to return in the inferior 67-69, although the title already had Joe Hallen, who typified the new gung-ho attitude permeating the series, and who could have been the Punisher. 'The Death of Joe Hallen' in 54-58 is the only story extending beyond three issues, yet after a promising start with Hallen's return home in 54 it becomes a standard mid-period *'Nam* effort, although with an unpredictable conclusion. It's followed in 59 and 60, though, by Dixon's best contribution, detailing what could be expected when a US serviceman was captured by the Vietcong, and returning a soldier from the early issues. 'Creep' in 66 is also a decent story, about a deadshot sniper.

70 is a revelation. Vansant began heavy use of photo reference for his art, which may have silenced the odd letter-column carper, but didn't really improve on his more natural style, and Vietnam vet Don Lomax was appointed the regular writer. Although not reverting entirely to the original premise, they return the integrity of the title, stamping their intention by reintroducing Ed Marks, now a reporter. Lomax uses him as an observer in similar fashion to the writer in Vietnam Journal, and his coping with the concept of reporter's objectivity at the cost of lives is powerfully portrayed in 72. From 71 Lomax also introduces a back-up feature looking in on the lives of former cast members. 75's examination of the My Lai massacre has an astonishingly callous conclusion encompassing the real monk who set fire to himself as a protest against the war. Neither Lomax nor Vansant are responsible, and their back-up strip is far more effective. They also provide a decent account of the 1968 Tet offensive in 79-81, but never quite match the warmth of the earlier issues. Ironically, Lomax's best story in 84 isn't illustrated by Vansant; it takes as its topic the experiences of the North Vietnamese guerrillas. It's a sympathetic and rounded conclusion to a largely decent series, and probably for the best, as the already completed stories which were originally intended to occupy 84-86 can be found in *The Punisher Invades The Nam.* It's a typical Punisher story, offering little concession to the title in which it was appearing.

Finally, mention must be made of *The 'Nam*'s covers, which were regularly attention-grabbing and memorable. Michael Golden's initial efforts set the standard, with a unique use of colour, and he continued providing occasional covers after ceasing to draw the title. Kevin Kobasic, Ron Wagner, Andy Kubert and Joe Quesada all deliver stunning illustrations, and Vansant, as he was inside, is a model of consistency and excellence.~WJ

Recommended: 1, 3, 5, 7, 10, 12, 15-18, 23, 38, 39, 60, 66, 72, 80, 84

THE NAMELESS

Image: *5 issues 1997*

Set in what appears to be a near-future Mexico where the lives of the underclass are considered worthless. Police officials offer human sacrifices to ancient Aztec gods and huge, centipede-like monsters stalk the city sewers. It's almost as if Mexico has come full circle, back to the atrocities of Tenochtitlan. Enter our (sort-of) eponymous hero, an undead Spanish soldier sacrificed 450 years before. He becomes the reluctant champion of Ellen Brazemore's children's refuge when kids start winding up as sacrifices. Joe Pruett's writing is tastefully functional while artist Phil Hester and his expert inkers McCorkindale and Parks manage a stark black and white style. The preponderance of action shots and close-ups resembles the continuity of a TV show. Perhaps the clipped dialogue, devoid of exposition, and the extremely kinetic, sharp-edged art are supposed to work in precisely this way. This isn't always the case but it looks good.~SW

THE NAMES OF MAGIC

DC/Vertigo: *5 issue miniseries 2001*

Dylan Horrocks and Richard Case continue the growing pains and path to power of Tim Hunter, destined to be Earth's mightiest magician. Following *Books of Magic* 75, Hunter, now seventeen years old, is ready to take control of his life and summons John Constantine, Dr. Occult, Mr. E and the Phantom Stranger to expedite his transition. Harried by a ravening band of Faerie Warriors and mysterious Men In Black, Tim and his newfound companions The Walker and Lotus seek to discover once and for all the secrets of his parentage before the Faerie forces kill him and render it all moot. As a spring-cleaning exercise setting-up the subsequent Hunter this is readable enough but Case's art is poor and detracts from the mood and feel Horrocks was aiming for.~WW

NAMOR

Marvel: *62 issues, 4 Annuals 1990-1995*

Despite his long history, being one of Marvel's founding characters, Namor, the Sub-Mariner, has seldom been handled consistently and with respect, but the signs looked good at first for this revamp, which was almost one of the last things writer/artist John Byrne made any visible effort on. Rather than fighting humanity in his trademark scaly Speedo, Namor dons a business suit and becomes CEO of Oracle, Inc., a corporation dedicated to challenging humanity's abuses. His cousin Namorita is a frequent and welcome co-star, and it isn't long before old flame the Invisible Girl turns up, unfortunately with her stretchable hubby in tow. Frequent references are made to Namor's World War II past, particularly his association with the Invaders, and the run also sees the revival of Iron Fist, the popular kung-fu character. With 25, Jae Lee takes over as artist, and we enter an era of style over substance, with Lee's dark, sinister, but not actually technically proficient, artwork skewing the feel. Byrne hung on until 34, and a succession of fill-in writers of no consequence, including Roy Thomas, who'd done distinguished work on the character in the past, tottered on to 44. Here Glenn Herdling became the regular writer, and things became inexplicably even worse, with protracted, pointless fight scenes and execrable art from Geof Isherwood. Occasionally there were moments of interest. A romantic reunion with the Invisible Girl (or was it really her?) took place in 50, and the claim by Llyra, former villain, paramour and murderer of Namor's love Lady Dorma (he has a chequered romantic history to say the least...) to be the mother of his son and heir spices up things towards the end of the run. With almost half the run substandard, the inevitable cancellation was a blessing for those who actually like the character.~HS

NARCOLEPSY DREAMS

Slave Labor: *2 issues 1995*

Collections of short pieces, mostly autobiographical, by Jaime Crespo. The variety and the Mexican perspective are interesting, and each issue has at least one piece with real staying power. In 1, we have the young Jaime's fantasies of being a yo-yo star, and the various stages in his return to reality, and in 2, Crespo describes being on a flight for San Francisco in October 1989 when the pilot announces that an earthquake has hit SF and the Bay Bridge has collapsed. Worth a look.~FC

NARCOLEPTIC MAN

Magnetic Ink: *One-shot 2000*

To most comic fans superhero parody is a well worked seam, so it's rare that a new one raises a smile. This does, by virtue of a preposterous hero Narcoleptic Man, who falls asleep instantly. Luckily his partner, the nubile Easy Girl is there to distract the enemy. Of course, his arch-enemy is Insomnia Man, who gathers misfits such as the Incontinental and Binge and Purge. The stories aren't the point: the jokes are good, and almost all about bodily functions, and the laughs frequent. Well done Shane Simmons, Tony Furtado and Troy Hickman.~FP

Recommended

NASH

Image/Next Entertainment: *2 issues 1999*

Pro-wrestling champion Kevin Nash's vanity project casts him as a post-apocalyptic road warrior. His adventures are set in the wastelands caused by affluent survivors having constructed exclusive city-states. For the citizens of these citadels outsiders are an inconvenience. This is brutal, miserable stuff, notably when a little boy is blown away for effect in 2.~SW

NATHAN NEVER

Dark Horse: *6 issues 1999*

The Bonelli comics empire has dominated Italian comics for the last couple of decades, and this digest-sized translation was a valiant attempt at bringing their top science fiction title to an English-speaking readership. Nathan Never himself is a special agent in the far future, and the series clearly owes a heavy debt to *Bladerunner*, but with almost one hundred pages per issue the stories have a depth that more than compensates for a lack of originality. With a wide range of artists to choose from, Dark Horse missed a trick in not reprinting anything by the excellent Claudio Castellini or Roberto De Angelis, but of the strips here those drawn by the Mike Mignola-influenced Nicola Mari are particularly inspired (1 and 6). Add in sensitive translations and you have a quality package that really should have lasted longer.~DAR

Recommended: 1

NATHANIEL DUSK, Private Investigator

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1983, 4 issue miniseries 1985*

Don McGregor and Gene Colan's *Nathanial Dusk* was a classic Chandleresque piece of noir for which McGregor put away his purple prose and bleeding heart, while DC obligingly printed the strip from Colan's extra tight (but still wonderfully fluid) pencils. The lack of black contrasts and the washed-out colour palette gives the art an emotional sensitivity that reflects McGregor's humanist approach to the genre. Colan draws great characters, while McGregor's stories, set on the cusp between the Great Depression and World War II, hammer home a 'do the right thing' message. The first series, which concerns Dusk's search for revenge when his lover is murdered, is fuelled by the character's rage, giving it a sense of inevitability. It's straightforward but well told, supported by excellent artwork, although the second series was, if anything, better drawn. Although the second story is more complex, Dusk's motivation is forced, and the eventual dénouement is rather obvious. It's unfortunate that one miniseries has the better art while the previous one had the sharper story. They're still a cracking read, however.~FJ

Recommended: Series one 1-4

NATIONAL LAMPOON

National Lampoon Inc.: *One-shot ('Encyclopedia of Humor') 1973, one-shot ('Very Large Book of Comical Funnies') 1975, one-shot ('French Comics, the Kind Men Like') 1977, one-shot ('Foto Funnies') 1980*

These days, *National Lampoon* is perhaps best known as an increasingly unfunny film franchise, but way back in the mists of time it was a cutting-edge humour magazine hell-bent on breaking taboos and cocking a snook at society's mores. Editors Henry Beard and Doug Kenney put together a talented group of writers, including P.J. O'Rourke, Tony Hendra, Sean Kelly, Michael O'Donoghue and *Spinal Tap*'s Christopher Guest, to make a title that was genuinely subversive and radical (not to say occasionally tasteless!). From the outset, *National Lampoon* featured illustrations and cartoons by the likes of Arnold Roth, Joe Orlando, Gahan Wilson and Rick Meyerowitz, but in its second year it graduated to full strips. A frequent contributor was Frank Springer, whose somewhat bland approach fitted into the ironic take on life, but soon the title rejoiced in top-notch art by Gray Morrow, Ralph Reese, Warren Sattler and Russ Heath. Neal Adams was a particularly welcome contributor, and his strips (usually written by Michel Chocquette) appeared in issues 20, 22, 31, 33, 34, 54, 57, 64, 66, 70, 95 and 102, starring such luminaries as Zimmerman and the Son-o-God. 22 initiated a regular comics section, 'The Funny Pages', their own take on the Sunday funnies. Drawing principally upon the nascent underground comics movement, the line-up included such talents as Vaughn Bodé (Cheech Wizard),

Jeffrey Jones (Idyl), Shary Flenniken (Trots and Bonnie) and Bobby London (Dirty Duck), all of whom were on top of their game here. The mid-1970s were *National Lampoon*'s heyday, with the regular strips augmented by talents like M.K. Brown, Trina Robbins and Randall Enos, and by Byron Preiss' and Ralph Reese's lengthy dissection of the 'Me'-generation's mating habits, 'One Year Affair' (collected together in 1976 by Workman Books). The magazine's heyday was matched by several inventive books. *The National Lampoon Encyclopedia of Humor* is notable for a couple of gorgeous Russ Heath strips, including his notoriously sleazy 'Cowgirls at War' story. *The Very Large Book of Comical Funnies* was an all-new comics collection featuring just about every significant name of the era, which went through at least twelve printings. As the 1970s passed into the 1980s, the magazine became progressively less interesting, and its cutting edge was dulled. There were some significant later issues, including the Jan '82 (Vol.2 #42) sword and sorcery special with Berni Wrightson's scandalous take on *Bewitched*, and the Feb '84 (Vol.2 #67) all-comics issue. 'Foto Funnies' collects the fumetti strips that ran regularly in the magazine, and despite the gags, they seemed largely an excuse for the male staff to be photographed with naked women. As *National Lampoon*'s frequency was reduced to a bi-monthly and the regular features were dropped, NL floundered; it is incredible that it lasted as long as it did.~DAR
Recommended: *Very Large Book of Comical Funnies*

THE NATURAL INQUIRER

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1989*

R. L. Crabb's reports of legendary creatures like Bigfoot, the Cactus Cat, the Dingbat, the Rocky Mountain Stream Shark and, of course, the Jackalope, his specialist subject. Humorous drawings accompany a brief description, and occasional story of each creature, though there's little narrative overall. Fun and informative.~NF

THE NATURAL SELECTION

Karl Stevens: *3 issues 1998*

An examination of humanity in microcosm when it's announced an asteroid is due to strike Earth within weeks. Planned as twelve issues, one can only presume the premature disappearance is down to Karl Stevens' insistence on revealing as little of the story he has within the early issues, as there's a definite promise to the art.~FP

NATURE BOY

Charlton: *3 issues (3-5) 1956-1957*

In a shameless *Captain Marvel* rip-off, an orphaned waif is given powers over the forces of nature by a pantheon of nature gods, and drawn by John Buscema. 3 features a reprint of a 1940s Blue Beetle story, and 5 introduces our hero's distaff equivalent, Nature Girl, in a vignette. Inoffensive, but generic, with early work by a fledgling Dick Giordano.~HS

NATURE OF THE BEAST

Caliber: *2 issues 1991*

Snippets of captioned dialogue accompanied by vague illustrations are somehow published as a story. What there is of it is wooly nonsense about Earth in the future populated by thinking and walking animals as nature is disrupted. Rubbish.~WJ

Roberta Gregory's NAUGHTY BITS

Fantagraphics: *36 issues + 1991 to date*

Despite the salacious title, those seeking titillating material will be sorely disappointed. Come for a scathing and hilarious dissection of the seething underbelly comprising office life, the tensions within families, or relationships for the contemporary late-thirty-something woman, and you'll be more than satisfied. Gregory's central character is Bitchy Bitch, who begins as a barely repressed manic mass of outrage and resentment prone to fearsome vocal outbursts and tantrums. As the series progresses, though, she becomes a more fully rounded person, particularly through glimpses into her past. As the inquiring and uncertain teenage Midge she has a plastic mother impregnated with the values of the 1950s, and a brutal father (6-8, 15-17). Breaking free of their values is an important growth stage. The Naughty Bits supporting cast is small, but defined in wonderfully irritating fashion, as they too progress from plot-convenient stereotypes into more rounded characters. The fundamentalist Christian Marcie, spotlighted in 24-26, and 30-31 is particularly well characterised, attempting to live correctly within her narrowly drawn perimeters, yet a very troubled individual. The contented New Age Sylvia has a solo in 20, and an early quick shag, the exquisitely named Toadman, is also a memorable creation (1, 5). Bitchy's lesbian counterpart occasionally supplants her (21, 23 – with her other shorts gathered in the *Bitchy Butch* collection) and 27 is Gregory's well considered take on how women were treated in the dark ages. 4's 'Unhappy Holidays' is a good representative issue, contrasting a childhood Christmas visit to the molesting Uncle Stanley with an adult family Christmas twenty years on.

There is explicitly depicted sex, including 1's infamous Bobbitting, but Gregory's renditions, in one sense simple, in another more realistic than the perfect bodies found in sex comics, are far from erotic, their inclusion acknowledging sex as a part of regular people's lives. She also takes far more trouble with her editorial pages than most, including endearing introductory or postscript strips talking directly to the reader. As a possible solution to falling sales from 28 this broadens into longer autobiographical strips (cat lovers tune in) that have a diminished charm as illustrated diary extracts, but little substance. From this point the Bitchy strips are shorter and sometimes one long rant, and biographical material drops squarely into the 'worthy but dull' compartment. It should be mentioned that there's always been a small feel of 'anthology' about *Naughty Bits* due to Gregory's admirable generosity in turning over a few pages to other cartoonists most issues. Robert Triptow's strips extrapolating on the futures of people pictured in a 1937 high school yearbook he found (27, 28) stand out, and there's a good Patty Leidy strip in 36.

Through Bitchy Bitch's aggressive character *Naughty Bits* has engendered accusations of being man-hating, which is a ludicrous assertion. Although versions of many of the planet's prime male slimeballs are depicted, Gregory's is an equal-opportunity caustic wit, and her portrayals of females are no more flattering. Furthermore, she inserts vast doses of common sense into all the subjects she tackles. Anyone with a strong anti-abortion stance should read 8, and her issue dealing with people's reactions to a lesbian in the workplace (14) is a treat. All issues to 20 are now available in collections.~FP
Recommended: 1, 4, 5, 8, 10-12, 14, 17, 20, 24, 27

NAUSICAA of the Valley of Wind

Viz: *Part One 7 issues 1988-1989*, Part Two 4 issues 1989*, Part Three 3 issues 1992-1993*, Part Four 5 issues 1994*, Part Five 8 issues 1995-1996**

In the far future, humanity struggles to survive in a harsh, unforgiving environment. Some still try to use ancient technologies but those close to the Sea of Corruption, a forest of fungi and mould inhabited by enormous insects, the Ohmu, and poisonous to people, have grown used to the dangers of nature and show in their lives their respect for its power. *Nausicaa* tells the story of a war between the Torumekian and Dorok empires, of one side's unleashing of a biotechnical weapon that threatens to overwhelm everything, of a crypt wherein lie the secrets of the past, and of a plan to repopulate the Earth after its cleansing by the Sea of Corruption. Most of all, however, it's about Nausicaa herself, chief of the tribe of the Valley of Wind, conscripted into the war but increasingly associated with The Blue Clad One, the messiah who will save the world. Nausicaa is a warrior but more than anything else she is at peace with nature and she alone can communicate with the insects of the forest.

The first part introduces Nausicaa to the war between the Doroks and the Torumekians. She meets the Torumekian Princess Kushana, commanding forces that have been sent to confront the Doroks but which are no match for the miasma that has been spreading from the forest. Kushana's other worry is the plotting against her of her brothers and her father, the Emperor. As Nausicaa defies Kushana's orders in order to help those ruined by the warfare or the miasma, she finds herself falling into the role of The Blue Clad One.

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* Available in a collected edition

In Part Two, after being an unwilling participant in pitched battle, Nausicaa leaves Kushana's army and heads off on her own. One of the ancient God-Warriors has been unearthed but is in stasis, and the Dorok scientists have been experimenting dangerously with the spores from the forest, creating a mutant mould they can't control. Kushana is forced into a marriage pact with Namulith, true Dorok Emperor, in Part Three, in which Nausicaa discovers that the Ohmu are sacrificing themselves in order to destroy the mould. In Part Four, Nausicaa takes a spiritual journey on which she learns the secret of the Sea of Corruption. Returning to the outside world, she accidentally awakens the God-Warrior, which promptly mistakes her for its mother. Part Five concludes the series after confronting the plans of those who created the Sea of Corruption. Nausicaa refuses to accept that the only way forward is to recreate the past, and ultimately she denies it.

Hayao Miyazaki is modest about his comic skills, being better known in Japan for his animation, but this is quite frankly a masterpiece that deserves to be read by anyone with an interest in the medium. His humane scripting, sense of action, deftness of characterisation and storytelling and his control of the emotional highs and lows are all first rate. This is an epic story, told in epic style; to compare Miyazaki with Moebius does neither a disservice. You thought *Akira* was as good as Japanese comics got? How wrong you were.~NF

Recommended: Part One 1-7, Part Two 1-4, Part Three 1-3, Part Four 1-5, Part Five 1-8

NAVY COMBAT

Atlas: *20 issues 1955-1958*

One of Martin Goodman's numerous bi-monthly war titles. Every issue features five stories drawn from service on U.S. Navy warships, or more often in their submarines, and they're split between World War II and the Korean War. The title is also distinguished by its featured hero Torpedo Taylor, drawn for the most part by Don Heck in 1-14. These six-pagers represent an early high in Heck's career. Other stories are drawn by an admirable array of artists including Joe Maneely, Bill Everett, Gene Colan, George Woodbridge and Heck. Navy Combat is one of the sixteen titles that survived the great Atlas cutbacks in mid 1957 so 14 is dated July 1957 but 15 is dated December. The later issues have only two Torpedo Taylor appearances: 16 and in 19 where the art is by Maneely with a Heck splash page.~SW

NAZA

Dell: *9 issues 1964-1966*

The adventures of a Stone-Age warrior didn't sell back in the 1960s either. Bad stuff.~SW

NAZRAT

Imperial Comics: *4 issues 1986-1987*
Eternity: *2 issues (5-6) 1987*

Very much the surprise package. What seems to start as a funny animal sword and sorcery story broadens out into other areas and was starting to show great promise indeed at the time of its premature cancellation. The shifty Nazrat always has his eyes and ears open for an easy deal, even if crooked, and he's helped by his beefy loyal friend Kipper. When they mug the King's messenger, though, things start to go wrong. Jerry Frazee's cartooning is good, and his writing surprising. Worth picking up cheap if you ever see it.~WJ

THE NAZZ

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1990-1991**

Faintly disappointing miniseries about a sexy guru who turns out to be a power-hungry monster. Tom Veitch over-complicates his strip by hiding his central character's real agenda behind a series of smoke-screens and using a different character's viewpoint in each issue, which makes the story feel more profound than it is: power corrupts, and all that. Nonetheless, it's a very interesting read, and it makes a change to have someone musing about godliness from an Eastern rather than a Western point of view. Bryan Talbot is a sympathetic artist for this material, able to draw in a super-realistic, detailed style that avoids reminding you of superheroics (although The Nazz would probably qualify as a superhero by most people's definitions). Apparently readers deserted in droves when the 'hero' stopped looking cute and acting nice, which is a sad reflection on the state of comics today.~FJ

NBM Graphic Novels

NBM's extensive graphic novel line, increased by a large number of titles inherited from Catalan when that company closed, is now formally divided into two main areas: erotic and literature, as previewed in their *Comics Lit* magazine. In the past four or five years they have also created fantasy/horror, fairytale and humour lines, separating various generic books and seeking to add to them to provide strong leads for book buyers. The erotica appears under two imprints, the extensive Eurotica and the poorer Amerotica, both dealt with elsewhere, as is any series of NBM volumes running to three or more, and material originally serialised as comics. The Lit line features both US and European creators, and now various more populist choices have been hived off, is a sharp and interesting selection of graphic novels.

Most notable among the initial group of authors they brought to English-speaking notice was Hugo Pratt, whose *Corto Maltese* merits a separate entry. As well as keeping *Indian Summer,* Pratt's first collaboration with Milo Manara, in print, NBM also published his last work, *El Gaucho.* While it's not the best thing he's ever written, Pratt's script for this tale of rebellion and political maneuvering in South America in the early 19th century, seen through the eyes of a young seaman, is a sweeping history lesson, beautifully illustrated by Manara. He supplies even more detail than usual, creating wonderful character studies and drawing every fibre of the rigging as mighty ships set sail. They also scooped up Vittorio Giardino, whose art at first appears a little stiff and old-fashioned, due to his immense desire for verisimilitude. NBM have recently reprinted his Catalan debut, *Orient Gateway,* which introduces his detective hero Max Friedman in preparation for publishing *No Pasarán* (two volumes), a new major work, following their success with *A Jew In Communist Prague* (reviewed elsewhere). We learn something about Friedman's past in the Spanish Civil War when he returns following the break up of the international battalions in the late 1930s at the request of a friend to find her missing husband. Traveling with a journalist and photographer, he's plunged into the paranoid turmoil of a divided country allowed to fall to the Fascists because most of Europe can't bear to get into bed with the Communists, foreshadowing the events immediately preceding World War II.

Miguelanxo Prado's stories are closely comparable to the shorter stories of the Italian master of bitterness and wasted opportunities, Alberto Moravia, and like Moravia, Prado goes over the same ground again and again, adding tiny touches of characterisation, giving each story a new twist. *Streak of Chalk* and *Tangents* are both relationship-based books about mature people reflecting on their unfulfilled lives, and learning how best to hurt each other. Prado succeeds in keeping your interest in characters to whom you are not supposed to warm, using a soft pastel technique on dark backgrounds, and drawing accurately observed human mannerisms to match his subtle stories. Equally subtle in his study of relationships is Andre Juillard, whose *Blue Notebook* scooped a number of European prizes. The closely observed story centres on self-contained archivist Louise, who seems to attract obsessive boyfriends, with whom she can make no real connection. Two men, who turn out to be friends and then rivals, catch sight of her dressing in her uncurtained window, and both manipulate events to meet her. She gets an insight into her own compulsion when someone sends her the diary of her current lover, which lays out how he engineered their meeting. Juillard's next work, *After the Rain,* sees a photographer approached by a stranger, who wants to know about the identities of the people in one of his pictures, shown with a friend of his who's mysteriously disappeared. Once again questions of identity, self-identification and paranoia come to the fore, and in this case there is a very real reason for the sense of menace this creates. Unfortunately neither Prado or Juillard seem to have been popular with the US public.

Milo Manara's work, once of Catalan, was reprinted by NBM, who added two volumes to his saga centred around a character called Giuseppe Bergman, a thinly disguised portrait of the artist on a somewhat psychedelic search for meaning in his life. I is subtitled 'The Indian Adventures of Giuseppe Bergman', and most recently *To See the Stars,* has Bergman meeting a strange, elusive woman who imagines herself involved in the narratives behind a series of well-known paintings. Pensive, perplexing and lovely, as always. For some reason it's packaged as part of the Eurotica line now, presumably because all but Manara's porn is no longer in print.

A number of NBM's early books were reprinted following the appearance in *Cheval Noir* either of the work itself or of the creator. *In Search of Shirley,* by Cosey (two volumes), is a direct reprint from *Cheval Noir,* where the series was called 'Voyage To Italy', as is *The Six Voyages of Loan Sloane,* spaced-out early 1970s acid adventures from Philippe Druillet which originally appeared in *Metal Hurlant* magazine. NBM then published another book by Cosey, *Lost in the Alps,* the tale of a young English writer's search for his elder brother, who last contacted him from an Alpine resort. Although not typical of his output, Jacques Tardi's work on *Roach Killer* is outstanding, especially his use of spot red. Written by Legrand, it brings all the brooding atmosphere of a film noir to the story of a New York exterminator. Very different are the two volumes from the *Adele Blanc-Sec* series that he both wrote and drew, also taken from *Cheval Noir. Adele and the Beast* and *The Demon of the Eiffel Tower* are inventive, almost playful detective stories which subvert the forms of the genre.

After a few years without direction their Comics Lit line once again seems to be turning up gems. Nabiel Kanan's *Lost Girl* is a neat fable: a bored teenager on holiday in a caravan park somewhere in England, encounters another girl whose devil-may-care attitude represents everything she secretly longs for but is afraid to seek. Is the girl a runaway everyone's searching for? Motifs of disconnection and recognition run through the narrative, which mixes gawky teenage romance with well observed family life. Kanan's next effort, *The Birthday Riots,* also has a teenage girl at its centre, but is much more complex. The background is a London Mayoral campaign held when the government have just reformed land rights to return land to the aristocracy, and are clashing with travellers and gypsies. Told week by week in the run up to the birthday of one of the spin doctors' daughters, it's a fable of how political necessity and material gain swamps radical instincts, contrasting her political naivety and youthful openness with his trampled ideals. Both are excellent.

Labiano and Dufaux's *Dixie Road* (two volumes) is a broad and confidently drawn tale of a young girl in 1930s Louisiana discovering the truth about her family, set against a backdrop of labour struggles and migration from the southern states following crop failures. Her mother is a runaway heiress who likes mending cars, her initially absentee father a bank robber. With the law and private investigators on their heels, they set of for a socially conscious journey through the south. In the interim we had to suffer muddled, limited storytelling like that in *Shelter* and *Shelter: The Man in the Pointed Hat* by Cecil Fernando, about a grieving man and his son who take shelter in an old Indian's cabin during a hunting trip. Drawn entirely in charcoal, awkwardly in places, they begin to have visions as they wait for the Indian to die. The main barrier to enjoyment is the terrible lettering, but the story itself is slight and obvious. John Mallory had obviously fallen in love with *Cages* and *Big Numbers* before he produced *Amnesia,* a deliberately befuddling bit of self-importance about a director who enters an alternate world when he falls into a narcoleptic sleep, recounting his visions to a reporter. *Caveman* is a bit of an anomaly, a collection of very soft humour strips by Turkish cartoonist Tayyar Ozkan. They first appeared in *Heavy Metal* in 1993, and feature the adventures of a laid-back, bespectacled eight year old cave boy and his girlfriend Jade. The cartooning is competent, the jokes, as they so often are in short strips, repetitive.

Perhaps NBM's most important current creator is Lewis Trondheim, whom Fantagraphics had trouble launching on an unsuspecting US audience. Trondheim is a genius cartoonist, as seen in NBM's 2002 Christmas offering *L'il Santa,* which is plotted by collaborator Thierry Robin. It's a delightful fantasy, visually so inventive, in which Santa is forced to visit the big city to collect garbage, which he turns into children's toys, when the local supply is exhausted, leaving his impish helpers to defend his home against the Snow Dragon. Gentle and whimsical, the Euro version of Raymond Briggs *The Snowman,* is drawn in a quirky but polished cartoon style without words. Back in 1986 they had a go at Sci-Fi, putting out a story by *Barbarella* creator Jean-Claude Forest, drawn by Paul Gillon who'd go on to do *The Survivor*. *Labyrinthe* is about an Earth couple deep frozen in the present day and resuscitated 1000 years later when our civilisation has been destroyed. Instead of breeding to resurrect the human race, he promptly falls in love with an alien woman and becomes involved in an intergalactic war, in which a race of evolved rats are fighting the more humanoid inhabitants of the solar system. Gillon's art is detailed and rich but the colouring and printing are rather patchy. Another peculiarity is Dan Abnett's Arthurian fantasy *Uther, The Half Dead King*. Illustrated by Bo Hampton, it's very elegant, but the story's worn and full of portentous mutterings full of sound and fury, but not a lot else. About the best of the new science fiction is *Gipsy,* set fifty years in the future, where the creation of a transcontinental highway has had a huge effect on a world gripped by a new ice age, the breakdown of countries and impending anarchy. The story, by *Raptors* artist Enrico Marini, written by Thierry Smolderen, follows Tsagoi as he comes into possession of his truck the *Gipsy Star*. In volume 2, 'The Fires of Siberia', Tsagoi's heading for Siberia, a backwater passed by in the new global economy, with a truck full of weapons. More volumes have appeared in *Heavy Metal,* and are due for release in 2003. The choice of unusual settings and tackling of world issues makes this more than just a near future adventure, but it hardly stretches the reader. However, compared to *Gustav P.I.,* it's practically Tolstoy. Try this on for size: what if Vienna secessionist painter Gustav Klimt was a vampire paranormal investigator helping the London police out with a series of bizarre murders based around a Soho sex club? Malcolm Bourne's tarted-up police procedural is readable, but the art is lousy photo-referenced, over-dramatic nonsense. There's a similar problem with *The Fallen* by Miriam Kim and David Aaron Clark. Volume 1, 'The Pale Door', is a load of sub-Buffy shenanigans, using painted photo-referenced montages where everyone overacts. Both of these have some spark of originality, though, compared to *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri:* 'Power of the Mind Worms'. Based on a game, it has unpleasantly slick computer artwork, garish colours and no plot worth mentioning.

NBM have always tried to bolster the reputation of the graphic novel by publishing adaptations of well-known works, with varied results. One of their earliest, Crepax's take on *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde,* was moribund, among his worst graphic novels, and his adaptation of *The Turn of the Screw* (Henry James) was equally perplexing, updated to the 1920s and therefore lacking the repressed sexuality of the buttoned up, Victorian original. Less is more, with James, and drawing pictures best left to the individual imagination to conjure up does the story no favours. Why no one has translated his superb *Dracula* is anyone's guess. Except it has very little sex in it. In 2002 Lorenzo Mattotti got together with scripter Jerry Kramsky to have another less rigid and more inspired go at *Dr Jekyll,* with exciting results. Slight but worthwhile is *Give it Up,* in which Peter Kuper takes on Kafka. And wins.

There are four adaptations by Will Eisner in plush hardback format. Eisner is supposed to be a god, but frankly most of them are disappointing. *Moby Dick* is short and very unsatisfying. There is so much more to Herman Melville's original than the story, and that's about all Eisner has room for. The pacing doesn't replace the rhythmic language and the images don't really conjure up the majesty and terror of the sea, nor the obsessive relationship between man and whale. It's all a bit squitty and cute. *The Last Knight* (wisely subtitled 'An Introduction to Don Quixote by Miguel de Cervantes', to stop literary types choking on their broth), is mysteriously classified by NBM as part of their fairy tale series. Picaresque it may be, a fairy tale it is not. You open it with heavy heart, wondering how one of the longest, plot-heavy novels in European literature can be crammed into thirty-two pages. Eisner turns in a broad comic sketch, which pretty much fails to do more than say 'It's important to have dreams'. Because the story of *The Princess and the Frog* is both well known and short even for a fairy tale, it fits into thirty-two pages better than most, and Eisner's sketchy cartooning looks least out of place here. Probably due to my shameful, if predictable, lack of knowledge about African history and mythology, Eisner's most recent adaptation works much better. *Sundiata* is an ancient Mali story about a crippled prince who overthrows an invading despot, and works because it's a morality tale, handed down in an oral tradition without a great deal of description, leaving the artist room to manoeuvre in how he tells it. Overall you have to question why Eisner chose to adapt such disparate stories in such a short format (and why we're being asked to pay a small fortune for what is a series of not terribly good comic books between two bits of board).

The Yellow Jar by Patrick Atangan also offers insight into a different culture's fairytales, collecting and illustrating traditional Asian stories in ukiyo-e style (i.e. without perspective, like traditional Japanese woodcuts where there is no depth and landscapes float behind figures). The result is extremely pretty and the philosophical angles of the stories refreshing. However *The Yellow Jar* pales into insignificance next to Miguelanxo Prado's pyrotechnic version of Prokofiev's children's opera, *Peter and the Wolf*. Prado's art here is essentially about mark making, as he uses chalks and different papers to suggest the texture of each animal's musical representation. Absolutely sumptuous, a visual treat for adults and children. The other star is P. Craig Russell with his *Jungle Book Stories*. Russell threw himself into the adaptations and while he's particularly at home with the great adventures (and not very concealed erotic charge) of Wagner his richly textured, sinuous vision of India is very alluring. He turns in a strangely coloured, even-lined vision of India reminiscent in composition and figure drawing of *Tarzan* dailies – surely not a coincidence. The most missable fairytale volume from a comic fan's perspective is probably the one that will appeal most to unsophisticated adults and children, the Doug Wheeler scripted *Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, illustrated by old Tolkien-dauber David Wenzel. I thought he was a fantastic artist when I was about nine, and no doubt another generation of kids will appreciate his go at the classics, but he's essentially a sugary illustrator with an old-fashioned vision. A more successful adaptation, although the project doesn't sound too promising on the surface, is Stéphane Heuet's start at Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. The first two volumes are lovely hardbacks, a little over-wordy, but with pleasant, clean, measured art. The comic format is peculiarly suited to moving back and forth in time elegantly, and allows enough of Proust's singular tone to come through, something film has difficulty in conveying.

Now for the less welcome efforts: *Verdilak*, by Bo Hampton and Mark Kneece, is an awful vampire tale, based on Tolstoy's *La Famille de la Vourdalak*, painted in drab and often clumsy watercolours, and featuring pompous nonsense like "The systolic rush, embarrassingly conspicuous, pounds in her ears and carries on the raging winds of the storm". It recalls the earlier *Dracula* by Jon J. Muth, more arty-farty daubing, but this time illustrations for a play script. And one can't imagine the puzzling kudos accorded Richard Corben's globular adaptation of Harlan Ellison's classic holocaust-survivor story 'One Man and His Dog' as *Vic and Blood*, following the film of the same name.

In the mid 1990s NBM began looking to homegrown talent rather than relying on European reprints for their bread and butter. Peter Kuper's *Eye of the Beholder*, an unusual, paranoid, commentary strip that originally appeared in the *New York Times*. It's sometimes funny, sometimes pointed, and four woodcut-style panels, one per page show an action reversed/informed by the full page 'punchline' drawing over the page. Kuper uses typography, cityscapes and soundscapes to enrich his work. The second collection is called *Mind's Eye*. A less serious take on alien invasion comes in animation artist Bill Plympton's storyboard-based preview of his next film, *Mutant Aliens*.

Ted Rall began as a gag artist. His *The Worst Thing I've Ever Done* is an amusing 'true life' collection of short strips very much in the vein of the *Duplex Planet* pages produced by David Greenberger and assorted artists. People tell Rall exactly what the title suggests, ranging from minor nastiness to murder. It works, but the format flags by the end. There's a similar problem with the short tales in *Classics Desecrated* by Doug Wheeler and a host of artists, which is well executed, but a tired idea where the repetitive format gets to you. Rall also had a go at autobiography in, *My War With Brian*, a mature reflection on the miseries inflicted on his annoying teenage self by the local bully. His next work, *2024*, an updated version of *1984* is extremely funny, but has a good satirical bite. Drawn in his signature thick lined style, it gives us a mad computerised society, as if eBay ran the world, full of surreal details and beautiful touches, even though it's a shock at first to see the message delivered via such broad cartooning. However it hits home powerfully. Strangely, his attempt at war reporting via cartoons is much less successful. *To Afghanistan and Back*, is described as a 'Graphic Travelogue' and forms part of a new trend in cartoon reportage. Several essays top and tail strips about Rall's experience as a war reporter when he went to find out what US propaganda wasn't telling the good people of America about the war on evil. His conclusions? Afghanistan isn't what you expect (half of the population don't pray, smoke opium, and rip him off at every turn), the Taliban and the Northern Alliance are as bad as each other, and *Anna Karenina*, his wartime reading, is very good. No surprises there, then. It has a place, but it's already preaching to the converted. Rall also edited *Attitude: The New Subversive Political Cartoonists*, which showcases the work of cartoonists working for the alternative press including Tom Tomorrow, Peter Kuper, Scott Bateman, William L. Brown, and Stephanie McMillan.

If Rall is the P. J. O'Rourke of the new comics reportage, Peter Kuper turns out to be the Bill Bryson. His *Comicstrips* chronicles a journey through Africa and Southeast Asia full of derring-do, humour and insight into local life.~FJ

Recommended: *Adele and the Beast, The Birthday Riots, The Blue Notebook, The Demon of the Eiffel Tower, Indian Summer, In Search Of Shirley, Li'l Santa, Peter And The Wolf, Roach Killer, Streak of Chalk, Tangents*

NEAR MYTHS

Rip Off: *1 issue 1990*

As its title suggests, this is a collection of mythological tales, here interpreted (or reinterpreted) by Trina Robbins. Though not a major work, it retains her usual charm and economic line.~DAR

NEAR TO NOW

Fandom House: *2 issues 1987*

Anthology that's largely the work of enthusiastic amateurs, with the saddest aspect being a story by Jerry Siegel in 1 doesn't stand out. There's also a typically abstruse Matt Howarth strip in 1, and Norm Dwyer illustrating Dennis Pimple's story about cloud herders in 2 is best overall.~WJ

NEAT STUFF

Fantagraphics: *15 issues 1985-1989*

Within the first four issues of his black and white magazine *Neat Stuff*, Peter Bagge went from an underground (particularly Crumb)-influenced doodler to a master storyteller. It's a delight to watch him feeling his way and developing his characters. Early issues are more manic, centring around Girly Girl (the most fearsome small child ever created) and Chuckie Boy (an incompetent wimp), followed by The Bradleys, his enduring creation. The Bradleys are the ultimate imperfect American family, in which the members spend most of the time hating each other. The stories revolve around teenage Buddy and his viewpoint, without being blind to his many failings. By 6 Bagge was producing extraordinary comic tours-de-force like 'Mom Power', in which Buddy's long-suffering mother goes bananas, downs tools and gets pissed on the front lawn, and 'Brotherly Love', an extended chase sequence in which Buddy and his annoying little brother Butch act out *Tom and Jerry* cartoons. Each character is fully rounded; each is awful in their own special way. The Bradleys stories were reprinted as six comic sized issues in 1999.

Neat Stuff also introduced us to the delights of Junior, a hopeless loser whose dry and rather dumb commentary on the world passing by is both touching and funny, Studs Kirby, a parsimonious braggart who runs a talk radio show, and Chet and Bunny Leeway, young professionals whose guiding force is a mixture of social climbing and ennui.

Bagge's sympathy for his characters is displayed in the gut-wrenchingly embarrassing 'Studs Kirby's Big Break' in 7, where Studs, mostly out of fear, screws up his chance to impress a big city radio star by getting drunk and insulting him. All the character's insecurities and the way he compensates for them are laid out for us to realise that what we've been laughing at is weakness. Other excellent stories include the thirty-two-page Buddy story, 'Hippy House', in 9, 'You're not the Boss of Me' (Buddy's self-obsessed sister Babs throws the mother of all strops), and Girly Girl and Chuckie Boy putting the boot into political correctness in 'Summer Camp' in 13.

Neat Stuff blends the screamingly funny with warm, understanding humour that succeeds so well because it's character-driven. Bagge's manic drawing style perfectly matches the sudden outbursts, screaming fits and fights with which the stories are punctuated. Most stories are collected, but in books with a character theme rather than chronologically.~FJ

Recommended: 6, 7, 9, 11-13, 15

NECRON

Catalan: *3 Volumes 1989-1991*

It's a great pity that all that most English speaking comic readers know of Magnus (real name Roberto Raviola) is this light-hearted erotica. Originally drawn for *Metal Hurlant* in a broad, even-lined style, it features his characteristic heavy use of blacks, but lacks the detail and accuracy of his more usual drawing style. Necron is an over-sexed robot made from leftover body parts and bits of machinery by a mad female scientist, who can only get it off with corpses. Of course she could probably do a great deal to aid the human race with this technology, but instead she decides to build a walking dildo. Not wanting to violate the dead, she creates her 'undead' servant with a gigantic dong, but soon discovers that others would like to get their hands on her discoveries. The jokes aren't up to much, but the vigorous drawing style and good-natured humour (even about necrophilia) is winning.~FJ

NECROSCOPE

Malibu: *5 issue miniseries 1992-1993*, 5 issue miniseries ('Wamphryi') 1993-1994*

Caliber: *2 issues 1997-1998*

Comics adapting Brian Lumley's novels. The Necroscope of the title is Harry Keogh, able to speak with the dead and instantly learn anything from them, which is just as well because a Russian ESP operative is attempting to raise a vampire. Dying in the first series is a minimal hindrance to Keogh, who faces an older and infinitely more terrifying vampire in the second series. Martin Powell's adaptations make for good comics, with the first series superior by virtue of Daerick Gross' more appealing artwork. In the second Dave Kendall disguises a lack of basic anatomical knowledge under his painting. Powell also adapts the incomplete Caliber series involving an other-dimensional vampire world. It's decently drawn by Michael Perkins.~WJ

NECROTIC: Dead Flesh On A Living Body

After Hours Press: *One-shot 2001*

Seemingly intended as a miniseries originally, this is a well thought out modern horror story about archaeologist, Marshall VanDerGott, who, dying of cancer in 1928, is mummified by his friends and awakens in 1999, young and apparently healthy. His romance with Gwen, whom he meets at a museum, is, however, troubled by his need to re-bandage his body every forty-eight hours to renew his decaying flesh. Buddy Scalera and M. Swank write this tale of a doomed romance that descends into violence and gore, and Pat Quinn draws it. A good attempt, though not entirely convincing.~NF

NEFARISMO

Eros: *8 issue limited series 1994-1995*

A new gardener arrives at *The School For Evil*, and becomes embroiled in games of decadence and domination that can end in death. Drawn in such an unappealling manner so as to remove all eroticism from almost every form of sexual behaviour on display, the pretentious dialogue renders this unreadable as well. Unsuitable for all but the most extreme sexual submissives, who should purchase immediately and incorporate into their regime.~FP

NEGATION

CrossGen: *One-shot ('Prequel') 2001, 12 issues +, one-shot ('Lawbringer') 2001 to date*

Negation gives us a different view of the monstrous foes from *Crux*. In an opposing universe the God-Emperor Charon is supreme and total ruler. With nothing left to conquer he turns to the planes of the CrossGen universe. Being cautious though, he first has his vile minions abduct one hundred assorted denizens of said planes and test them to destruction. At least that's the plan. Amongst the squabbling pack of variously powered individuals is weak, powerless Earthling, Obregon Kaine, whose grasp of strategy and military tactics enable some of the prisoners to escape and begin a guerilla war within the Negation universe. It's competent science fiction drama from Tony Bedard and Paul Pelletier, and 'Lawbringer' gives some background on Charon.~WW

NEGATIVE BURN

Caliber: *50 issues 1993-1997*

Despite attracting material by some of the great and good, Negative Burn suffered from being too indulgent. The diversity of the stories is laudable, but too often they rely on weak humorous punchlines or are let down by amateurish artwork.

There are several main strands to the content of each issue; from 28, the page-count was increased to sixty-four pages, so there was plenty of room. There are the regular series: 'Mr Mamoulian' by Brian Bolland (all issues), dealing with park-bench philosophy; 'Classics Desecrated' by Doug Wheeler and various artists (4-18, 20, 21, 23, 24), in which literary classics are trashed (sorry, adapted) in one or two pages, and 'Alan Moore's Songbook' (9-14,16-19, 25, 26, 28, 35, 37), where his lyrics are illustrated by different artists, more or less successfully. There are also early or unpublished works by a number of better known creators, P. Craig Russell (4, 8, 30,37), David Lloyd (6), Michael Gilbert (14) and John McCrea (37, 39, 41, 42, 44).

A large proportion of the remaining material is strips from existing or upcoming Caliber titles, or examples of titles that Joe Pruett, as editor, felt deserved wider exposure. Most of the following strips are well worth investigating, either from Caliber or from other publishers. In the former category we have *Kilroy Is Here* (1, 4, 6,13, 18, 24, 47, 50), *Boneshaker* (1, 8, 50), *The Wretch* (38), *The Trigger Man* (4), *Jazz Age Chronicles* (7, 12), *Dominique* (9, 13, 25, 34), *Twilight People* (9-13), *Exit* (12, 22), *Baker Street* (25), *The Jam* (25), *Nowheresville* (33) and *The Kingdom of the Wicked* (38). In the latter, *Flaming Carrot* (1, 14, 19), *Strangers In Paradise* (13), *Suburban Nightmares* (25-27),

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*Available in a collected edition

Trollords (21), *Replacement God* (29, 35), *Strangehaven* (24), *Very Vicki* (26), *Rob Hanes* (30, 39), *Shades of Gray* (32), *The Trespassers* (38), *Skeleton Key* (44), *Patty Cake* (45-49), *Too Much Coffee Man* (50), and *Footsoldiers* (50). There's nothing particularly wrong with this, but the short-story format doesn't always do the strips favours and it's not always obvious whether the story's been produced specifically for *Negative Burn*. Other strips that fall into the above categories, but which are less successful are *The Black Mist* (3), *The Apparition* (1, 25), *Sojourn* (5), *Kabuki* (16, 25) and *Milk & Cheese* (13).

Several creators also deserve mention. Phillip Hester's artwork constantly surprises, changing shape to suit story or genre, whether it be for short stories, like 'Boneshaker' and 'The Creep' (29, 37) or longer ones like 'The Wretch', and he can be found in many other issues. Jeff Nicholson's disquieting studies of human behaviour are very effective (15-18, 30-36), while Joe Pruett and Philip Xavier's 'Lost Paradise' (22) and Ian Carney and Dave Taylor's 'Mr Murray' are both heavily, but interestingly, Moebius-influenced. Joe Pruett and Andrew Robinson's 'Dusty Star' (28, 37) is a Western with robotic trappings, but regrettably reduces itself to a gag strip for the second episode (though it also briefly had its own title). Kevin O'Neill turns in some interesting experimental artwork in 31 and James Owen's 'Little Neil In Slumberland' neatly parodies *Cerebus* and Neil Gaiman. Darko Macan and Edvin Biukovic collaborate on a series of fine short stories, usually very blackly humorous and often war-related (41, 42, 44-48, 50). Andrew Pepoy's 'Ajax and Simone' is a well-drawn humour strip in 48 which also features Ivana Filipovic's 'This or That?', a strikingly drawn character study. Star of the show, however, is Paul Pope, whose 'Eulogy To Marx' (12) and 'Triumph Of Hunger' (13) are terrific political strips, and whose non-related short stories in 18, 20, 21 and 23-25 are worth looking out for.

The final issue was a ninety-six page spectacular that brought a welcome return for some creators, Phillip Hester, in particular, with a long 'Boneshaker' episode. Neil Gaiman (with Guy Davis) and Paul Jenkins (with Michael Gaydos) both turn up to no real purpose, but Mike Wieringo's 'April Nightmares' is fun. Finally, many issues have sketchbook pages, some of which may be of interest – Mike Kaluta (4), Jeff Smith (3), Arthur Suydam (5), P.Craig Russell (10), Tony Harris (13), David Mazzucchelli (17), Jaime Hernandez (31) and Neil Gaiman (25). There are two collections of the *Best of Negative Burn Year One* and *Year Two*, which are a good place to start for those who want to see why the title is generally well regarded, but no single issues can be wholly recommended.~NF

NEGATIVE EXPOSURE

Humanoids: *4 issue miniseries 2001**

Incompetent, but lucky reporter Varése is in Beijing during the Tianamen Square massacre, and guided to some spectacular pictures by the mysterious Madam Kokonino, who has an ulterior agenda. Unfortunately for both, Varése mucks it up. In many ways he's the antithesis of Tintin, dragged into situations rather than doggedly following them, a victim of circumstance and beneficiary of luck. With help from the mysterious Frenchman he eventually comprehends the full plot, involving a search for immortality with the background of Kokonino World, an advanced funfair with incredible robots. Thierry Smolderen's story is drawn in an expressive ligne clair style by very good artist Enrico Marini, never flashy at the expense of storytelling, and able to draw everything the story demands with aplomb. Elements of the plot are just too convenient, but overall it's a good adventure yarn.~FP

NEIL & BUZZ IN SPACE AND TIME

Fantagraphics: *1 issue 1989*

Neil is jogging in a park with Buzz, who may or may not be the Devil. Together they travel to the end of the universe and spend a day in a New Jersey amusement park. Despite the names, and Neil's reference to astronaut training, it's uncertain if this is meant to be the Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin. This is an unfinished story by George Alec Effinger, realistically and richly illustrated by Henry Mayo. Possibly a subtle, ironic and very black comedy on the nature of existence. Possibly.~NF

NEIL THE HORSE Comics And Stories

Aardvark-Vanaheim: *10 issues 1983-1984*
Renegade: *5 issues (11-15) 1984-1988*

Beginning life as a syndicated newspaper strip (1975-1979), Arn Saba's eclectic creations made a brief appearance in Charlton Bullseye 2 (1981). The title is dedicated to Carl Barks and inspired by the musicals of Fred Astaire, indicating that this is a very unusual comic. Based in format on *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories*, it mixes comic strips, annotated music scores, illustrated text and paper-doll pages. Neil himself is a big-hearted omnivore with a real love of bananas; his companions are Madame Poupee, a puppet, and Soapy, a cigar-smoking, cynical cat. Saba is assisted by a number of friends who contribute stories or lyrics or paper dolls (Barb Rausch). Her Great Women of Comics dolls include the Dragon Lady, Modesty Blaise and Phantom Lady. The stories are full of *Little Nemo*-like surrealism, totally out of this world, with touches of parody and plenty of romance. This is a unique series that's a joy to read, pushing what you expect of a comic book to the limits.~NF

Recommended: 3, 11, 14

NEMESIS the Warlock

Eagle: *7 issue limited series 1984-1985**
Fleetway/Quality: *19 issues 1989-1991**

On a far-future, radiation-scarred Earth, mankind dwells underground, courtesy of the alien invasions that have devastated the surface. Transportation is provided by a fantastic system of Travel Tubes monitored by Chief of Tube Police, Torquemada. Named after, and later revealed as a reincarnation of, the 15th-century Spanish monk who tortured thousands of heretics, this righteous, evil bigot graduates to Earth ruler and later godhood as he fans xenophobia against all non-humans and drives his crusade to the stars. His nemesis is Nemesis, a bipedal equine alien who assists any alien or Earth resistance movement subjected to Torquemada's attentions. Outrageous, wacky, undisciplined and juvenile, the strip is littered with throwaway gags, both verbal and visual, such as the flying machine based on a Penny Farthing design in the Gothic Empire sequence. Fine character development unfolds leisurely; it is not until 'Purity's Story' (16-17) that Nemesis' full motives are revealed to be not quite as pure as initial appearances suggest.

The publishing history of Nemesis is convoluted. It débuted during 1980 as a few isolated shorts in the British weekly comic *2000AD*. The regular strip began as a series of serials in *2000 AD*, each serial labelled a 'Book' and comprising around twelve to fifteen consecutive issues of five-page episodes. The Eagle series reprints Books 1-3 in colour for the first time, and Fleetway/Quality reprint Books 1, 3-9. In both cases, the originals have been resized and partly redrawn to fit standard comics, much to the detriment of the artwork. The best and most accessible format is presented in Titan's *Nemesis* compilations, also designated as 'Books'. These fail to collect Book 2, which means that their numbering is out of sync with the original *Nemesis* numbering. More sporadic episodes have appeared in *2000 AD* subsequent to Book 9. Pat Mills is Script Robot on all and Kevin O'Neill co-creates and draws Books 1, 3 and 4. Indeed, some of their previous creations (most prominently *ABC Warriors*) find their way into later stories. Bryan Talbot is the other major artistic contributor (Books 4-6). Jesus Redondo (2), John Hicklenton (7, 9) and David Roach (8) complete the roll call.

Books 1, 3, 4 head the class, as later tales are burdened by the increasing political conscience that the series develops. And the kindest comment that can be attributed to Hicklenton's artwork is to describe it as an acquired taste.~APS

NEON CITY

Innovation: *1 issue 1991*

A future in which clones of 20th century celebrities live and mix with ordinary humans. Except someone's killing them. The admittedly original backdrop fails to disguise the lack of inspiration elsewhere in this cop series.~FP

NEON CYBER

Image: *8 issue limited series 1999-2000*

An offshoot from *Dark Minds*. The Shen Yang crime syndicate in Macropolis persuades the street gangs to divide the city into territories. This doesn't sit well with rival gangs. When the protagonist Neon is framed for the murder of Shen Yang boss Zeburo the Neon Dragons are forced to make a stand. This leads to deaths in 4 and 5, while Neon is with his mysterious girlfriend Asako. Adrian Tsang tightly plots some gripping stuff, but given the cast consists of criminals and murderers, it's hard to muster much sympathy for them, never mind actually like them. Lou Kang pencils efficiently with only a slight overdose of talking heads. Amoral and forgettable.~SW

NEON GENESIS EVANGELION

Viz: *Series one 6 issues 1997-1998*, series two 5 issues 1998*, series three 6 issues 1998-1999*, series four 7 issues 1999**

A superior entry in the peculiar category of Japanese comics where children are given military designations and sent to fight battles in giant robot suits. It's 2015, and a devastated Earth (meteor hit planet), is under attack from mysterious beings known as Angels. The delving into fourteen year old pilot Shinji's feelings about being a planetary saviour, and life in general, sets the series above similar material, and every succeeding chapter introduces new complications. Series 3 and 4 are available in Japanese style editions that read from back to front, more faithfully presenting the artwork.~WJ

NERVOUS REX

Blackthorne: *10 issues 1985-1987*

Rexford is a mild-mannered Tyrannosaurus Rex who would rather eat oatmeal than hunt and rend and tear. This wouldn't be a problem, except that his huge wife, Dearie, has ambitions for him. It's the old hen-pecked husband gag – with the jokes rationed to about one every two issues, so it's just a portrait of an ugly marriage in urgent need of a divorce lawyer. Once in a while, however, William Van Horn manages to keep an idea pinned down for long enough to build a story, and he has a nice way with moons and planets.~FC

Recommended: 5

NEURO JACK

Big Entertainment: *1 issue 1996*

The invading Ghomans rule the galaxy by means of a vast internet web. Neuro Jack is a human freedom fighter whose consciousness was downloaded into the web, enabling him to fight them with the stored knowledge of a thousand enslaved worlds. Mediocre computer generated comic based on concepts designed for the Microsoft Network.~WW

NEUTRO

Dell: *1 issue 1967*

Had notoriously inept film maker Ed Wood ever turned his hand to comics he'd have created *Neutro*. It's gloriously incompetent in every fashion, starting with Jack Sparling's appalling art. If the hand he's drawn on page sixteen is based on his it explains a lot. The anonymous script reads as if it's been dashed off on dictaphone by someone who's just consumed more speed than is good for them. Neutro is a giant robot, buried on Earth in component parts centuries ago by aliens for an obscure purpose. Uncovered by archaeologist John Dodge, Neutro is reconstructed, and there follows twenty-two pages of dementia, starting with speculation on Neutro's possible destructive capacities and continuing with a spectacularly badly illustrated sequence of assorted powers attempting to bring Neutro under their control. Truly an all-time turkey, and only recommended for kitsch value.~FP

Recommended

NEVADA

DC/Vertigo: *6 issue miniseries 1999**

Steve Gerber's notorious *Howard the Duck* fill-in issue (16) featured, among other delights, a Las Vegas showgirl running off with an ostrich. Some two decades later, Gerber returned to that pair of characters. Were the fans clamouring for this oddest of odd couples? Probably not, but against all the odds, it was worth the wait. Gerber is on masterful form, mixing the cosmic and the banal with his typically jaundiced eye, and artist Phil Winslade illuminates the script with astonishing detail. Any summary of the plot is, frankly, impossible; suffice it to say that minds will be blown. A further *Nevada* adventure appeared in Vertigo's *Winter's Edge* 2.~DAR

Recommended: 1-6

NEVERMEN

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 2000**

The four eponymous heroes all dress in the same uniform: jackets, hats, saggy gaberdines and goggles, betraying few distinguishing marks or motives like a cadre of Phantom Stranger impersonators. The motif-like cast includes a retired cop, a bloodthirsty vigilante, a mystery woman, some strange villains and a mad professor or two, and the story has a maddeningly dreamlike quality, skipping from one slam-bang action scene to another without acquiring any plot impetus. It's like the ghost of an adventure story with little evidence (or hope!) of things ever becoming relevant. The introductory episodes in *Dark Horse Presents* 148-150 offer little enlightenment. This is lovingly drawn by Guy Davis and looks magnificent in colour, but Philip Amara's writing is deliberately oblique, so the contest in 1 to make sense of the story so far is particularly cynical. Exciting and nice to look at on the surface but annoyingly empty.~SW

NEW AMERICA

Eclipse: *4 issue miniseries 1987-1988*

A story spun-off from Eclipse's Scout, set in the early 21st century, when America is ravaged by a twelve-year civil war and partitioned into independent kingdoms as political factions fight for control. *New America* focuses on anti-heroine Rosanna Winters, general in the Southwestern Free States, as they conduct assassinations and sabotage raids to play off the political cabals. Creators John Ostrander, Kim Yale and Kwapisz depict a grippingly realistic scenario, bereft of superpowers, spandex, magic or unforeseeable technology. Character motivations are powerfully defined. It is bleak, sober, political, adult, uncompromising and devoid of humour. You cannot dance to it and it will never spawn a hit single. A classic in its field.~APS

Recommended: 1-4

NEW! COMICS

Tweedle-Yin Tweedle-Yang Productions: *1 issue 1990*

Magazine sized alleged humour anthology from a group of Vancouver cartoonists, none of which matches the wit of the publishing company name. Theresa Henry turns in a couple of good one-pagers on modern relationships, and there's some appeal to the frenetic underground style cartooning of Shaun Hayes-Holgate and the Rick Geary stylings of Ludwig Dääs. That alone, though, doesn't compensate for the remainder being amateur scribbling or entirely pointless strips.~FP

NEW FORCE

Image/Extreme: *4 issue miniseries 1996*

Filling the gap during a hiatus in the publication of *Newmen*, this was intended to stimulate interest in one of Image's longer running titles. The Newmen spend much of the series captured by one organisation or another, but by the end the team has been refreshed and retooled for continuation in *Newmen* 21. Penciller Todd Nauck showed promise, although relied on swipes.~WJ

THE NEW FRONTIER

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1992**

A dense and complex political thriller starting with the 1963 death of a beloved Marilyn Monroe figure and extrapolating from there to a 1980s in which there's an annual pageant in her honour. Such is the winner's popularity that her affiliation with a dark-horse presidential candidate boosts his ratings considerably, at which point past secrets begin to emerge. With *Suburban Nightmares, Silent Invasion* and this title, artist Michael Cherkas had a pre-*X-Files* solo franchise on the conspiracy-theory section of the comic market, but his stylised art won't be to everyone's taste. There's no really sympathetic characters and the third issue lacks breathing space, but otherwise top-notch.~FP

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* Available in a collected edition

Recommended: 1-3

NEW GODS

DC: *Series one 19 issues 1971-1972 (1-11*), 1977-1978 (12-19), 6 issue miniseries 1984, Graphic Novel ('The Hunger Dogs') 1985, series two 28 issues 1989-1991, series three 15 issues, 1 Secret Files 1995-1996*

"An epic of our times", proclaims the cover of *New Gods* 1, and how true it was. The series audaciously begins with an epilogue explaining how when the old Gods died their planet split in half, one portion becoming New Genesis, the other Apokolips. This was the setting for what would be known as Jack Kirby's "Fourth World" trilogy, the most magnificent space saga ever to appear in comics. When reduced to basics, the series concerns good vs evil, and whether upbringing or genetics determines character. The population of New Genesis live in harmony with themselves, each other and their world, and largely occupy a beautiful city, floating above a lush, green, unspoiled planet. The inhabitants of Apokolips, by contrast, are ruled by the dreaded Darkseid, and the constantly churning energy pits cloud the planet with noxious fumes, blotting out most light.

The plot propelling Kirby's *New Gods* was Darkseid's quest for the Anti-Life Equation, which would give him power over the universe. Led by Highfather, visually a very biblical-style character, the Gods from New Genesis want to prevent this. Foremost among them is Orion, Darkseid's son, but raised on New Genesis. The full story of the pact behind this is told in 7, among the most powerful and moving superhero stories ever, detailing the origin of the conflict between New Genesis and Apokolips. Orion's upbringing imbues him with decent values, but his endemic ferocity has to be curbed by machine. The Anti-Life Equation is to be found on Earth, and while it serves as a setting for Orion and other New Gods we also learn more about New Genesis and Apokolips. Kirby populated the series with further memorable characters such as Orion's right-hand man Lightray, a name describing his powers and personality, Darkseid's scientific minion the sadistic Desaad, and a personification of death on skis named The Black Racer. It's Darkseid, though, who's remained his most memorable creation. Although almost a personification of evil he retains the grandeur of a ruler, and a perverse sense of justice.

New Gods was Kirby at his best. The grandeur of his designs completely convinces, and the comics are packed with magnificent imagery. The only downside is the subdued inking of Vince Colletta in 1-4. Mike Royer's arrival with 5 cemented a perfect look. Kirby's plots and characterisation were equally excellent, and although he was often criticised for unrealistic dialogue in other titles, such comments have no place regarding *New Gods*. 6's 'Glory Boat' is a delve into the depths of the human psyche, and there's more human interest in 8's 'The Deathwish of Terrible Turpin', a study of how much a human will endure. Kirby also surprises throughout, particularly with 9's revelation that New Genesis is not the paragon of integrity thus far presented. Sadly, Kirby was unable to finish his story, and Orion's claim in 11 that when he and Darkseid clash the war will finally end is a tantalising teaser. In 1984 DC reprinted Kirby's issues as a 6 issue miniseries, featuring a new conclusion in the final issue. Twelve years on Kirby's art wasn't as strong, but his plotting was as good, with an ending that defied all predictions. The saga didn't finish there, though, as Kirby then produced the graphic novel *The Hunger Dogs*. It's frankly disappointing, with Kirby's intention of killing some major characters vetoed in the face of toy-company interest, requiring extensive alteration to plot and art.

After their 1970s cancellation little was seen of the New Gods until their return in *First Issue Special* 13, leading to the restoration of a regular series, now titled *The Return of the New Gods*. Those also hoping for a return of the glory days were sorely disappointed. Gerry Conway was seemingly under instructions to go mainstream superhero and redesigned characters and concepts accordingly, introducing new cast members along the way. If one can forget Kirby it's a solid, if unspectacular superhero series, very nicely drawn by Don Newton. Ultimately, though, the characterisation is very much at odds with what had been established, the uniform dialogue patterns being particularly out of place. Again cancelled midway through a story, this time it was concluded a little sooner in *Adventure Comics* 459 and 460.

By the time of the second ongoing series the *New Gods* cast were intimately connected with the DC Universe as recurring characters. The appointment of respected TV scriptwriter Mark Evanier boded well as his credentials included a period as Kirby's assistant when the original series was conceived. Strangely, though, his work fails to impress. Part of the original appeal of *New Gods* lay in the gradual unfolding of a mystery, but Evanier lays everything out on a plate, even complicating stories with superfluous explanation. He gave the characters a greater depth, though, and his best story is 7-12, in which Orion infiltrates Apokolips to search for his imprisoned mother. Evanier's scheming Desaad was also well characterised, plotting to usurp his master Darkseid throughout the series. 17 introduces Darkseid's father, an equally unsavoury character, completing three dysfunctional generations. Paris Cullins drew 1-18, and, while able to tell a story and draw a good action scene, he was incapable of imparting the grandeur of New Genesis or the squalor of Apokolips. The same applied to his successor, Rick Hoberg. The problem throughout *New Gods* is that Kirby defined his worlds and characters so well that no following creators have been able to match him, few having his imagination and scope. Jim Starlin also paints a grand picture, though, and was originally intended to produce the entire series. What remained of his plots filled 2-4. When cancellation arrives with 28, the primary thought is 'oh well, never mind.'

The bulk of the 1995 series is written by Rachel Pollack, and the usual plot of Orion and Darkseid in opposition isn't dragged out. The astonishing conclusion in 2 results in some of the Gods going mad, particularly Lightray. Here the series becomes disjointed, with the redeeming plotline being Desaad masquerading as Darkseid, and despite dramatic artwork from Luke Ross the series failed to gather pace. 9 is a noteworthy Keith Giffen-illustrated fill-in, Giffen having begun his career with nice Kirby impressions. Pollack ends her run in 12 with a big bang, leaving John Byrne a bit of a problem to tie up in the final three issues. He does so with aplomb, his interpretations of the characters being closer to Kirby's than anyone else's. He provides a well-paced plot involving the destruction of Apokolips and New Genesis, guest-starring other related Kirby characters Mister Miracle, Big Barda and the Forever People. Byrne's pencils, inked by Bob Wiacek, are clear, crisp and expansive. It seems as if Byrne is the first worthy successor to Kirby. He concludes the series with a cliffhanger resolved in *Jack Kirby's Fourth World*, but you can pick up the 'Secret Files' special which offers background information for many characters. To experience the *New Gods* saga at its best read the recommended issues and don't bother with the rest.~HY

Recommended: Series one 1-11, miniseries 6, series three 12-15

NEW GUARDIANS

DC: *12 issues 1988-1989*

Assembled during *Millennium*, this bunch of oddballs and misfits was supposed to 'bring about the next evolutionary step for mankind'. This rapidly became a moot point, as they featured the most embarrassing collection of stereotypes ever to be assembled in one team. The Chinese woman is in touch with the 'Dragonforce' of ley lines, there's a tech-obsessed

Japanese man and the streetwise black chick from 'Fascist Britain', the Aboriginal mystic who became 'one with everything', and the embarrassingly nellie South American mystic who became comics' first visible homosexual, thereby reinforcing everybody's favourite stereotype about gay men. Realising they were on a highway to doom, the creators flailed about, trying a succession of 'quick fixes'. Jet sacrificed her life heroically during an Invasion crossover and Extrano butched up his act, becoming more Dr Strange and less Carmen Miranda, but it was still all going horribly wrong. Eventually, the DC cut their losses and decided that they were instead supposed to be the protectors of the next generation of humanity, dumping the team on an island with a bunch of mutants and forgetting all about them. No bad thing, either.~HS

NEW LOVE

Fantagraphics: *6 issue miniseries 1996-1997**

Towards the end of *Love and Rockets'* run there was a feeling that Gilbert Hernandez had become chained to his ongoing characters, involved in ever more dense and complex tales. Meanwhile, the odd and imaginative short pieces Gilbert once contributed all but disappeared. Unshackled from a locked-in continuity, Gilbert's always fertile imagination fires like a scattergun, throwing out whimsical throwaways and fabulous fables, and permitting him to indulge a sense of humour lately held in check. Top item in the latter category is a one pager found in 6, 'Roy in "Serious Fucking"', which ought to bring a smile to the face of any broad-minded adult. Given Gilbert's accomplished and under-rated art these pieces would be enough for many other creators, but there's also an assortment of more thought provoking material. The glimpses into the lives of the American based cast from *Love and Rockets*, are well crafted, particularly those involving the pre-teen Venus, possessed of a precocious nature, yet still not understanding plenty of what occurs around her. 3's sordid revelations about football star Sergio and his mother Pipo are a fine example, as Venus is driven around by Sergio, who leaves her for long periods. A second story then details what Sergio was up to during these absences. The eclecticism of *New Love* is magnificent, and one hopes Gilbert doesn't desert it, but only the previously known *Love and Rockets* characters transfer to his current title *Luba*.~FP

Recommended: 1-6

NEW MAN

Image/Extreme: *4 issue miniseries 1996*

A spin-off from the 'Extreme Destroyer' crossover, New Man is trapped in the present, having been a servant of the alien Keep who chose to help the Earth's defenders against them. 2 sees him trying to recruit the Wildcats against another alien who's controlling all human minds, but by the time he's convinced Majestic to join him the crisis has been averted. Told straight by Eldon Asp but actually quite funny. The rest of the series is about starting over on a new world. The last issue is a 'Shadowhunt' crossover. Daft name, but not without promise.~NF

NEW MUTANTS

Marvel: *100 issues, 7 Annuals, 1 Graphic Novel, 1 Special 1983-1991, 3 issue miniseries 1997-1998*

Débuting in the 1983 graphic novel, *New Mutants* was one of the earliest *X-Men* spin-offs. Originally by Chris Claremont and Bob McLeod, it returned to the roots of the X-Men, bringing together the second generation of students at Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters. A group of young mutants were learning both to use their powers and to function in a world that hated and despised them. The title also built on the New X-Men concept of a multi-racial, multi-national team boasting members from as far afield as Brazil, Scotland, Asia and Nova Roma, a throw-back colony to ancient Rome. Early issues are a light, solid read, not as angst-ridden as the X-Men and generally entertaining. An evil teen nemesis team, the Hellions, add to the fun and games. The straightforward superhero fun goes out the window with the arrival of Bill Sienkiewicz on 18, when the stories take on a darker, weirder edge. Sadly, the low-grade paper and basic printing aren't enough to do Sienkiewicz's art credit – the gorgeous covers serve to show us what we're missing – but the stories make up for it, particularly the 'Demon Bear'* issues starting with 19.

After Sienkiewicz leaves with 28, issues are mediocre and best avoided, although, if you haven't already had your fill of X-Men-related time paradoxes, the look at alternate futures around issue 50 is worth the time. The next notable period comes with the arrival of Rob Liefeld in 86, who, like him or loathe him, certainly stamped his mark on both the *New Mutants* and the entire comics industry. Liefeld instituted a much harder, more violent edge, action-packed, fast and furious, with little time for boring stuff like characterisation. Introducing Cable, the warrior from the future with the gun twice his size, the New Mutants moved further and further away from Professor X's ideals under the guidance of their new mentor. Appealing to a younger audience, and filling long-term fans with horror, Cable quickly became one of Marvel's most popular characters. 87-94 are collected. Before long, Cable had his own comic, *New Mutants* had become X-Force, and Liefeld had left to become one of the founders of Image, ushering in a new era for the comic industry.

In addition to the annuals, there's also a 1990 one-shot titled *Mutant Summer Fun*, which is, to all intents and purposes, a *New Mutants Special*. The miniseries focuses on the classic, Sienkiewicz-era line up as a game of 'Truth or Dare' sees the young heroes teleporting into the future, following a mysterious figure who hints bad things are due to happen to Illyana 'Magick' Rasputin. Appearing in a present in which she is dead, they find themselves face-to-face with their present-day counterparts, manipulated into messing with the timeline in an attempt to avert Magick's fate. Ben Raab and Bernard Chang present an enjoyable and character-driven romp, the time-twisting antics of which grate far less than you might expect from the usual convoluted X-continuity.~JC

Recommended: 18-28

NEW STATESMEN

Fleetway/Quality: *5 issue miniseries 1989-1990**

Genetic engineering enables the USA to develop super-soldiers early in the 21st century, one representing each state. The resulting political re-alignment sees England joining the USA, and by 2047 an evangelical Statesman is making a play for the Presidency and a previously discredited group is unravelling some appalling events. Despite the superhero trappings, this is more a political thriller. John Smith applies a wide range of characteristics to the cast, who are well designed by early artist Jim Baikie, drawing in his usual polished fashion. Unfortunately Smith's methods of storytelling are abstruse, requiring not so much reading between the lines as joining the dots. This was originally serialised in British comic *Crisis*, and offered early artwork from Sean Phillips (from 2) and a professional debut to Duncan Fegredo (from 3). There are moments to enjoy here, but digging them out is hard work.~FP

NEW TALENT SHOWCASE

DC: *19 issues 1984-1985*

New Talent Showcase stemmed from DC's commendable encouragement of new creators under talent co-ordinator Sal Amendola. The best overall strip is 'Class Of 2064' in 1-3, in which a school trip runs contrary to expectation. It's written with a pleasing lightness by Todd Klein, already well employed as a letterer, and illustrated by Scott Hampton, already top of the form. It's reprised in 7-8, drawn by Terry Shoemaker. A high percentage of contributors go on to better things, with Dan Day, Stephen DeStefano, Geof Isherwood, Karl Kesel, Rick Magyar, Tom Mandrake, Mindy Newell, Graham Nolan, Javier Saltares and Eric Shanower among the successful graduates, but plenty of perspiration with little inspiration is the order of the day. The title changed to *Talent Showcase* with 16.~WJ

NEW WARRIORS

Marvel: *Series one 75 issues, 4 Annuals 1990-1996, series two 10 issues 1999-2000*

Writer Fabian Nicieza and artist Mark Bagley brainstormed the first series and got away with it far longer than you'd imagine possible. The team's origin parallels, entirely coincidentally, we're sure, that of the most popular incarnation of the Teen Titans. Firestar (reformed New Mutants opponent), Namorita (shapely younger cousin of Sub-Mariner), Marvel Boy (supporting character of The Thing) and Nova and Speedball (stars of their own short-lived series) are summoned from comics limbo by a new, mysterious character with an agenda of his own. The first laugh occurs when the enigmatic individual is revealed as a skateboarding martial artist with the jolly name of Night Thrasher! Maybe it means something different in the USA. Night Thrasher's sister Silhouette also joins the cast, a plucky young thing who melts into the shadows and reappears to beat up bad guys with her crutches. Yep, a paraplegic streetfighter. The stunning idiocy of these two characters aside, it's fun in a bogus way, lots of light hearted superheroic hi-jinks, and then just when you think you've got its tone sussed it turns around and bites you. An example? In 20, Marvel Boy, Vance Astrovik, faces his abusive father one too many times, and retaliates with his telekinetic powers. Rather than the usual cliché of "Oh no! What was I thinking? I stopped myself just in time!", Vance lets Dad have it full force...and Astrovik senior dies next issue. 21 also sees the addition to the team of Rage, briefly of the Avengers until his true age was revealed, and Darkhawk, from another failed title. In 'Nothing but the Truth' (22-25) Marvel Boy is arrested, tried, and convicted for negligent homicide, and is shown as having the maturity to accept and face the consequences of his actions, dissuading the other Warriors from breaking him out. The subplot concerning Night Spanker's agenda is resolved concurrently with Marvel Boy's trial. It's tedious business and only Vance's trials, literal and otherwise, stick in the mind.

Bagley quit after 25, but Darick Robertson is a capable replacement. 28 presents yet another team member, or possibly two, as the young man and woman who share the Turbo costume and persona climb aboard. In 36, the incarcerated Vance Astro decides to change his nom de guerre to Justice, and starts seeking that commodity for his fellow prisoners, trying to change the reform system from within. In 'Time and Time Again' (43-50) the Warriors are scattered in time and space, courtesy of old Nova foe the Sphinx and a team of emergency reserves are called in to assist. During the action, Justice is thrown into the recent past of his family, and discovers why his father became an abuser. Does he try and alter the course of events, saving his mother years of misery but perhaps preventing his own birth, or let history take its course?

Shortly after, Evan Skolnick and Patrick Zircher inherit the title and do their best, but the decline was already in place. Desperate measures such as inducting the Scarlet Spider, in an attempt to tie into the 'Maximum Clonage' hoo-hah, were not well received by readers. One entertaining issue, however, was 66, 'The Speedball Revenge Squad', a light-hearted issue dealing with our bouncing buddy's inadvertent reunion with all the foes from his solo title – and Niels, the Bouncing Cat – during a visit to his hometown.

Following the 'graduation' of Firestar and Justice to the Avengers, an attempt was made to revive the Warriors. Speedball, Namorita, Nova and the surviving Turbo reunite joined by new characters Aegis (gangbanger with an enchanted breastplate) and Bolt (a 'lightning lad' with the Legacy Virus, Marvel's AIDS analogy). Scripter Jay Faerber and artists Steve Scott and Walden Wong do a capable job, but a lack of any convincing reason for the team to be, or stay, together undermines the series. Guest-stars were thrown in with random desperation to no avail, and the most interesting aspect of the second series remains the eye-searing costume redesigns inflicted upon the team. They generated so many howls of protest that the editor had to announce peevishly in the letter column that no more comments on the costumes would see print!~HS

THE NEW WAVE

Eclipse: *14 issues, 1986-1987*

Fairly uninspired superhero fare from the period when Eclipse came close to being a major player in the market. The Mindy Newell plots were mostly clichéd and never anything special, but some issues have early art from creators who were to go on to greater things, including Ty Templeton, Erik Larsen and Rob Liefeld.~JC

NEW WORLDS

Caliber: *6 issues 1996*

An anthology title. The strips weren't so much solicited for the title as thrown together because of a vague science fiction grounding. Mister X continues from the stories printed in his own title that ended in 1990, with his writer in 1 and 2, Wilbur R Webb, really X-artist emeritus Seth. The well-paced artwork of D'Israeli in 1 and 2 is replaced by the downright static, impersonal style of inker Ken Holewczynski, drawing Ian Edginton's scripts in 3-6. Other good features include the saga of Antrax, a semi human "antroid" who really goes through the philosophical mill in 1-6; Durwin S. Talon and John B. Ludwick's stylish Beyond the Fringe in 1-3; the innovative 'Twelve Fingers Hero' by Danijel Zezelj in 4; Mark Pawlik's accomplished clear-line style on his robot strip 'Kit Model 103' in 4 and 5 plus Horus' very slick 'Great Legends of Space and Rock and Roll' in 4-6.~SW

NEW YEAR'S EVIL

DC: *8 One-shots ('Body Doubles', 'Dark Nemesis', 'Darkseid', 'Gog', 'Mr Mxyzptlk', 'Prometheus', 'Rogues', 'Scarecrow') 1998*

A series of one-shots highlighting the villains of the DC Universe. 'Body Doubles' features an enjoyable romp with the 'Thelma and Louise' hot-babe assassins from *Resurrection Man*, and 'Dark Nemesis' is a pedestrian superhero story as the villainous group from *Team Titans* attempts to break out of jail. 'Darkseid' relates how the apparent destruction of the God of Evil has resulted in a civil war on Apokolips, while 'Gog' is a slight departure as Mark Waid and Jerry Ordway relate the origin and refit of a character from *Kingdom Come*, setting up his entrance into contemporary DC titles. Superman's most annoying enemy 'Mr Mxyzptlk' uses the device of a tenth-dimensional monster attacking the imp's fifth-dimensional home as an excuse to rehash some old cheap-shot spoofs of DC comics, whilst 'The Rogues' sees a gang of Flash's old foes ambling through a cheesy rip-off of *The Golden Child*. The last two titles are the cream of the crop, with 'Prometheus' from Grant Morrison and Arnie Jorgensen introducing the newest bad guy to square off against the Justice League, whilst 'Scarecrow' by Pete Milligan and Duncan Fegredo relates an offbeat tale of obsession as the master of terror switches fixations from Batman to the apparently fearless medical student Becky Albright.~WW

Recommended: 'Prometheus', 'Scarecrow'

NEW YORK: YEAR ZERO

Eclipse: *4 issue miniseries 1988*

There are initial allegories to the Vietnam war as soldier Chester Brian, used to surviving on his ingenuity, returns from war on Venus to a hostile New York. It's a place where snipers are common, and the haves spend vast amounts of money to protect themselves from the have-nots. Brian lucks into a job, but it comes with a high danger level. Uniformly poor covers by American artists probably prevented many from seeing the gorgeous and detailed interior art of Juan Zannotto. He enjoys illustrating his military hardware, and brings a real filthy quality to his street scenes. Ricardo Barreiro's script throws in dozens of decent ideas, yet they're mere diversions from a very thin, but action-packed plot. Anyone who enjoys gun-toting action heroes should sample *New York: Year Zero*. There are guns and explosions aplenty, and they're better drawn than most.~FP

NEWMEN

Image/Extreme: *21 issues 1994-1996*
Maximum Press: *2 issues (22-23) 1996-1997*

The alien nu-gene gives some people abilities beyond those of normal humans, and the aliens return from time to time to harvest the latest crop of superpowered beings as slaves. The Newmen are gathered together by the Proctor to repel the aliens when they next visit. Most of the series depends for its dynamism on the conflict within the group as they come to terms with what they are. First appearing in 'Extreme Prejudice', 1-4 were collected, 9-11 are part of the 'Extreme Sacrifice' crossover, and 20's conclusion was part of the 'Babewatch' crossover that was also the prelude to the 'Extreme Destroyer' crossover (see the pattern?). At this point the series went into hiatus while the *New Force* miniseries attempted to generate new interest in the constantly bickering X-Men clones. With 21 Chris Sprouse and Al Gordon brought a fresh, clean look, with several nods to Alex Toth, which augured well but came too late. The team guest-starred in *Judgement Day* , but have not been seen since.~NF

Stephen Sullivan and Tim Truman's NEWSTRALIA

Innovation: *5 issues 1989-1990*

Gun-runner Brin Dingo, his robot No-Nox and the humanoid combat kangaroo Boomer Blue try to aid rebels and make a profit in a future world ruled by the totalitarian science society, The Order. Despite his name on the masthead, Truman is hardly involved and the end result is bitty and unsatisfactory.~WW

NEXT MAN

Comico: *4 issues 1985*
Comic Company A: *1 issue 1993*

A Vietnam soldier preserved after a near-fatal explosion is revived twenty years later, having been genetically altered. Minimalist plotting and artwork. The Comic Company A issue was to have been Comico's fifth issue.~FP

John Byrne's NEXT MEN

Dark Horse: *31 issues (0-30) 1992-1994**

The scene for *Next Men* is set in the one-shot *2112* graphic novel, highlighting the career of one cadet, Thomas Kirkland. His apprenticeship pits him against Sathanas, who leads a large band of mutated human beings, the results of genetic experiments a century previously known as the Next Men Project. It's thought that Sathanas is destroyed at the end, but the reality is that he's journeyed back in time to the present day. That's where *Next Men* takes off, but not before some appearances in *Dark Horse Presents* 54-57, reprinted in the zero issue.

The plot concerns five youngsters with special abilities who were part of an unauthorised superproject funded by Senator Hilltop, with a mysterious ally. The youngsters escape, are separated, then reunited in an organisation run by 'Control', who gives them costumes and codenames – Sprint, Brawn, Bounce, Scanner and Hardbody. 7 has them investigating a group of Russian mutants at the behest of the Russian government. These characters are their counterparts indoctrinated with Communist ideals, and unhappy at the way the country has been developing recently. 13 starts a more character-based story inspecting relationships between the Next Men, specifically sexual tension disrupting the team, while the youngest member, Sprint, wants to learn more about his biological mother, and travels to New York to do so. There he's exploited by the head of a comic company, who sees extensive profits to be had by publishing a comic about a real superhero. The others follow, but their new-found fame leads to complications, most particularly a case of murder relating to their original escape.

From 19 Byrne begins writing four-issue story arcs, numbered as such on the covers, which also continue the regular numbering of the series. The first, 'Faith', sees the team joining an underground community of homeless people, and Mike Mignola contributes pages of Hellboy to 21. More comic characters come to life during 'Power', most pertinently the evil Dr Trogg, but also a guest shot from Concrete, manifestations created by a young woman whose latent powers have recently surfaced. 'Lies' (27-30) reveals that all is not what most believed to be the case. Overall, *Next Men* is a masterful exercise in sub-plots and subterfuge, full of twists and turns. Initial confusion will give way to understanding, as John Byrne is at his best, with excellent writing and great illustration.~HY

Recommended: 0-30

NEXUS

Capital: *Series one 3 issues 1981-1982, series two 6 issues 1983-1984**
First: *74 issues (7-80) 1985-1991, 4 issue miniseries ('The Next Nexus') 1989**
Dark Horse: *One-shot ('The Origin') 1992, 4 issue miniseries ('The Liberator') 1992-1993, 3 issue miniseries ('Alien Justice') 1992-1993, 4 issue miniseries ('The Wages of Sin') 1995, One-shot ('Nexus Meets Madman') 1996, 4 issue miniseries ('Executioner's Song') 1996, 3 issue miniseries ('God Con') 1997, 4 issue miniseries ('Nightmare in Blue') 1997*

The first *Nexus* series was a black and white magazine that introduced a mysterious, immensely powerful hero and the planet where he lived, Ylum. Nexus is driven by terrible dreams to kill mass murderers. In telling his new lover, Sundra Peale, the story of his life, Nexus explains that his first execution was that of his father, Theodore Hellpop, who had destroyed a whole planet before escaping with his wife to Ylum, where Horatio was born. Writer Mike Baron swiftly introduces Dave, a Thune alien, groups of political refugees led by Tyrone, and the bodiless heads used to generate fusion energy by evil slavers. Beautifully drawn by Steve Rude, from the very beginning this was an excellent foray into science-fiction territory, albeit with a costumed central character.

The second Capital series was comic-sized, in colour, and introduced Judah Maccabee, The Hammer, who has modelled his life on Nexus and happens to be Dave's son. Briefly relieved of his head by the slaver Clausius, Judah joins the regular cast. Nexus always had a humorous side (though whenever Clonezone the Hilariator started cracking jokes this mysteriously evaporated) and the guest appearance of Badger (6-8) set the tone for the comic adventures of Judah that punctuate the more serious storylines. Tortured by the executions he must undertake, Nexus tries surgery to keep himself awake, but the resultant insomnia nearly destroys him, until he answers the dream calling him to kill the President of the Web (16). He's unprepared for Judah and Sundra's intrusion and the subsequent discovery of the secret behind his powers that causes the dreams in 18 and 19.

Steve Rude needed the occasional guest penciller (including Eric Shanower and Keith Giffen) to keep up a monthly title, but with 27 he took a longer leave of absence, returning for 33. Mike Mignola, José Luis Garcia-Lopez and Rick Veitch all filled in as Baron's plots became more and more convoluted. Judah becomes bodyguard to Cohesive Web (Earth based government) ambassador Ursula, Nexus and Sundra, get back together, but Nexus' hit-list still seems never-ending, provoking all sorts of repercussions, and everyone fears him wherever he turns up because they assume he's out to assassinate someone. Paul Smith draws 37, 38, 43 and 44 to give Rude more time and Badger makes another appearance in 45-50, culminating in the death of a major character. With 51 Smith becomes the regular penciller, Nexus decides to shove his job as avenging angel, and the race for the presidency of Ylum is in full swing. Tyrone emerges as the victor, and the Merk recruits another Nexus, Stanislaus Korivitsky, as Horatio leaves for Flatlandia. This ties into the *Next Nexus* miniseries, in which an old enemy's daughters, with Nexus' powers, try to kill Horatio.

Rude returns (58-60) for the first part of the new Nexus' mission, but after his departure there is a high turnover of artists, which seriously disrupts the quality. In an effort to kick-start things Baron has the new Nexus killing innocents as well as murderers, with the Web blaming Ylum for his murderous sprees. Horatio's old powers are restored in 75, and Hugh Haynes draws the last issues of the regular series from 72, but you miss Rude's smooth, dynamic artwork. His departure seemed to de-motivate Baron too, with the humour all but disappearing from plots that seemed to drag on from issue to issue.

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* Available in a collected edition

Nexus: 'The Origin' is a retelling of the hero's life by Baron and Rude, in preparation for the title transferring to Dark Horse. When Nexus returned it was in the hands of Stefan Petrucha and John Calimee, and, in 'The Liberator', considers what happens to the masses when someone kills their leader. Baron and Rude return for 'Alien Justice', in which Nexus must travel to the Thune homeworld in search of Dave's wife. Baron and Mike Allred co-write *Nexus Meets Madman*, with art by Rude, and it's a delightful if inconsequential episode that doesn't impinge on either of their ongoing plotlines. 'Executioner's Song' is presented as a miniseries but numbers itself as *Nexus* 89 in the indicia. It begins with the desecration of Horatio's parents' graves as Michana Loomis goes on a rampage, upset by her father's execution at his hands. Succeeding miniseries continue the numbering while presenting each story separately. 'God Con' is quite literally about a convention of divine beings held on Ylum (including Jesus, Mohammed and Buddha) with its attendant religious conflicts. In 'Nightmare in Blue' readers are given a chance to vote for the character that Nexus will execute next, from a list that includes the mother of his children.

Throughout *Nexus*, Baron tried to create a complex universe where Nexus' actions are not only important but where Nexus is part of a society in which freedoms have been hard-won and must be constantly defended. Nexus chooses Ylum as a home precisely because it is in a state of flux, a place where refugees with all sorts of different beliefs gather for refuge. The interplanetary intrigues and personal vendettas that make up most plots keep the level of adventure and excitement high, but the heart is in its rich depiction of misfits and tortured souls, from Horatio himself to Judah and even Ursula. Without Steve Rude, however, Nexus is hard to read. His inspirational artwork lifted the series way above its competitors, and no one else can make the series as resonant as he can.~NF

Recommended: 1-20, 45-50, 'The Next Nexus', 'Nexus Meets Madman', 'Alien Justice', 'Executioner's Song', 'God Con', 'Nightmare in Blue'

NFL SUPERPRO

Marvel: *One-shot 1991, 12 issues 1991-1992*

Let's quote from Marvel's blurb on each title page: "Phil Grayfield's career as a pro football player ended soon after it began due to injuries. Now, as a result of a fantastic accident, he has a new career, as a super-powered hero who uses his amazing abilities to fight crime and defend the sport he loves from those forces that would seek to corrupt it." Not a joke, not a parody, not a hint of tongue wedged in cheek. Redefines the term 'low concept'.~WJ

NICK FURY, AGENT of S.H.I.E.L.D.

Marvel: *Series one 18 issues 1968-1971, series two 47 issues 1989-1993*

Splitting *Strange Tales* into two books gave Jim Steranko the chance to write and draw full-length S.H.I.E.L.D. stories at his psychedelic best. Frankly, his plots rarely made much sense but are vindicated by the sheer style that made 1-3 and 5 seminal comic-book works. They're reprinted as two issues of *Nick Fury Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. Special Edition*. Sadly the creators who followed attempted to mimic his work, but Steranko is inimitable.

Gary Friedrich wrote most of the succeeding first series issues, yet the run suffers from a lack of continuity: for instance, Countess Valentina and Laura Brown are unaware or unconcerned that Nick Fury dates them in alternate issues. 12-14 are the best efforts but were not enough to stave off cancellation with 15. 16-18 were published a year later as all-reprint issues of the S.H.I.E.L.D. stories in *Strange Tales* 136-144.

Not once in forty-seven issues does the second series strike the right chord. *S.H.I.E.L.D.* distinguishes itself from the staple diet of comic-book superheroes when focused on the espionage/James Bond approach. This run gorges on aliens, resurrected characters, excessively recurring villains and superpowered S.H.I.E.L.D. agents. Bob Harras' first six issues continue in the same questionable vein he initiated in *Nick Fury vs S.H.I.E.L.D.* Relief arrives in the form of D. G. Chichester, who scripts most tales to 31. It is no coincidence that the series' best run, in 20-23, 25 and 26, is accompanied by Jackson Guice on pencils. The story is another Red Skull, Baron Strucker and H.Y.D.R.A. conspiracy, but nevertheless just manages to scale the dizzy heights of mediocrity. The epilogue in 27-29, guest-starring Wolverine, disappoints as Chichester's fight dialogue exerts unreasonable demands on readers' credulity and Ernie Stiner takes over on artwork. A strip less suited to his cartoonish style is hard to imagine. Scott Lobdell's run from 32-37, 40-41 is disastrous, as all pretence of sub-plot, supporting cast and characterisation goes out the window. Gregory Wright handles the swan song (42-47) and achieves something of a resurgence, but he wields his powers of resurrection far too freely.~APS

Recommended: Series one 1-3, 5

NICK FURY vs S.H.I.E.L.D.

Marvel: *6 issue miniseries 1988**

Bookshelf-format series in which Bob Harras pens the second most controversial story in the annals of *S.H.I.E.L.D.* (see *Marvel Spotlight* 31 for the first). Half the S.H.I.E.L.D. regulars die before 1 starts, as Nick Fury discovers corruption and subterfuge within the organisation in a highly promising first two issues. But Harras loses everyone with a rationale so questionable that even Marvel decided it was necessary to 'correct' portions of the story in the second regular series and the 1994 *Fury* one-shot. Internally shattered, S.H.I.E.L.D. is disbanded at series' end and not revived until *Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (second series) a year later. Paul Neary's polished pencils take no part of the blame.~APS

The NIGHT

Amaze Ink: *One-shot (0) 1995*

Dan Vado and Norman Felchle contrived a title combining two then popular elements. There's the starkly contrasting shadowy black and white style artwork as used by Frank Miller in *Sin City*, and the impossibly proportioned hero with even more impossibly proportioned guns. Even better, there's a good story with a nod to the Ditko heroes of yesteryear.~FP

NIGHT FORCE

DC: *Series one 14 issues 1982-1983, series two 12 issues 1996-1997*

The mysterious Baron Winters never seems to leave his spooky old Washington townhouse with its back garden leading into history, and draws to himself people who will be able to help him deal with occult problems whether they like it or not. Marv Wolfman kicked off the series with a long story about Vanessa Van Helsing, granddaughter of the vampire-slayer, who acts as a psychic conduit and is therefore in great demand with various nefarious organisations. Unfortunately the normal world thinks she's mad. To rescue and cure her The Baron recruits Jack Gold, a washed-up journalist whose promising career was cut short by alcoholism, and Donovan Caine, a professor of parapsychology. In later stories he uses a serial killer to destroy a strange monster that's imprisoned the inhabitants of an apartment building by taking away their will to resist, and a cannibal on death row to defeat a murderous dream entity. He also has to call upon an old lover to rescue Vanessa when he sends her on a mission to exorcise the ghosts of Nazi plotters from an old house without seeing it's a trap. The second series begins with a sect of time-travelling occultists possessing young children, who start killing adults. It provides an ongoing villain for the Baron while he tries to avoid becoming the Thirteenth Man, a vessel for all the souls unclaimed by Heaven or Hell for all eternity.

Wolfman's scripts are very strong in the first series. His characters are by no means perfect - especially the Baron, a fascinating occultist always two steps ahead of the police, who consider him a charlatan. He lies and manipulates freely, and is willing to send his "force" to their deaths if necessary. The

second series suffers from ill-paced stories, which seem like sketches for longer series, with too much jammed into the pages and jumping from one incident to the next. The ending to the second series, the weakest "let's leave room for another revival" bit of plotting since *Lost In Space*, is a particular let-down. Gene Colan atmospherically illustrated the first series, using a very light inking technique and relying on colour to bring to life the monstrous acts depicted, and suggesting rather than showing most of the violence. The second starts with Brent Anderson in good form for a couple of issues and goes through a series of McKeever clones, most notably Shawn Martinbrough and Jake Love on issues 5-7. The art is a little more visceral but generally restrained enough to remain scary.~FJ
Recommended: series one 11-14

The NIGHT MAN

Malibu: *23 issues, 1 Annual 1993-1995, 4 issue miniseries 1995-1996*

Created in the same accident that created the Strangers, the Night Man's abilities took a little longer to develop, largely because he spent months in a coma. When he recovers, Johnny Domino finds that his eyes are extremely light-sensitive, and that he can tune in to the evil thoughts of those nearby. Given that he's not got much else in the way of abilities to start with, his one-man war against criminals has interesting and not always favourable repercussions. The ever-changing artists are distracting, although no-one terrible works on the title, but overall *The Night Man* is a decent if inessential superhero title. The miniseries, involving parallel dimensions and assorted mystical mumbo-jumbo, is plain dreadful.~WJ

NIGHT MUSIC

Eclipse: *3 issues 1984*

A collection of rare and early works by P. Craig Russell, whose detailed, highly illustrative style is at once realistic and fantastic. The first issue includes a science-fiction tale from 1979 and adaptations of songs by Mahler, the second has two stories about dreaming and 'Dance on a Razor's Edge', about the dreams and death of Yukio Mishima. 3 is an adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book* story, 'The King's Ankus'. Though these are immature works they are not without interest and are still beautifully illustrated.~NF
Recommended: 3

NIGHT NURSE

Marvel: *4 issues 1972-1973*

This series, by Jean Thomas and artist Win Mortimer, tells the story of three young nurses. There's a plucky black girl working her way out of the ghetto (oy vey!), a spoiled débutante slumming in the working world, and a nice middle-class blonde girlie. They face the hazards of everyday life on the wards: stopping terrorists from taking over the operating theatres, being summoned to take care of elderly recluses in spooky Gothic mansions, being propositioned by hunky visiting millionaire playboys... yeah, right, that happens all the time! In the category of "So bad it's a must-have item"this series, thanks to initially limited print runs and the fact that most readers destroyed it in disgust, is now achieving some desirability as a kitsch collectors' item.~HS

NIGHT STREETS

Arrow: *5 issues 1986-1987**
Caliber: *2 volumes 1987-1988*

A well conceived and produced story about criminal life in an un-named city. It's a place protected by the Black Dahlia, a vigilante in fishnets, and has a protection racket run by a six-foot tall talking cat with a feral nature. Trouble starts when another organisation attempts to assume the role of Katt and Associates. The high story content prevents excess talking heads becoming boring and more than compensates for the shortcomings of the art, although Mark Bloodworth improves throughout. Unjustly neglected, this puts many more professional titles to shame. Caliber published two collections, and you'll need to buy the second for the conclusion.~FP
Recommended: 1-4, Book 2

The NIGHT TERRORS

Chanting Monks Studios: *1 issue 2000*

Bernie Wrightson's 'Spuds' and William Stout's 'Go Fish' are the main attractions in this horror anthology. The former's pencil-only story starts well, but lacks a decent finish, while the latter's funny, clever and creepy, if short. Publisher, Joseph M. Monks writes the final two tales but both rely so much on hiding what's really happening, through ambiguity or omission, that the conclusions seem corny rather than horrific. A promised second issue never appeared.~NF

NIGHT THRASHER

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries ('Four Control') 1992-1993, 21 issues 1993-1995*

The queue for the most ridiculous name ever bestowed on a comics character starts with Dwayne Taylor, intense poor-little-rich-boy armoured teenager who founded the New Warriors. The miniseries is a successful mix of corporate mystery and superhero action as Taylor searches for the person behind a takeover attempt on his family foundation. 1-14 of the ongoing title are bereft of any spark, with the well-intentioned but miserably executed polemic about racial division in 6 typical. Kurt Busiek becomes writer with 15, and improves the title, applying practical solutions to villainy using Taylor's wealth. The final two issues are the best of the series, with Night Thrasher at odds with his charge Rage, a 14-year-old built like the Hulk, unhappy with his lot and reacting the only way he can.~FP

NIGHT TRIBES

WildStorm: *One-shot 1999*

Dull horror nonsense as two former *Wetworks* characters find new team-mates and repel the hordes of hell. For once quality told, and Night Tribes haven't been seen since.~WJ

NIGHT WARRIORS: Darkstalkers Revenge

Viz: *6 issue miniseries 1998-1999*

Based on the computer game from Capcom, this tells the bewildering saga of a bunch of supernatural creatures that use any excuse to fight each other. Well rendered, but ultimately impenetrable.~WW

NIGHT ZERO

Fleetway/Quality: *4 issue miniseries 1989*

By the time they reached this old tosh Fleetway/Quality had dredged right through the bottom of the barrel and into the compost beneath as far as *2000AD* material was concerned. With a he-man hero and dealing with the problems of succession in the dystopian Zero City, there's a total lack of inspiration, and, violence apart, it both reads and looks as if it had been produced in the 1950s. It's distressing to consider how many trees died so that this pap could see print on two separate occasions.~WJ

Clive Barker's NIGHTBREED

Marvel/Epic: *25 issues 1990-1992*

Charged by an otherworldly entity with locating a homeland for monsters on Earth, the Nightbreed travel the remote back streets of North America searching for sanctuary, often encountering other Nightbreed who aren't prepared to follow the leader. 1-4 adapt the *Nightbreed* film, which was Barker on autopilot, and those are the best issues. A contender for Most Ridiculous Character Seen In Comics is the guy who rips out his spine to use it as a lasso in 7. Wouldn't a rope be easier? Gratuitously gory, with an almost child-like desire to shock, there's little to be recommended beyond the violence. A two-part series *Jihad* pits the *Nightbreed* cast against the Cenobites from *Hellraiser*, and is better than any regular issue, with excellent art from Paul Johnson.~WJ

NIGHTCAT

Marvel: *One-shot 1991*

This one-shot was the result of a deal struck by Marvel with one Jacqueline Tavares, a singer who thought that dressing up as a superhero would enhance her career. Oops. Using her likeness, but presumably not her actual biography, the Mighty

Marvel Monolith created a comic only Helen Keller could love, exhuming every cliché in comics to generate another feline femme fatale in a Marvel Universe already overstocked with same. The real life Ms. Tavares allegedly sued Marvel for failure to deliver the further adventures of Nightcat, as stipulated in her contract. She should have sued them for ending her career by putting her in this piece of tat in the first place.~HS

NIGHTCRAWLER

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1986, 4 issue miniseries 2001*

The first miniseries is written and drawn by Dave Cockrum, who has the teleporting X-Man sucked into the Well at the Center of Time, first seen in the Nightcrawler solo tale in *Bizarre Adventures* 27. The subsequent adventure owes a huge debt to Cockrum's love of the swashbuckling Barsoom yarns of Edgar Rice Burroughs, full of lusty, sword wielding maidens, pirates and floating citadels, where Nightcrawler is mistaken for an annoying Elf-thing called a Boggie. Enthusiastic, predictable and in the final analysis, very silly.

What a difference fifteen years makes, as the second bite of the cherry examines the inner strength and faith of Nightcrawler. Now a Catholic priest-in-training, he becomes embroiled with a Russian Mafia ring who smuggle and trade in economic migrants, enslaving the men and prostituting the women. Universe-saving tactics and exotic superpowers prove of little use in the sordid and uncomfortably real world powerfully depicted by writer Chris Kipiniak and artists Matthew Smith and Mark Morales. A very readable change of pace.~WW

NIGHTCRY

Creative Force Designs: *6 issues 1994-1996*

Horror anthology from Joseph M. Monks combining lacklustre short slasher fiction from newcomers with translations of remarkably tame mystery tales from Mike Deodato Jr's early days in the Brazilian comic industry. Dull and unsatisfactory.~WW

NIGHTFALL: The Black Chronicles

Homage: *3 issue miniseries 1999*

Nightfall is a secret police force set up by the Vatican to monitor demons. The comic has an attractive noir-ish feel that well outshines the actual story, which is clichéd and populated by characters that feel like they've come straight off the rack.~DB

NIGHTHAWK

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 1998*

Millionaire playboy Kyle Richmond drinks a potion to prevent a heart condition ending his life. An unexpected side effect increases his strength and stamina at night. He initially becomes an amoral version of Batman, fighting crime for kicks before joining The Defenders and learning about actions and consequences. In this story he seems to die only to be returned to the land of the living with the impossible power to see crimes before they happen. He tangles with Daredevil and apparently kills him, followed by a hellish sequence in 2 and 3 where Kyle, weighed down by Daredevil's corpse, realises he's being manipulated. The artwork by Richard Case is clear and good at the surreal side of hell if not the horror. Jim Krueger's writing is competent enough but his plot just doesn't deliver.~SW

NIGHTMARE

Skywald: *23 issues, 1 Annual, 1 Special, 1 Yearbook 1971-1975*

The success of Warren's black and white horror line spawned many imitators, and *Nightmare* was Skywald's first attempt to cash in on the trend. The company name was derived from the surnames of its two publishers, Sol Brodsky and Israel Waldman, and it was the latter's past that set the tone for *Nightmare*'s early issues. Waldman's I.W. line issued a vast range of reprinted material from liquidated publishers, and this same pool of material filled 1-2, along with lacklustre art from the likes of Ross Andru and Syd Shores. It was occasional work by the likes of Ralph Reese, with two superbly drawn strips in 4 and 5, Doug Wildey (5, 6) and Mike Kaluta (6) that enlivened the otherwise moribund 1-6, only otherwise notable for their high gore quotient. 7 saw a significant shift in direction with an influx of Spanish and South American artists such as Ramon Torrents (7, 9) and Francisco Cueto (7, 13, 15), and the hitherto largely unknown Al Hewetson became principal writer, becoming editor with 9. He infused Nightmare with his quirky personality, which was not always a good thing, but at least it made the title distinctive. Writers (and readers) began to appear in stories, there was a big increase in bizarrely laid out editorial pages, and the art became more frenetic, with panel borders all over the place or banished, and art bleeding off the page. In many ways it anticipated 1990s comics. From 10 on artists like Ricardo Villamonte and Pablo Marcos dominated, although there are others of particular note. They include the excellent Ferran Sostres (7, 8, 12, 22) Collado (a beautiful strip in 20), Suso (14, 17) and the young John Byrne, also in 20. The later years were dominated by increasingly peculiar series, the strangest of which was the Shoggoth serial. It actually starred Hewetson and whoever was drawing the strip that issue battling horrible beasts bent on taking over the world! Readers were encouraged to remain vigilant and join the battle, but not enough did and *Nightmare* was cancelled. In addition to the regular magazine there were the 1972 annual and the 1973 winter special containing new stories, while the 1974 yearbook contained mostly well chosen reprints. Confusingly 21 was cover billed as a 1974 summer special and 23 was the 1975 winter special. Both featured old material.~DAR

Alex Niño's NIGHTMARE

Innovation: *1 issue 1989*

Of all the comics that take five minutes to read, this is at least the strangest. Psychologist Peter Alex Nemo (!) flies through a patient's nightmares dressed in superhero costume (as you do) and rescues her. This is very much Jack Kirby's *Sandman* territory, with the massive proviso that, since Alex Niño drew this, we are dealing with some genuinely visionary artwork. Future issues were planned, though quite where he could have taken the strip is hard to see. However, for fans of Niño this sole issue will certainly hit the spot.~DAR

NIGHTMARE

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1994-1995*

Edvard is the monarch of the Realm of Nightmare, and, as a long-time foe of Doctor Strange, feeds off human terrors. However, when he falls in love with Roxanne, star of countless horror films, he leaves his realm in order to be with her, and this causes disturbance in many quarters. The parts involving Roxanne work very well, as she emerges from her initial romantic daze and realises Edvard is less than pleasant, probably not human, and not at all good for her. The greater part of the story, though, concerns an attempted coup in the Realm and Edvard's plans to establish a base of operations on Earth. The action really doesn't make much sense, but the artwork by Joe Bennett and Mike Witherby meets the needs of the story well: plenty of Gothic extravagance and a truly frightening Edvard. It's above average, but the plotting weaknesses make for a frustrating read when it's clear that Ann Nocenti can do so much better.~FC

NIGHTMARE THEATER

Chaos!: *4 issue miniseries 1997*

Very much in the tradition of the EC horror anthologies, this is hosted by Mr Mischief and Psychotica whose own story is told during the prologue and epilogue of each issue (by Brian Pulido and Fauve). There are some noteworthy stories here, but overall there's nothing new or particularly frightening about any of them. Of interest: 'One Perfect Night' in 1 is drawn by Berni Wrightson (who also provides covers for all four issues); Flint Henry draws 'The Ballad of the Eyeball Dragster', written by David Quinn (1) and 'A Life in the Cinema' (2); 'The Monster Hunters Club' in 1 is drawn by Rick Veitch; 'Itchy Peterson: Born Lucky I Guess' is by Alan Moore and Val Semeiks (4); and 'Cut! Cut! Cut!' is by Robert Loren Fleming and Mike Hoffman (2).~NF

NIGHTMARES & Fairy Tales

Slave Labor: *3 issues + 2002 to date*

A series of horror stories, narrated by a doll, Annabelle, about her different owners. In the first (1-2), Dominique, who claims to be a vampire, demands a decision from her friend, Morgan. Scared, however, Morgan tries to avoid Dominique, until her friends start to die. In 3, a haunted nunnery consumes Dominique's newborn child. These are disturbing, and evocative gothic tales from Serena Valentino, with expressive artwork from Foo Swee Chin (hints of manga and Aubrey Beardsley) – very promising.~NF

NIGHTMARES ON ELM STREET

Innovation: *6 issues 1991-1992*

New stories for those who can't get enough of Freddy Krueger and his bloody habits. Successfully conveys the remorselessly nasty spirit of the films, but much better is the three-part *A Nightmare on Elm Street: the Beginning*, in which Freddy's early days are recounted.~WJ

NIGHTMASK

Marvel: *12 issues 1986-1987*

Using a character who lives and operates in dreams there's always the option of ethereal left-field encounters and shaded revelations, and so it is here. Directionless from the off, when the Haitian in the supporting cast suddenly becomes involved in voodoo you know the barrel is being scraped. The only surprise is why the editors let this pelt headlong into mediocrity so swiftly.~FP

NIGHT'S CHILDREN

FantaCo: *4 issue miniseries 1991, one-shot ('Foreplay') 1991, one-shot ('Double Indemnity') 1992, 4 issue miniseries ('Vampyr!') 1992-1993*

Millennium: *One-shot ('Origins') 1993, 2 issue microseries ('The Vampire') 1994, one-shot ('Liaisons') 1994, 2 issue microseries ('Red Trails West') 1994-1995, 2 issue microseries ('Ripper') 1994-1995*

In the first miniseries, Billy is picked up off the street by vampires, Klaus and Julia, and initiated into their lifestyle. Klaus is considered dangerous by other vampires, however, and his control over Billy (and Julia) is challenged when Billy falls for Samantha. 'Double Indemnity' is two separate strips about Klaus and Julia's romance and Billy's attempts to help a friend through drug withdrawal. 'Vampyr!' is Klaus' origin, set in Transylvania in 1458, enslaved by the Turkish, Fatima. Short stories in the Millennium series are a prelude to the ambitious 'Ripper', which sees Klaus in London during the murders of Jack the Ripper, who appears to be targeting the members of Klaus' former brothel. Wendy Snow-Lang's themes are based on the search for self and love, even amongst vampires. Stylistically, there's a lot of talking and she uses a lot of head-shots and close-ups, in a stiff, painterly fashion.~NF

NIGHTSIDE

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 2001-2002*

Sydney Taine and Ape Largo are private detectives specialising in cases involving, and usually on behalf of, supernatural beings. They call the world of werewolves, vampires, wizards and witches the Nightside. The premiere story arc has them searching for mystic artifacts stolen from Japanese temples as a Yakuza invasion threatens to destabilise the uneasy pact that allows the Nightsiders to co-exist with the ordinary humans of the Dayside world. Hackneyed rubbish as Marvel tries to belatedly cash in on the success of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.~WW

NIGHTSTALKERS

Marvel: *18 issues 1992-1994*

On the face of it, teaming three of *Tomb of Dracula*'s supporting cast as hunters of the supernatural wasn't the brightest idea for a series, but it works. Frank Drake is Dracula's descendant, Hannibal King is a vampire who resists his craving for human blood and Blade is a single-minded vampire hunter. Given to fighting among themselves as much as with supernatural menaces, this is the best of the Midnight Sons titles, largely due to writer D.G. Chichester's gruesome imagination and facility for dialogue over the first eleven issues. 14 and 15 are Siege of Darkness chapters and 16-18 returns more characters familiar to *Tomb of Dracula* readers, and ends the series in style.~FP

NIGHTVEIL

AC: *7 issues 1984-1985, 1 Special 1988*

The sorceress member of Femforce stars in solo adventures, meant to be trippy and supernatural, but mostly lame and clichéd. The special had a rather nice Mike Kaluta cover. Two spin-off issues of *Nightveil's Cauldron of Horror* appeared in 1989 and 1990, black and white 1950's horror reprints with our heroine appearing in a framing sequence.~HS

NIGHTVISION

Tundra: *One-shot 1993*
Rebel: *4 issue miniseries 1993*
London Night: *One-shot 1996*

The night vision is Blythe's ability to instantly recognise other vampires. Alluring and deadly, she's on a quest to deal with them all. David Quinn's distinctive narrative is at times poetic, but more often tiresome, and occasionally wanders up his arse in a succession of hollow soundbites like "Fetish freaks in the Hollywood babe machine". The art is standard seductive babes for boys too young to buy a proper sex mag.~WJ

NIGHTWATCH

Marvel: *12 issues 1994-1995*

Pity poor Kevin Trench, Nightwatch. Designed as a blatant copy of Spawn, he encounters a succession of ridiculously named villains, while his supporting cast becomes ever more ill-proportioned. The short run indicates that Spawn readers obviously didn't fall for the con. After his title was cancelled it's likely that Nightwatch went into demolition, as he averaged the destruction of one building per issue.~WJ

NIGHTWING

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1995*, 74 issues +, 1 Annual, 1 80pg Giant, 1 Secret Files 1996 to date, 4 issue miniseries ('Nightwing and Huntress') 1998, one-shot ('Our Worlds at War') 2001, one-shot ('The Target') 2001*

The miniseries begins with one-time Robin Dick Grayson's resignation from the superhero business, but on receipt of a letter with information about his parents' murderer, he puts on a new costume and heads off to Kravia. Here his family, the Flying Graysons, had apparently seen something they shouldn't have during a circus tour. Written by Denny O'Neil, it's about tidying up the past and clearing the way for a new life. Initially, it reads poorly, but it does its job without fanfare.

In his own series after many years, during which a very devoted fan base had built up, Dick Grayson moves into Blüdhaven, a place in need of a superhero. It's had a corrupt government for a long time and is now home to Black Mask's large criminal organisation. Initially, Nightwing tries to work with the police force, but finds corruption endemic, and police in league with the crime boss, Roland Desmond, also known as Blockbuster. A former policeman and Blockbuster are the background villains for most of the series, occasionally coming into the spotlight as necessary. The policeman gains a new identity as Torque after his head is twisted through one-hundred-and-eightydegrees (9-11), while Blockbuster's search for a replacement heart leads to a crossover with *Birds of Prey* (45-46). There's also a wannabe hero calling himself Nitewing, who is successively beaten up, trained by Nightwing, jailed for his vigilantism and take under Torque's wing.

Apart from the villains, much of the series is about Dick Grayson's decision to live away from Gotham, with a new home and friends, as well as a new career. He works in a bar to be close to the police and then joins the police force (31) to fight the corruption from within. Romantically, his landlady and then Huntress (26-29 and 'Nightwing and Huntress') are options before he starts to spend more time with Barbara Gordon (Oracle), particularly from 58.

After a few early appearances (6, 13-15, 25), Robin and Batman have not visited much, (though Superman turns up in 30), and the separate identity has been emphasised by the relatively few crossovers with Batman stories. There have been some, though, crossovers, with Cataclysm (19-20), No Man's Land (35-39), Officer Down (53), Last Laugh (62) and the Bruce Wayne: Murderer storyline (65-69). 1-70 are written by Chuck Dixon (except 53), who's made a valiant attempt to create a distinctive role and milieu for Nightwing. His successor Devin Grayson was known as a fan of the character, but it's too early to tell what she may change. Her first storyline (71-73) has Nightwing protecting the wife of the corrupt police chief, taking him out of Blüdhaven on a comedy chase around Europe. Artistically, the series has suffered from several artists more inclined to distortion and design than to conveying narrative effectively, including Scott McDaniel (1-40) and Trevor McCarthy (60-68). Greg Land's artwork is prettier and more effective (41-46*, 48-52, 54-56), while new regular penciller, Rick Leonardi (from 71, after fill-ins on 57 and 59) is perfectly competent without being showy. Issue to 39 have been collected.

The only annual was an unconvincing tale from Grayson and Land of Nightwing marrying a woman he's trying to protect. The 'Nightwing and Huntress' miniseries is by the same team, but more interesting visually because of the inks by Bill Sienkiewicz. The two heroes team up to protect a mob informer and share a little romance along the way, despite having differing views on vigilantism. Nightwing and Oracle spend a dull issue being chased through various time periods in 'Our Worlds At War', before Dick Grayson is framed for a murder and has to become The Target to clear himself, in the one-shot of the same name.~NF

The NIMROD

Fantagraphics: *7 issues + 1998 to date*

Lewis Trondheim's autobiographical 'Approximativement' is stylistically somewhere between *American Splendor* and *Maus*, but it's much funnier than either of them. This first issue contains part one in which Trondheim-as-bird agonises over changes to his strip 'La Mouche' (The Fly) requested by a Japanese publisher. With daydream sequences, lunch with an agent and numerous anecdotes, this is a clever and knowing portrait of 'real' life. Most issues contain several shorter strips, many wordless, as in the story about a visitor who finds himself progressively wrecking the room in which he's been asked to wait (1) and 'Diablotus', which is actually the major strip in 2. Kaput & Zösky are spacemen who shoot first and ask questions later in 3, while 4 contains 'The Stroll' a McConey strip about a walk in the countryside. 'Genesis Apocalypso' in 5 is a stunning (and funny) history of mankind (explaining religion and philosophy) while 6 and 7 return to 'Approximativement'. Fantagraphics publishing Trondheim was considered something of a coup, but disappointing sales almost led to cancellation after the second issue. The title (meaningless other than as an anagram of 'Trondheim'), struggles on with one or two issues a year, but is always worth the wait.~NF

Recommended: 1-7

NINA'S ALL-TIME GREATEST...

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1992, one-shot 1994*

Nina Paley's underground style strips have 'self-publishing' written all over them. This isn't a personal mini-comic, however, and no matter how much these strips resemble the comix of the mid-1970s, there's no bite whatsoever. In fact, despite their charm and high degree of craft, their observations on cartooning and sexual politics are crass and somewhat asinine.~SW

NINE OF ONE A Window to the World

Immedium: *1 issue + 2002 to date*

Oliver Chin illustrates badly-spelled text about a group of Californian highschool kids' reactions to the September 11th terrorist attacks in the US, and their history teacher's project sending them to interview older people about their reactions and 'take' on the events. The first two "reports" fill the back of the comic and their earnestness and predictability suggest this is aimed at other children, although there's no other indication of this. The drawings are crude in a catalogue art kind of way and often look traced. All in all, heart in the right place, historical value minute.~FJ

9-11

Alternative: *1 volume ('Emergency Relief') 2002*
Dark Horse: *1 volume ('Artists Respond') 2002*
DC: *1 volume ('September 11th 2001') 2002*

The comics community responded to the planes crashing into the World Trade Centre with three anthologies, each running over two hundred pages, issued to raise funds for assorted relief charities and families of the bereaved. As with all such projects, they're very much the mixed bag, with goodwill and enthusiasm transcending content. A few highlights from each book: P. Craig Russell's poetic piece opening the Dark Horse volume, and Alan Moore's voice of reason closing it, and also Bill Stout's oddly moving 'Shoes'. Jim Harrison has an interesting viewpoint in the Alternative book, which has a good gag from Peter Kuper, an effective Will Eisner political cartoon and Jon Hastings' justification for working on. There are good Astro City and Hellblazer stories in the DC volume, also featuring Michael Moorcock's memories of London's World War II blitz. A topic common to all three volumes, but particularly apparent in the Alternative Comics one, is autobiographical contributions conveying the shock and concern felt by the creator on following events. This is largely a shared experience, with few offering unique insights, and the repetition dulls the impact. More interesting are stories of people affected personally by the fallout such as Mike Manley (Alternative) and Jim Mahfood (Dark Horse). It might have been unwise to involve superheroes as in the DC volume, but Dan Jurgens and Alan Davis, and Dwayne McDuffie and Denys Cowan do so with subtlety, the latter pair also looking beyond the tragedy for possible reasons in their Static story. Surprisingly very few creators question what might have prompted the deed, so well done Tom Hart (Alternative) and Bob Harris (Dark Horse), and Brian Pulido writes a moving testimonial to a corollary victim. Of course, criticism has no relevance here. These are three volumes of at the very least professional stories and illustrations. If you've not done so already, dip your hand in your pocket and buy at least one of them.~FP

NINE PANEL GRID-1996

James Pyman: *7 issues 1994-1997*

The title is the format for every page in this self-published comic. Each issue contains a chapter of the meandering ongoing 'Greetings From Asbury Park', the story of a couple taking a trip to Asbury Park and hanging out there. He's English, she's American and it's all very dull. It's combined with individual short observation and mood pieces in which Pyman wanders the streets of London, or details a night in the pub as seen through the eyes of a drinker. As much as anything *Nine Panel Grid* appears to be a form of storytelling discipline for Pyman, whose art progresses from issue to issue, although perhaps not as much as he might like. For someone basing his stories in the everyday world, his stiff and often incorrect figurework doesn't yet match his ambition and requires more attention.~FP

NINE VOLT

Image/Top Cow: *4 issue miniseries 1997*

When Ragnar's own race is destroyed, he travels to Earth to help defend it from the Tritons, who have already begun their invasion. Teamed with a government agent, Frank Holden and an android, Digit, the first battle comes when religious zealots, convinced the Tritons are angels, occupy the laboratory where the remains of human vivisections are housed. The miniseries really only sets the scene for the battle against the Tritons, hinting for instance at the identity of the human mind now occupying Digit. Written by Cliff Son and drawn by Anthony Chun (with lots of inkers) there isn't enough explanation to make this a completely satisfying read but there's something to be enjoyed in the mystery of Digit and her aggressive personality.~NF

1963

Image: *6 issue miniseries 1993*

It's a matter of record that having written the groundbreaking *Watchmen,* Alan Moore came to despair of the grim and downbeat superhero comics it spawned. Here he takes the opposite tack, by pretending it's 1963 (right down to fake ads and editorial pages), to produce a pastiche of early Marvel comics in all their enjoyable simplicity. What elevates this beyond affectionate parody is that while aping the early Marvel style – artists Steve Bissette, Chester Brown, Dave Gibbons, John Totleben, Jim Valentino and Rick Veitch obviously have a fine old time imitating Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko – Moore brings his own plots and characters to the party. Each issue spotlights different characters, maintaining that they're issues of an ongoing run, complete with footnotes referring back to hilariously titled non-existent comics and Marvel-style letters pages. The issues can easily be read individually, but chronologically they're titled *Mystery Incorporated, No-One Escapes the Fury, Tales of the Uncanny, Tales from Beyond, Horus Lord of Light* and *The Tomorrow Syndicate.* The best stories are those with but a superficial similarity to Marvel characters, such as the gloriously beat Tibetan-trained mystic Johnny Beyond in *Tales from Beyond.* The clash of 1960s beatspeak with New Age waffle from the 1990s provides both the funniest moments and the best story. The ongoing plot running through all issues was leading towards a giant-sized issue contrasting the 1963 heroes with the 1993 Image counterparts, to be drawn by Jim Lee. Sadly, the lazy bugger never got around to it.~WJ

Recommended: 1-6

1984/1994

Warren: *29 issues 1978-1983*

This magazine-format title bills itself as "illustrated adult fantasy", which here translates as "porn with a science-fiction theme" or "Hey! If I set this in the future or another planet, I can cram in any amount of rape, torture, bestiality, cannibalism and compliant robot women, and claim it's daring and progressive fantasy." This really is a foul series, reeking with hatred and resentment for women and sex – and apparently convinced that these attitudes are normal and universal. Let's take 'Little Beaver' in 26 as an example. A group of men take a pubescent girl, place a bomb inside her vagina, and send her to the enemy in the expectation that she will be raped by the commanding officer, thus triggering the bomb. And the style of the artwork (and previous 'Little Beaver' stories) leave you in no doubt that this is intended to titillate, which is deeply frightening. Presumably there are men who can read this comic without feeling ashamed to be male, but one wouldn't care to meet them. Admittedly, not all of the comic is that extreme, and many stories aren't porn at all, though they're all weak and poorly told. In the whole series, there's only one story genuinely worth reading, 'The Missionary' by Carlos Gimenez in 15, which makes a good point about the fixation on pain and suffering in certain aspects of Christianity. Are there other reasons for opening any of these issues? Well, if you must, there's artwork by Alex Niño (every issue), Richard Corben (1-8) and Frank Thorne (7-29). And let's not forget Peter Hsu, whose 'Ariel Hart' stories (22, 26) are easily the most explicit in the series, and whose frankness deserves some kind of recognition – it's not every artist who would want the world to know that he's a graduate of the Barbie Doll School of Anatomy, and has only the vaguest idea of how the female pelvic area is put together. The title is updated to *1994* with 11, but avoid.~FC

NINJA

Eternity: *11 issues 1986-1988*

You've got to hand it to Ninja's main 'creative' team, writer C. J. Henderson and penciller Kevin Farrell – they do maintain a consistent standard of shiteness throughout every issue of this wretched waste of trees. The main 'story arc', about a female Ninja who works for the Red Dog Tactical Squadron, a covert branch of the US Army, remains politically naïve and drearily formulaic from first issue to last; the artwork never ever shows any sign of becoming even vaguely competent. There's not a single reason why anybody in his or her right mind would want to collect this one – Search and Destroy!~AL

NINJA BOY

WildStorm: *6 issues 2001-2002*

Action heavy coming-of-age tale set in a fantasy feudal Japan following the career of Nakio, a young Ninja-in-Training. He's fine with all the running, kicking, jumping, magic-seeming tricks stuff, he just can't get his head around the killing people thing, silently or otherwise. It's predictable stuff, full of ghosts and magic and talking animals, and the modern eternal verities are well represented: friends and the lack of same, the hells of school, and of course vengeance and responsibility. Naka's personal arch enemy is the tyrant Amatsu Mikaboshi, killer of Nakio's brothers and someone the young Ninja should have killed but couldn't.~WW

NINJA ELITE

Adventure: *7 issues 1987-1988*

Spinning off from *The Adventurers,* and cashing in on the then current ninja phenomenon, this details the exploits of Night Wind from age ten to her becoming an agent of the Amita K'un warrior society, all set prior to her joining The Adventurers. Although well illustrated by James Fletcher, Gabriel Morrisette and Frank Reyes, it's pretty pedestrian stuff.~WW

NINJA HIGH SCHOOL

Antarctic: *4 issue miniseries 1987**

Eternity: *Series one 36 issues (5-39*, 3½, 1 Annual 1988-1993, series two ('In Color') 13 issues 1992-1993*

Antarctic: *64 issues + (0, 40-102), 2 Specials, 10 Swimsuit Specials, 14 Yearbooks, 1994 to date, 12 issue limited series (V.2) 1999-2000, one-shot (Brenner Printing Presents…) 1993, one-shot (…Talks About Sexually Transmitted Diseases) 1993*

Ben Dunn's long running parody series features a manga style and industry in-joke repertoire based on the eternal triangle, albeit with a modern slapstick twist. Jeremy Feeple is a nerdy teen at the ever-so-surreal Quagmire High School. The beautiful and deadly Ninja Princess Ichi Kun (Aka Itchy Koo) has been ordered by her grandfather Ichinohei to marry if she wishes to inherit the leadership of his Ninja Clan. Superpowered alien princess Asrial must marry an average Earthling – and there's no one on the planet more average than Jeremy – in the name of securing allies to ensure galactic peace and stability. The first Antarctic issues relate the trio's first meeting and the huge, destructive and inconclusive duel the two girls fight over the bewildered nerd. Matters are further complicated by the machinations of Rivalsan Lendo, head of the rival Ninja Corporation, who wants to marry Itchy Koo to secure his powerbase, and Jeremy's own mother who is revealed to be a deadly Ninja Warrior in her own right. Jeremy, understandably, is like a bunny in headlights through all this, helpless and hapless. Whatever the outcome, he'll have no say. Many of the wacky supporting cast, such as Jeremy's missing father Bob (the world's greatest ratcatcher), or science teacher Professor Steamhead, originally appeared in Antarctic's first publication, *Extremely Silly Comics* and that's probably the fairest description of Jeremy's life. It's even a good way to define the title's publishing history.

Originally planned as a three part miniseries, runaway success prompted Antarctic to pump out another issue, and a compilation volume containing a new story set the day after the duel, reprinted by Eternity as 3½. The demands of a successful series seemed beyond the small, fledgling company and they promptly licensed the title to Eternity who republished the issues with substantial art revisions from the perfectionist Dunn. 5 is the first new issue, and although sometime story collaborator James Hanrahan tones down the humour in places, the irrepressible nature of the series soon escapes again. Taking a lead from practically everything they've ever read, and piling on the plot-twists in the manner of a cheap soap opera, Dunn and Hanrahan go into a creative frenzy. In short order we meet time-travelling witches, a cross-dressing delivery "boy", intelligent dog super-warriors, three space twerps who will eventually become the Zetramen (in the first of many spin-off miniseries) and a bizarre back-story wherein Jeremy's Ninja problems all began as part of a mysterious debt of Giri that Ichinohei owes the departed Bob Feeple. 11 is notable as Dunn goes solo once more with a moving "origin" tale set in World War II as Jeremy learns of Grandpa Ichinohei's wartime exploits and encounter with Russian peasant Tasha, and how he adopts her daughter Anna. Jeremy's mother is also named Anna...

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*Available in a collected edition

The series goes from strength to strength, managing to produce the illusion of progress without ever going anywhere or evolving beyond its audience. Only in the very latest days of the Eternity run does any major plot development occur, as Asrial's alien foes the Zardons attack Earth with giant monsters and kidnap the alien princess. Itchy and Jeremy stow away to rescue her. On returning to a devastated but victorious Earth, Jeremy is seduced by a demon and is trapped in Hell. Eternity also reprinted 1-13 again, this time in colour, and produced an annual which was comprised of material contributed exclusively by Japanese fans of the series.

Dunn was clearly unhappy with Eternity, and a year after their final issue he released 0, a compilation of short tales set just before the first issue, and then returned with more of the stories his audience wanted, but it wasn't quite the same. Although much improved technically, and with old friend Herb Mallette scripting, much of the juvenile enthusiasm was gone and it shows. Cheesy parodies such as "the Y- Men" (41-42) did not impress and eventually Dunn quits entirely (45) turning over the reins to John Marshall and Matt Lumsford who substitute action for charm to disastrous effect. The series staggered on for a while but was suspended with 74 so Dunn could try a different tack. The experiment with colour in *Ninja High School* Version 2, with reduced humour content and much more science fiction/superhero action was clearly satisfactory, and the regular series resumed with a putative resolution to the Jeremy/ Itchy/ Asrial triangle before heading off into pretty much the same territory as always, although with a much greater emphasis on action over humour.

Throughout its history Antarctic has championed the cause of the unpublished and wannabe creator. The Yearbooks invited submissions from fans and filled their pages with NHS related material that mostly ranged from the mediocre to the awful, but at least they gave people the chance, whilst the Brenner one-shot was a remarkably useful guidebook of tips to help creators self-publish. The STDs one-shot is filled with advice on how to avoid or if necessary treat various forms of venereal disease, coyly presented by *NHS* cast members. Twelve collections reprint all issues to 45, but Antarctic are now gathering twenty issues a time in 'Textbooks', two of which have so far seen print. For the really dedicated four volumes of 'Perfect Memory' reference all issues to 100, compile publication history, list related miniseries and reproduce design and sketchbook pages.~WW

Recommended: 1-9, 11, 33-39

Small Bodied NINJA HIGH SCHOOL

Antarctic: *7 issues 1992-1995*

Comedy episodes in the young lives of Asrial, Jeremy, Sammi and others, whether it be a game of giant *Monopoly* (1), a techno-fairy destroying video recorders in school (2), Sammi's delivery of chicken to new girl, Lana, which causes her father to destroy the restaurant (5-6). There's even mice from space trying to steal gems from the local museum (7).~NF

NINJAK

Valiant: *28 issues (2 x 0, 1-26), 1 Yearbook 1993-1995*

Independently wealthy Colin King maintains a dual career as the crimefighting Ninjak, concentrating his efforts on infiltrating seemingly impregnable secret organisations. As his name suggests, he's an accomplished swordsman and martial artist, and is also adept at espionage. He often works, reluctantly, under the sponsorship of Neville Allcott and the British secret service. This is all established in 1-4, written by Mark Moretti and drawn by the team of Joe Quesada and Jimmy Palmiotti, and together with the Moretti-written and drawn 0 and 00 issues, running through his background and origins, they're the best of *Ninjak*. Beyond that point it's not until 11 that a regular new writing team of Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning take over, with artist Andrew Currie joining them in 13. The trio's dry run in 7 is the best of their work here, and no sooner have they settled in than they're displaced by José Gonzales, who lasts until the final issue. Lack of any cohesive direction is a constant problem, with almost every issue changing one member of the creative team. While *Ninjak* never plummets into mediocrity, there's little inspiration beyond the early issues either. The series is abruptly cancelled mid-plot.~FP

Recommended: 0, 00, 1-4

NINJAK

Acclaim: *12 issues 1997-1998*

Kurt Busiek and Neil Vokes tell the tale of Denny Meechum, a stereotypical computer dweeb who can become the hero of his favourite game. When Denny finally beats the game (*Last Starfighter* anyone?) he also releases all the monsters and villains, magical servants of Lord Akuma, a primordial mystic defeated by the game's designer in the distant past. Said designer, a trés cool chinese monk, wrote the game to find his own successor and is surprised when a nerdy kid solves the puzzle and gets the power. But then who else would play a game called Ninjak? Woefully hackneyed plot, ineptly handled. Even the numerous guest stars (including Colin King, who was Ninjak in the Valiant incarnation of the title) barely lift the proceedings above dreadful.~WW

THE NINTH GLAND

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1997*

A short black-and-white horror story by Renée French. Two young sisters who have an obsession with surgery find a strange, calf-like creature that seems to be in distress because of a growth on its leg. They take it to the local hospital and ask the janitor to operate. He needs little persuasion, and they find some very strange things inside the growth. This is a disturbing story, not just because of the scalpels at work, but because it suggests that acts of compassion are motivated principally by voyeurism and the desire to control, and it makes its case very persuasively.~FC

Recommended

N.I.O.

Acclaim: *4 issue miniseries 1998-1999*

A prototype robot warrior is activated before programming is completed in order to protect the son of a programmer, who suspected corruption at the top of the manufacturing company. An accident instils the consciousness of another programmer within the robot. Any potential is wasted, though, as three issues of fighting robots is all that follows, albeit well drawn by Joe St Pierre.~WJ

NO DUCKS!

Last Gasp: *2 issues 1978-1980*

Anthropomorphic underground that Walt certainly wouldn't approve of! Packaged, like *Commies From Mars*, by Tim Boxell, a lack of big names makes this even patchier than a normal underground, but Hunt Emerson and J. Michael Leonard offer good fun, and issue 2's Moebius parody by Steve Leialoha is well worth searching out.~NF

NO GUTS OR GLORY

Fantaco/Tundra: *One-shot 1991*

Set a challenge to produce a twenty-four page comic in twenty-four hours with no prior thought, Kevin Eastman did just that. Good for him. To then package the resulting old tosh and try to sell it at $3 a pop shows more than a little cheek.~WJ

NO HONOR

Image: *4 issue miniseries 2001*

Cat burgling art thief Russell Jordan Thomas, known as Random, is possessed by the thousand year old spirit of samurai Tannen when he steals an ancient sword. Their personalities are initially at odds, with Tannen not approving of Random's dishonourable livelihood. Britt Morrigan, a slinky ex-thief working for the NYPD, is on Random's trail and doesn't mind bending the rules, with other police portrayed as either foolish, corrupt or jobsworths throughout. In 3 Random agrees to head for Japan when things hot up for him in New York. Fiona Kai Avery plots a good story, but mounds of exposition in the dialogue ruin the pacing. Clayton Crain's storytelling can be downright obscure in places, relying on close-ups of unestablished detail, but it turns the pages nevertheless. An entertaining idea marred for want of some creative editing.~SW

NO HOPE

Slave Labor: *9 issues 1993-1995*

Jeff Levine's cartooning is basic, and his stories are often unrounded, dealing as they do with everyday incidents, but there is something curiously gripping about *No Hope*. It's well-dug ground – going to punk gigs, having a dead-end job, drinking too much, watching TV – but Levine injects moments of self-revelation into his ongoing diary of pointless youth. With 7 his style changes dramatically from increasingly smooth cartoony figures to rough, brush-rendered portraits and street scenes, relying more on observation. From this point the stories cease to centre around the same characters and the book loses cohesion, but there's some good drawing, particularly in the dialogueless strips. *The Days Go By Like Broken Records* reprints 1-6.~FJ

Recommended: 3, 8

NO JUSTICE NO PIECE

Head Press: *2 issues 1997-1998*

Rather strangely titled anthology fundraiser aiming to promote awareness of the Comic Book Legal Defence Fund, which provides for those in the comic industry having to defend themselves in court. Despite few of the contributors being very well known, the work is generally of a decent standard, often with a point to make. The best story is Mike Baron's in 2, about over-zealous protection of children.~FP

NO NEED FOR TENCHI!

Viz: *7 issue limited series ('Part One') 1996*, 7 issue limited series ('Part Two') 1996-1997*, 6 issue miniseries ('Part Three') 1997*, 6 issue miniseries ('Part Four') 1997-1998*, 5 issue miniseries ('Part Five') 1998*, 5 issue miniseries ('Part Six') 1998-1999*, 6 issue miniserie ('Part Seven') 1999*, 5 issue miniseries ('Part Eight') 1999-2000*, 6 issue miniserie ('Part Nine') 2000*, 7 issue miniserie ('Part Ten') 2000-2001*, 4 issue miniseries ('Part Eleven') 2001*, 6 issue miniserie ('Part Twelve') 2001-2002**

Picking up the story from an animated series, trouble ensues after high school student, Tenchi, inadvertently releases the demon, Ryoko from his grandfather's shrine. It just happens that Ryoko is actually a marooned space pirate. Becoming Tenchi's unwanted house guest, he teases the hapless youth whenever possible, and soon other alien women have arrived to plague him including: Ayeka, an alien princess; Sasami, her mischievous sister; and Washu, Ryoko's mad scientist "mother". 'Part One' sees Tenchi's troubles double when Ryoko look-alike, Minagi arrives on behalf of alien scientist, Yakage, who tries to steal Tenchi's powerful sword and kidnap Ayeka. In 'Part Two', Yakage challenges Tenchi to a duel to the death while Ayeka's life hangs in the balance. Then Tenchi's childhood girlfriend puts Ryoko and Ayeka through their paces to see who is most worthy of his affections in 'Part Three'. The group have some adventures in space on their way to rescue Princess Asahi's father, Takebe from rival, Tatetsuki before discovering that Yume is using mind control to try to give herself supreme power in the universe ('Part Four' to 'Part Six').

In 'Part Seven', there's an adaptation of 'Tenchi Muyo!: The Movie' in which the group travel back in time to prevent a strange fate befalling Tenchi's mother. This is followed by a series of shorter stories ('Part Eight') and then another trip into space, this time in search of a lost treasure and a meeting with an old flame of Ryoko's. 'Part Ten' features the visit of Ayeka and Sasami's mothers, a vengeful sea god, assassination attempts and monkeys. The final storyline ('Part Eleven' to 'Part Twelve') sees the friends trying to rescue Ayeka who's been kidnapped and brainwashed by Garyu into attempting to kill Tenchi. Hitoshi Otuda's ability to switch between light romance, more serious soap opera and rousing space adventure, means the series does try to offer something for everyone, and it's well drawn (though keeping mostly to Japanese manga conventions). It can be charming as well as too cute for its own good, but interested readers could do worse than try 'Part Seven' which offers a good mix of moods.~NF

NOBLE CAUSES

Image: *One-shot ('First Impressions') 2001, 4 issue miniseries 2002*, 4 issue miniseries ('Family Secrets') 2002-2003*

Taking the Fantastic Four as his starting point, Jay Faerber has twisted and crunched the idea of an extended family group of superheroes into something very appealing indeed. In the one-shot he establishes the respect and awe with which the Noble Family are held, and introduces a sense of a past that at no point becomes intrusive. This is via a plot in which younger son Race arranges a first meeting between his family and his fiancé. She's the viewpoint leading most of the first miniseries, starting with the superhero wedding in 1, and she learns that behind the public façade, the Nobles are more dysfunctional than most. Faerber's hefty application of TV soap opera techniques extends to very good endings, with 1 a total shocker. Each issue additionally runs a back-up set sometime in the past offering further insight into the lead tale. A series like this requires an artist producing big-screen artwork and strong storytelling, and Patrick Gleason fits the template perfectly, also managing inventive visual asides to boot. So, all in all, a well written and drawn comic that's the equal of most superhero titles released in the past few years.

Unfortunately, for the most part, the second miniseries is nowhere near as good. It's a slimmer plot from Faerber, but the fault lies squarely with the art of Ian Richardson, which is all style and no substance. This time Zephyr's pregnancy is the central issue, but the best portion is 3's back-up concerning the lonely childhood of bastard offspring Frost. There are a few nice pages concerning old enemies in the final issue, but let's hope future series improve.~FP

Recommended: One-shot, miniseries one 1-4

NOBLESSE OBLIGE

Rae Comic Co: *4 issues 1995, Series two 3 issues 1996*

Peter Oblige is on the run from his past and a failed heist in which several bank guards and robbers were killed. Looking for redemption, he accidentally comes between a racist cop and a gang in The Projects. Unfortunately for the story, our hero doesn't seem capable of thoughts that don't include his lost love, Mia. Confusion abounds around the possible criminality of the Police Commissioner, whether there really are a couple of superheroes in the city and whether the setting's America or the UK. Christopher Reeve's artwork is occasionally effective, but, more often than not, simply adds to the uncertainties in his script.~NF

NOBODY

Oni Press: *4 issue miniseries 1998-1999**

Writers Alex Amado and Sharon Cho's title character is the protégée of a mysterious masked mystic man. Her ability to alter her appearance helps her to outwit detectives so as to find and do battle with a serial childkiller. The mood is naturally dark, apart from some fun with a satanic rat in a pentangle, but Charlie Adlard's stiff black and white art is undistinguished.~GK

NOCTURNAL EMISSIONS

Vortex: *4 issues 1991-1993*

Cross-pollinate prime, late 1960s S. Clay Wilson and Mary Fleener at her most oblique and you still don't have an adequate handle on Fiona Smythe's work. Nocturnal Emissions is a forum for her curious mix of graffiti and underground-style stories. Two continuing series begin in 1. 'Toad in the Hole' is a sort of 'acid in wonderland' trip strip, while 'The Mannequin' chronicles the amorous misadventures of city girl Gert in Nevada. As well as some other aggressively idiosyncratic strips, a third series, 'Skin of Fate', begins in 3, which involves protagonists Pussy & Roach and a much-sought-after human tattoo-hide.~SW

THE NOCTURNALS

Bravura: *6 issue issues 1995**
Dark Horse: *One-shot ('Witching Hour') 1998**
Oni Press: *One-shot ('Troll Bridge') 2000*, 3 issue miniseries ('The Dark Forever') 2001*

The initial series was written and drawn by Daniel Brereton as part of Malibu's creator-owned Bravura line. It's a pulp-influenced tale of 'monsters' that have escaped from the corporation laboratory where they were created. Doc Horror leads a group comprising Komodo, Halloween Girl (Eve), Polychrome, Firelion, Starfish and The Gunwitch who are caught between factions fighting for control of the Mob and hunted by Mister Fane and the Corporation. 'Witching Hour' collects the story that ran in *Dark Horse Presents* 125-127, but in colour with Eve trick or-treating on Halloween. In 'Troll Bridge', a lantern transports Eve to other dimensions on her quest for treat-or-treat goodies. In black, white and orange, this has guest artwork from Joyce Chin, Art Adams, Stephen DeStefano, Kieron Dwyer, Ted Naifeh, Stan Sakai, Jay Stephens, Jill Thompson, Bruce Timm and Adam Warren, as well as appearances from Usagi Yojimbo, Jingle Belle and the Scary Godmother. The whole team is back together for 'The Dark Forever', investigating a plague of zombies and a mysterious lost city under the surface of Pacific City. Oni has also released two collections: 'Black Planet' collects the Malibu series and 'Unhallowed Eve' both 'Witching Hour' and 'Troll Bridge'. Perhaps not completely at ease with scripting initially, Brereton nevertheless has a good ear for dialogue and has created a set of strong characters. 'Troll Bridge' is a lot of fun in its own right, but the series is at its best when Brereton provides his own, atmospheric, painted artwork, and he's one of the few who can use paint well in comics.~NF

Recommended: Bravura 1-6, 'Unhallowed Eve', 'The Dark Forever' 1-3

NOCTURNE

Marvel UK: *4 issue miniseries 1995*

A film-maker discovers an old costume that grants him extraordinary powers, but that seems to be taking over his mind. Very stylishly drawn by José Fonteriz, fresh from his sojourn on *XXX Women*, and written by Dan Abnett. This enjoyable sequel to the old Night Raven character was sadly a victim of one of Marvel UK's periodic cutbacks and never really received a fair chance at distribution.~HS

NOMAD

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1990-1991, 25 issues 1992-1994*

Possessed of a complicated background (explained in the first issue of the ongoing series), Nomad appeared periodically from *Captain America* 282 as Cap's costumed assistant. The costume has gone by the time of this well-conceived miniseries from Fabian Nicieza, James Fry and Mark McKenna, as Jack Monroe is developed into an armed vigilante with a conscience following a drug trail. Unfortunately it also lands him with an infant, leading to ludicrous scenes as Nomad dukes it out with assorted groups of ne'er-do-wells with a baby strapped to his back. The ongoing series begins well, with Nomad following the peripatetic inclinations of his namesake, but quickly becomes bogged down in crossovers and mundane plots. It takes notice of the title's cancellation for matters to improve with the 'American Dreamers' story in 22-25. Nomad is reunited with his sister to confront his past, but there's plenty who don't want him to have a future. A captivating plot and unpredictable conclusion make it a shame the title was permitted to slip.~FP

NOMAN

Tower: *2 issues 1966-1967*

In *T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents* 1 the aging Doctor Dunn transferred his consciousness into the body of an android. His personality can now travel to any android duplicate at will. Add to this a hooded cloak that grants its wearer invisibility and you have the versatile Noman. The scripts are unspectacular and the choice of the experienced but altogether too benign Ogden Whitney as artist seems inappropriate. 1 has stories drawn by Bob Kane and Paul Reinman, a truly unpleasant teaming, and the Giunta studio, neither faring any better than Whitney's anodyne depiction. There are also fillers starring T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agent Lightning drawn by Mike Sekowsky in 1 and Chic Stone in 2. Both sixty-eight page issues sport Wally Wood covers more exciting than the contents. Stick to Noman's appearances in *T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents*.~SW

NON

Red Ink: *5 issues + 1997 to date*

Non is quite the achievement, growing from a reduced size comic to a squarebound and boxed trade paperback a step at a time, while gathering a reputation as a cutting-edge small press anthology. The problem with it, though, is that almost none of the contributors match the talent of guiding light Jordan Crane. Crane starts well, and improves throughout, his thin-lined style gloriously expressive, deflecting the nagging notion that he takes too many pages to move a story forward. Dean Haspiel contributes a shocker to 4, and Larry Stone, a contributor from 1 is a good cartoonist, but a less successful writer. The extravagant handmade packaging and consequent exorbitant price have made 5 a rare item, and the only occasion thus far where Crane is matched for talent, with contributors including Megan Kelso, Paul Pope and Steve Weissman. Strips are in black and white and yellow (or pink), and the main anthology book is accompanied by two small wordless pocket sized paperbacks, Crane's *The Last Lonely Saturday*, a moving silent strip in brown, cream and yellow about a widower, and Kurt Wolfgang's stylised *Where Hats Go*. That's at times puzzling, and ultimately the story is a labour of love lacking content beyond the excellent cartooning. Overall 5 impresses, but with the extras available separately, as reading it doesn't reward the effort of the publisher or reader.~FP

NORMALMAN

Aardvark-Vanaheim: *8 issues 1984-1985**
Renegade: *4 issues (9-12), 1 Annual 1985-1987**

Jim Valentino's first major comic series is a protracted satire on the superhero comic. Normalman has been rocketed from Arnold by his parents (only Arnold didn't blow up) to Levram, where he's the only non-superpowered person. The Ultra-Conservative takes exception to this, and Normalman finds himself relying on Sgt Fluffy, Captain Everything, Sophisticated Lady and the Countess of Monte Crisco to get him safely back to Arnold. Each issue concentrates on a particular company or genre (EC in 3, Disney in 4, team comics in 7, Cerebus in 10, American Flagg in 11, Archie in 12), and as parodies go it benefits from having a real story and not relying too much on the same sort of material every issue. It's not hilarious but it is good for a laugh. The series concluded in *Normalman 3-D Annual*, which is a rare comic making good use of 3-D.~NF

NORMALMAN – MEGATON MAN Special

Image: *One-shot 1994*

Jim Valentino and Don Simpson get together to parody the then current state of comics as Megaton Man and Captain Everything (two of the stupidest characters around) decide to join a successful comics universe and make some real money. With assistance from Larry Marder and Bob Burden, who draw their own creations (from *Tales of the Beanworld* and *Flaming Carrot*) throughout, Valentino and Simpson manage to throw pretty much everything but the kitchen sink at the issue. Unfortunately, it's only okay, because, fun as it is to see lots of cameos of characters, the targets have been hit so many times before that the script's practically one big cliché (though the Neil Gaiman section's vicious enough).~NF

NORTHERN Lightz

Northern Lightz: *7 issues + 1999 to date*

A magazine all about the joys (or otherwise) of marijuana. It's more parody – or should that be piss-take? – than satire, although the creators are not above some jabs at current social and political mores. Its closest equivalent is probably *Viz*, but, despite the near single-minded inclusion of weed in every strip, *Northern Lightz* actually offers more variety of comedy. It rewrites cultural heritage in 'Spliffy the Bush Kangaroo' (1), 'Mission Implausible' (1), 'Thunderbuds' (3), 'Adventures in Sherweed Forest' (4), 'Sir Spliffalot and the Quest for the Holy Hookah' (6) and 'Hashpuss '(7). Regular features include 'Buck Roachers' by Alan Grant and Frank Quitely (1-6), The Astounding Ganjaman by Jim Stewart (1-7), 'Spliff Wars' (1-5), Dave Alexander's Mad Mentol MacBam Brothers (1-7, survivors of *Electric Soup*), Captain Zappa by John Miller (4-7) and Cronic the Budbarian by Paul Van Linden (5-7). A one-off worth mentioning is Frank Quitely's Greens (6), in which the family are on holiday near a nuclear base. It's somewhat hit or miss, but depending on your sense of humour and tolerance (or otherwise) for drugs, this is worth a try at least.~NF

NORTHGUARD

Matrix: *5 issues 1984-1985**

Caliber: *3 issue miniseries ('The ManDes Conclusion') 1989*

Northguard was never a traditional superhero, although writer Mark Shainblum certainly got the trappings down right. What made him different was that his abilities were the creation of a benign Canadian corporation, and the well-defined supporting cast were as much a part of the comic as the lead. The Matrix series was called *New Triumph* in the indicia, although it's Northguard's name forming the largest part of the logo, and it was collected by Caliber when they issued the conclusion. By this time Gabriel Morrisette's art has developed very nicely, and there's a darker tone to the proceedings of a religious maniac intending blood and thunder. Inventive and appealing throughout, there have been many worse superhero comics, and this tops all Canadian efforts to date.~WJ

NORTHSTAR

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1994*

Having gone to such great pains to out Northstar as the first openly gay superhero in *Alpha Flight* 106, Marvel then seemed to change their mind about the whole issue. Their second-string mutant speedster engages in perfectly pedestrian anti-terrorist activities. Leaden.~HS

NOSFERATU

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1991*

Reprint of Phillipe Druillet's extraordinary Gothic adaptation of the Nosferatu legend, drawn in his customary, highly decorative style featuring flowing forms and pattern making. A quintessentially 1970s artist whose work is free-form and original, if sometimes frustratingly visually led, Druillet was introduced to a new audience by *Cheval Noir*.~FJ

NOSFERATU

Venus: *4 issue miniseries 1997-1998*

Holden Morris uses the character and mystique of Nosferatu to tell what he considers to be the intensely erotic tale of two sisters in 1930s England. They take up residence near an old monastery as the eerie Count Orlac prepares for his final demise: The sisters seduce each other, the Count's other female victims, and the dead guy himself whilst writing a Requiem Mass to be performed upon his eventual death. The drawing is well executed but is let down as the plot continually sacrifices content for gratuitous and exploitative sex. A waste of talent.~WW

NOSFERATU: Plague of Terror

Millennium: *4 issue miniseries 1991*

Why were people so mad-keen for *Nosferatu* comics in 1991? Millennium pitched in with this series by Mark Ellis and Rik Levins, in which the bald old ghoul is on the rampage once more, in search of attractive victims to bite. Brings nothing new to the vampire genre.~FJ

NOSFERATU: A Symphony of Shadows, A Symphony of Shudders

Tome: *2 issue microseries 1991-1992**

Dreadful and laborious adaptation of the 1922 German Expressionist film by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, which was in itself a theft of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*; in fact, the Stoker estate's subsequent copyright trial was the first successful defence of an intellectual property this century. Screenwriter Hendrick Galeen only changed names: Count Dracula = Graf (Count) Orlac, Transylvania = Wallachia and Whitby = Bremen. Raphael Nieves and Ken Holewczynski try their best, but the movie script is minimal, relying on spooky lighting and creative sets to work its magic, leaving the comic with no real meat to its bones.~WW

NOSFERATU 1922: Silent Screamers

Image: *One-shot 2000*

Nosferatu 1922's main purpose is to promote a new line of horror action figures, which never bodes well. So, what do we get? A retelling of the 1922 movie, sandwiched between two halves of a comeuppance tale of a nasty boy who wants to buy the Nosferatu figure. If you want to buy the toy, buy the toy. But don't bother with the comic.~DB

NOT BRAND ECCH

Marvel: *13 issues 1967-1969*

'Brand Ecch' was the tongue-in-cheek editorial manner in which Marvel referred to the product of their competitors in the mid-1960s. 1-8 caricature Marvel and occasionally DC superheroes with varying degrees of success. From 9 the page-count increases and the emphasis broadens to encompass general parody. There's pleasure to be derived from seeing the regular Marvel artists lampooning their characters, with Jack Kirby proving surprisingly adept at parodying his own Thor (3) and Fantastic Four (7) origins. Marie Severin's demonstration on how to draw the Marvel way in 13 is hilarious, but the best issue to sample is 7, also including Roy Thomas and Severin's Superman parody.~WJ

NOT QUITE DEAD

Rip Off/Knockabout: *4 issues + 1993 to date*

Gilbert Shelton's *Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* and *Fat Freddy's Cat* strips have transcended generation gaps to become universal crowd-pleasers. Until *Not Quite Dead*, he'd been recycling his 1960s characters, and the first issue reads like the work of a man trying to create something new, but with little new to say.

Not Quite Dead are the longest dues-serving band in existence, hauling their equipment to whichever dive will provide beer, pizza and a little money. Shelton, with French cartoonist Pic contributing to the art, doesn't really hit the spot in 1, where the one-pagers are okay, but the longer strips string together a succession of punchline gags, and don't work. There's a slight improvement thereafter, but only 3 is noteworthy. Here Shelton plays a variation on the myth of Robert Johnson meeting the Devil at the crossroads. It's sustained, funny, and makes a point. All Shelton's cover paintings are magnificent.~FP

Recommended: 3

NOVA

Marvel: *Series one 25 issues 1976-1979, series two 18 issues 1994-1995, series three 7 issues 1999*

Nova was conceived as a way to return to basics, to the freshness and youthful fun of the early Spider-Man. Enter Richard Rider, who stumbles upon an alien helmet that confers on its wearer super strength, flight and sundry other superpowers. Richard is just a student, unsure about his role, lacking in confidence, and finding it hard to explain his late homework and mysterious absences while out fighting second-string villains like Diamondhead and the Sphinx, not to mention various heroes who initially mistake his intentions in the time-honoured Marvel tradition. Marv Wolfman gave Nova an (unintentionally) funny supporting cast full of comedy racial stereotyping. While establishing his own set of villains, Wolfman also had him meeting Thor (4) and Spider-Man (12, continued in *Amazing Spider-Man* 171). At one point, Nova even pops up in the Marvel offices, suggesting that they do a comic about him in one of those uncomfortable "superheroes are real, kids" scenes. However, there was too much re-working of an old formula and too few fresh ideas to make the character popular. John Buscema's by-numbers artwork didn't help, although later issues pencilled by Carmine Infantino are an improvement.

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* Available in a collected edition

Marvel decided to have another try at a solo title following the success of *New Warriors*, in which he appeared with new powers and a new costume. It was unlikely there was a great deal of fan recognition out there so they might as well have created another character altogether. Marvel's final attempt to revive Nova was a lacklustre affair, with the hotheaded superhero making a mess of things while at college. In an effort to appeal to hardened Marvelites the run brings back most of his old foes and features numerous premiership heroes (the FF, Spider-Man, Iron Man, Captain America, The Hulk). Erik Larsen includes every cliché he can, and the art by Joe Bennett and Armando Durruthy is entirely standard.~FJ

NOVAVOLO

Jungle Boy Press: *One-shot 2000, 1 Annual 2001*

Created by Jai Nitz and Greg Kirkpatrick to showcase their writing and artwork respectively, this accomplished anthology contains a mix of old and new, though not everything works. Most of the stories are written by Nitz (except for Phil Hester's 'The Wretch') and Kirkpatrick provides the attractive pencils for a humorous view of comic conventions ('Con Sketch') and the superhero 'Raven's Blood'. Kirbor the Unwashed is a homage to Kirby's monsters. There's also a funny single page Wretch strip by Mike Worley, in the style of Henry Boltinoff. The Annual continues in this vein ('Con Sketch' and Kirbor reappear) with more of an emphasis on the comedy (after the strips there is 'The Official Handbook of the Monkey Universe').~NF

NOWHERE

Drawn & Quarterly: *5 issues 1997-2000**

Debbie Drechsler weaves a deceptively slow and evocative yarn of teenaged Lily, a girl becoming a woman in the turbulent yet idyllic 1960s. Her less than storybook family moves from the big city to the provincial town of Woodland, located on the edge of a deep, dark forest. Lily, lost and confused, slowly makes new friends and discovers the world of boys and juvenile sexual politics as she and her sisters come to terms with all the unwanted disruptions in life, changes she increasingly has no control over. How she adapts to the inexorable procession of life in an immutable environment while undergoing the social, emotional and physical changes of puberty provides an intriguing but always enthralling peek into the lost arena of adolescence, successfully using the cultural climate as both metaphor and stage. Excellent graphic biography (collected in one volume as *Summer of Love*) that every thinking comic fan should see.~WW

Recommended: 1-5

NOWHERESVILLE

Caliber: *Special 1995, 4 issue miniseries ('Death By Starlight') 1995-1996, One-shot ('The History of Cool') 1997*

Stylish it may be, but talented creator Mark Ricketts' fatal flaw is an obsession with 1950s beat. The authenticity will repel many not prepared to wade through scrupulously accurate slang, rendering much of the earlier issues hard going. It's a shame as his investigator is the classic downbeat with a narrative playing in his head, and the plots are sharp, suspenseful and intriguing. Comparisons with early Brian Michael Bendis are not misplaced, down to the static art, and Bendis contributes to 'The History Of Cool' along with Phil Hester. Issue 3 of the miniseries doubles as *Wordsmith* 7. An Image collection incorporates rejigged versions of the special and 'Death By Starlight' featuring new panels and pages along with Galen Showman's contribution to 'The History of Cool'.~WJ

Nth MAN

Marvel: *16 issues 1989-1990*

As strange a comic as Marvel has ever produced, being partly a war title, partly a superhero title, and partly a treatise on the abuse of power. John Doe and Alfie O'Meagan spent their 1960s pre-teens in an Iowa orphanage, and events shaping them are interspersed with their current situation. Doe has become the Nth Man, a CIA-sponsored ninja, and O'Meagan is a near-omnipotent being able to erase the world's nuclear arsenal with a thought (unwittingly precipitating World War III), and to manipulate time and reality. The bizarre ending is completely in keeping for Larry Hama's continuous story, often confusing, but never dull. You're best advised to start with the first issue, and there's a reprise in the Squadron Supreme graphic novel.~FP

NUKLA

Dell: *4 issues 1965-1966*

CIA spy pilot Matt Gibbs is blown to smithereens by an enemy's nuclear defences. He manages to re-assemble himself, and his U-2 spy plane, by sheer force of will. Thus was born Nukla, the atomic spy, a blatant copy of Captain Atom in a white flight suit with red trim. The uncredited stories are over-simple; if only their twenty-seven pages were put to some entertaining use. The art was provided by Dick Giordano, who pencilled the origin story in 1, Steve Ditko who pencilled 4 and Sal Trapani who drew the balance... and also inked everything, unfortunately.~SW

NURTURE THE DEVIL

Fantagraphics: *3 issues 1994*

Stories by Jeff Johnson, full of incest and sex-and-violence and humiliation and gender switching, drawn in a nightmarish woodcut style. It's distinctive and disturbing, and at its best it connects with something raw and dark and primeval. However, the main story, 'The Garden', which is continued through all three issues, is ultimately disappointing, sliding from the mythic in 1 to soap opera in 3. Avoid 3, and make up your own ending instead.~FC

NUT RUNNERS

Rip-Off: *2 issues 1991-1992*

Bizarre, meandering fantasy about escalated competition between burger and pizza franchises. From the unreadable logo through the confused story to the usually reliable Stuart Immonen being unable to differentiate the look of his cast adequately, this is missable.~FP

NUTS!

Bantam: *2 volumes 1985.*

You have to hand it to Harvey Kurtzman; even at the end of his career he still experimented with different formats and venues for his mordant attacks on popular culture. *Nuts* was a humour paperback, ironically much like the many *Mad* magazine reprints, put together by Kurtzman and Byron Preiss. Despite the fertile ground for satire in 1980s America, the humour on show here is disappointingly weak, whether from Kurtzman and frequent collaborator Sarah Downs, or from the many other contributors such as Bob Fingerman, Rick Geary and Chris Browne. The highlight in both issues was undoubtedly Ralph Reese's beautifully drawn 'ABC of Dating', but this on its own is not enough to save the project and overall it rates as a disappointment.~DAR

OBERGEIST

Image: *6 issue miniseries ('Ragnarok Highway') 2001*, one-shot ('The Empty Locket') 2002*

Redemption story of a Nazi concentration camp doctor Jürgen Steinholz who is resurrected by 'angels' to stop white supremacists in a near-future America. Dan Jolley presumably thinks what he's written is daring and edgy, with such an obviously controversial central character. His story is weak, though, struggling to fill six issues, and it's a little tasteless to do this type of thing if you don't really have anything to say. Tony Harris's pencils are attractive enough, but wasted here and on the black and white one-shot, giving Steinholz's back story.~DB

OBJECTIVE FIVE

Image: *6 issues 2000-2001*

Teenagers Lark, Alexis and DJ set out for a desert rave, but are inadvertently infected with a 'super-soldier' virus along the way. Pumped up by their new and improved DNA, the pneumatic trio agrees to work for the Center for Disease Control, a "fifth objective" in the race to create and destroy biological weaponry. No amount of plot recapping can quite do justice to the awesome mediocrity of this truly ugly tits and ass extravaganza. Luke Lizalde is one of many young artists to have fallen disastrously under the spell of Todd McFarlane, and he faithfully replicates the master's awkward figure drawing, confused storytelling and lazily cartooned faces. Fourth-billed scripter Kevin Hoffer contributes barely literate captions and cliché-ridden dialogue, but then who in their right minds reads the dialogue in these things?~AL

OBLIVION

Comico: *2 issues 1995-1996*

When the first issue's editorial is arrogant and foolish enough to claim that "two talented individuals" have created 'a stunning amalgamation of superheroics, science fiction, espionage and cold war intrigue' it's inviting contradiction. What writer Jack Herman has done is read Jim Starlin's *Dreadstar* and some Clive Barker books, and what artist Andrew Dimitt has done is to watch Clive Barker films when he should have been paying attention in his anatomy classes. Utter bollocks, and derivative bollocks at that.~FP

OBLIVION CITY

Caliber: *9 issues 1991-1993**

Andy Garcia's adventures of art-director and underground cartoonist in and around the Oblivion Café and the Greater – and weirder – metropolis of Oblivion City. Manic humour featuring Throb, roommate Wufflehead Spurt, his girlfriend Tabby who murders the Mayor every Thursday, Meggazar Dude, the world's only Epileptic Superhero and the sundry other billions who inhabit the strangest city on Earth.~WW

Recommended: 1-9

OBNOXIO THE CLOWN

Marvel: *1 issue 1983*

First seen in *Crazy* magazine, Obnoxio's refreshingly disreputable and cynical, and here we see how he fares in the X-Men's Danger Room, and then against the horrors of jury duty. Alan Kupperberg has fun in both writing and art.~FC

OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS

CD Comics: *2 issues 2000-2001*

On meeting comic creators, Rick Beckley asked them about their strangest experience working in comics. He then passed the stories to assorted lesser-known writers and artist for adaptation in this fundraiser for The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (www.cbldf.org). The stories range from the predictable to the distressing, with standouts being a toned down version of Jamie Delano's Swedish convention experience, and Mark Waid's script instructions in 1, and the psychotic fan sending letters in Matt Wagner's name in 2. It's inessential, but for a good cause, and you'll have a few laughs. Treat yourself.~WJ

OCTOBER YEN

Antarctic: *2 issues 1996*

Brandon Graham's artwork shows a lot of promise, but what his stories are about is really anyone's guess. They jump from one element to the next seemingly unconnected scenario making little sense in isolation or connected.~FP

ODDBALLZ

NBM: *5 issues + 2002 to date*

Well, you can't really go wrong with Lewis Trondheim, can you? 1-4 serialise two stories not previously seen in English, with two more beginning in 5. The more intriguing is a McConey story in which he's appointed the manager of a company that snoops and confronts people. Throwing up some interesting moral dilemmas and paranoia amid the usual McConey friendships and interplay, it's excellent. Perhaps the other strip prompted the title. In 'Astronauts from the Future', also crediting Manu Larcenet, precocious school kids Martina and Gilbert have problems. She believes people are being replaced by robots, and he believes aliens are replacing people. They team-up to test these hypotheses. Both stories are unpredictable, and both are drawn in Trondheim's brilliant loose style. It's a shame the colour French pages are black and white here, but collections will surely follow. New stories begun in 5 see McConey transplanted to the Wild West, and the kids starting a new adventure with the danger of a planetary invasion.~FP

Recommended: 1-5

ODDJOB

Slave Labor: *8 issues 1999-2001**

Moe investigates the bizarre and fantastic from an office in Spiral City using his library and Compass of the Odd, which points towards disruptions in the normalcy continuum. Robin is an out of work 'conceptual' clown sometimes hired to help. Moose is a bar owner and Moe's landlord. Plots include Formaldehead using a stolen cookery book to open the portal to the dimension of gummi (1), Mr Jicima, Dr Roswell and Moose battling the Amish Cyborg while Moe and Robin are in Australia solving the mystery of the exploding Echidnas (3), and the invasion of the Grumblers and the story of how Moe lost his eyes (6-7). These characters previously appeared in *Odd Adventure-Zine*, and this can be amusing, but never goes anywhere.~NF

The ODYSSEY

Avatar: *1 issue + 2002 to date*

With four short, separate, strips about Medusa, Trident, Judo Girl and Orion the Hunter, this spin-off from *10th Muse*, mixing superheroes and Greek gods, does not convince. Sean Murphy shows some style on the artwork for Judo Girl, but the first two stories are mere melodramatic posturing and the last nearly incoherent.~NF

OFFCASTES

Marvel/Epic: *3 issue miniseries 1993*

Good-looking but derivative coming-of-age science-fiction adventure with thefts – 'scuse me, homages – from Moebius' *Airtight Garage*, *Blade Runner* and *American Flagg* among others.~HS

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* Available in a collected edition

OFFERED

Comics One: *2 volumes 2001*

Champion decathlete Yu Tachikawa is a test tube baby, but his life takes a rather strange turn when he's told he was fathered from the frozen sperm of the ancient warrior Gilgamesh. This is far from the least of the b-movie ideas sprinkled through Kazuo Koike's plot, which also starts with a woman called Yippie Payetta who's Adolf Hitler's granddaughter and a homunculus preserved in formaldehyde. They're probably deliberate indications that the story shouldn't be taken seriously, and it is a lot of fun, meandering over two four hundred page paperbacks. These incorporate detours in a nudist camp, an astounding bank robbery and some frankly bizarre and inexplicable interludes (hunt the eyeball) before the concluding search for the riches of a lost civilisation. There is the feeling that Koike is laughing at his cast, but the art of Ryoichi Ikegami, in realism mode, is excellent throughout. It must also be remarked upon that in a story with a high sexual content someone is very coy about genitalia. The penis is never rendered as anything other than white space encircled by a hand or mouth, and the pudenda is drawn as area radiating light. Whether purely for American consumption, Japanese censorship or Ikigami's own preference is unknown.~WJ

OH MY GODDESS!

Dark Horse: *6 issues miniseries ('Part I') 1994-1995*, 8 issue limited series ('Part II') 1995*, 11 issue limited series ('Part III') 1995-1996*, 8 issue limited series ('Part IV') 1996-1997*, 12 issue limited series ('Part V') 1997-1998*, 6 issue miniseries ('Part VI') 1998-1999*, 8 issue limited series ('Part VII') 1999*, 6 issue miniseries ('Part VIII') 2000*, 7 issue limited series ('Part IX') 2000-2001*, 5 issue miniseries ('Part X') 2001*, 10 issue limited series ('Part XI') 2001-2002, 9 issues (88-96) + 2002 to date*

Whimsical humour from writer/artist Kosuke Fujishima about Keiichi, an engineering student who accidentally rings the 'Goddess Help Line' instead of the local fast food joint, and gets a visit from the rather personable Belldandy, a first class goddess who grants him one boon. Since he's been having trouble getting a girlfriend, he wishes Belldandy will stay with him forever, without really thinking through the practical consequences – like his living in an all-boy dorm where women, even supernatural ones, are forbidden.

As the series develops first Belldandy's sisters, the older, slinky tease Urd and the mischievous, younger Sculd, then a cast of family and student characters are introduced, turning it into a charming oriental *Archie* with supernatural shenanigans on the side. Like the Riverdale students, they never seem to age or develop, so it's possible to jump in and enjoy the stories without worrying too much about the continuity. The parts are sometimes made up of two or three different story arcs, so working out where you are can be difficult. To make it more confusing Dark Horse screwed up the first series by printing the stories out of order, but rectified this in the collected version.

Fujishima's artwork is very pretty, more detailed and decorative than many manga artists, but his humour is weak. The story revolves around Keiichi's desire for Belldandy, which is constantly frustrated by the other women in his life – his and her sisters, and not very evil bad goddesses. There are many jokes about sexual tension, but the plots are usually slight and fluffy, and tip over into the maudlin at times. Some of the more fun tales include 'The Devil In Miss Urd' from part 6, where evil goddess Mara clones Urd and attempts to separate out her wicked and good sides, and 'Pretty In Scarlet' from part 9, in which Sculd swallows an angel's egg and gives birth to her own personal angel who's more trouble than all the baddies put together. Supplemental stories have also featured in *Super Manga Blast*.~FJ

OH MY GOTH!

Sirius: *4 issue miniseries 1998*, 3 issue miniseries ('Humans Suck!') 2000*

Voltaire is an animator and musician, whose mini-comics advertising his gigs transformed into this series. The first miniseries introduces the alien, Posche, who, tired of watching Earth from a distance and always misunderstood when he visits, decides to travel to the place most feared by humans, Hell. Instead of the real Hell, however, he ends up in a Goth club, where he meets the friendless Angel and, eventually, Count Lord Baron Maloderus, a villain. The second miniseries has more self-contained issues, full of scatological gags, including a Ray Harryhausen parody/homage in 2. The largely illustrative artwork of the first series becomes more traditional cartooning in the second, but the humour's very specialised and the characters too colourless to be interesting in their own right.~NF

OINK

Kitchen Sink: *3 issue miniseries 1995-1996, 4 issue miniseries ('Blood and Circus') 1998*

Not to be confused with the British humour comic of the same name, this *Oink* is a dour science fiction saga about a mutant pig seeking revenge on his totalitarian masters. Creator John Mueller is clearly influenced by the work of Bill Sienkiewicz, and particularly Simon Bisley, but brings nothing new to the painted comic book look. Mueller seemingly wants to say big things about religion, politics and science. The blurb on the back of 'Blood and Circus' claims it's a cross between *Mad Max* and George Orwell – you wish! – but the overriding emphasis on nihilistic gore is pretentious rather than profound. The second miniseries relocates the action to a post-apocalyptic Wild West, but is as full of cliches and ugly pictures as the first instalment.~AL

OKTANE

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1995**

Broad-based satire extrapolating on the then current condition of federal and local government administration and finance, and taking sideswipes at political correctness, rednecks and plenty of other targets along the way. It's also an action comic, with the dispossessed and downtrodden mad as hell and not going to take it no more, led by a giant black man-machine Oktane. Gerard Jones casts his net far too wide, and the convoluted pastiche elements prevent this from being a satisfactory action story either – though that isn't the aim. There are plenty of decent ideas lost in the muddle, and some very funny lines and scenes. Oktane constantly revising his background to engage the sympathies of those he's with is amusing, and Gene Ha and Andrew Pepoy's art is excellent throughout. Better *Oktane* than yet another assembly-line superhero, but overall unsatisfying, although Jones' editorial in the final issue should be required reading for all aspiring comic writers and plenty of those already employed as well.~WJ

OLYMPIANS

Marvel/Epic: *2 issue microseries 1991-1992*

One of the first in a flood of generic superhero parodies, and sadly not nearly the best, inexplicably published by Marvel's adult Epic imprint. It's the same old soap opera trials and tribulations of superhumans with powers like Gods (Gedditt?) in a futuristic and unfeeling world. There's a couple of good one-liners but nothing worth bothering about, much like the inking contribution of soon to be big time Todd McFarlane in 2.~WW

OMAC

DC: *8 issues 1974-1975, 4 issue miniseries 1991**

Yet another great concept from Jack Kirby. Menial Buddy Blank is transformed into a One Man Army Corps powered through a psychic link with a satellite, Brother Eye. Poor pacing and weak scripting dilute strong plots and artwork in the first series, after which Omac is given back-up slots in *Kamandi* 59, then *Warlord* 37-39 and 42-47. John Byrne remains true to Kirby's ideas in the second series, now in black and white, and produces an excellent tale concerning the consequences of dabbling with time. Byrne switches the emphasis with each issue, the most effective being Omac trapped without memory on Earth in the 1930s, and leading

a completely different existence. The story is finished in style, and the entirety ties in well without everything established by Kirby with altering anything, but can be understood without reference to any previous issues. A gem.~FP
Recommended: miniseries 1-4

OMAHA The Cat Dancer

Steeldragon Press: *2 issues 1984-1986**
Kitchen Sink: *19 issues (0, 3-20) 1986-1993**
Fantagraphics: *4 issues 1994-1995*

You would think that any comic that dealt intelligently and in a thought-provoking manner with gay, bi- and disabled issues, political scandal and attitudes to pornography, mental health and prostitution would be far too politically correct to be fun. You'd also think that with more plot and characters than your average episode of *Coronation Street* it wouldn't have time to fit in frequent sexual encounters between characters. And you'd think an issue packed soap-full of bonking cats, birds and dogs wouldn't be very hot. You'd be wrong on all counts. Omaha, which débuted in *Bizarre Sex* 9 (reprinted as *Omaha* 0), is produced by a well-informed, liberal couple who obviously know their way around the bedroom. Its strength lies in the emotional resonance of the characters, which carries you through various dramatic plot twists. For an exotic dancer Omaha is involved in her fair share of kidnappings, murders, secret inheritances, 'dead' parents who suddenly reappear, etc.

Kate Worley writes decidedly superior melodrama and Reed Waller draws the sexiest cat/human hybrids you'll ever see. Whatever *Omaha* lacks in depth it makes up for in honesty – infinitely more arousing than anything Eros has managed to put out, one of the few truly 'adult' sex comics around. Kitchen Sink reprints of the first two issues are also available, and they also publish two issues of *Images of Omaha*, collections of illos and short strips by other creators, published to benefit Waller while he was being treated for cancer. See also *Dope Comix* 5, and the entire series is available over a number of books..~FJ
Recommended: Series one 3-7, Series two 2, 3

OMEGA the Unknown

Marvel: *10 issues 1976-1977*

A large mute humanoid alien wearing a blue and red costume and endowed with superstrength lands in New York, and is somehow connected with a young boy whose parents are revealed as robots. This was off-the-wall stuff even for the experimental mid-1970s Marvel, but unfortunately only writers Steve Gerber and Mary Skrenes knew what was going on, and they never had a chance to finish the story. Avoid the hack fill-ins (7-8); loose ends are poorly tied up in *Defenders* 76-77.~FP

OMEGA MEN

DC: *38 issues, 2 Annuals 1983-1986*

Now gathering dust in back-issue boxes and only remembered for Lobo's début in 3, there are many worthwhile issues of *Omega Men* later in the run. Introduced in *Green Lantern* 141, the team began life in their own title as spacefaring superheroes united by a desire to free their occupied homeworlds. Led by the utterly charismaless Primus, the remainder of the crew were from Grim'n'Gritty Central Casting, with the only element of suspense coming from whether or not the serpentoid Demonia would betray the team to their enemies. Lacking direction and meandering, the comic finally took off when the creative team of Todd Klein and Shawn McManus arrived with 26. Their decision to sideline the previous heroic archetypes in favour of more interesting secondary characters and well-conceived new ones was wise, as was emphasising science-fiction elements instead of superheroics. When the familiar cast return Klein's given them a personality boost. There's also a varied selection of back-ups focusing on the planets in the Omega Men's solar system, with Steve Parkhouse's contribution in 28 a gem, and Dave Gibbons' dry run for *Watchmen* in 33 also worth a look. Unfortunately McManus' deadline problems mean there are art fill-ins aplenty after 30, with the best being the Dan Spiegle-illustrated mystery story in 32 with not one, but two good revelations. The series' conclusion is excellent, and should bring a glow to the heart of anyone who's been following the plot, but loses some effect when read cold. There's a postscript, also written by Klein, in *Teen Titans Spotlight* 15.~WJ
Recommended: 26-30, 32-34, 38

The OMEN

Chaos!: *5 issue miniseries 1998*

Moronic attempt by the typecast publishers to produce a teen superteam comic – and still do it their way. Voodoo Childe, Vex, Rip, Carcass and Oblivia are brought together by the mysterious Gallows to fight the rise of the Saviour and the Church of Divine Ascension and prevent Armageddon from breaking out in Los Angeles. Like, who would notice, dude? This stuff is bad enough from creators that actually like team books. Phil Nutman and Justiniano go through the motions and none of us care.~WW

ON A PALE HORSE

Innovation: *4 issues 1991-1993*

In life Zane was a waste of space, but when he's appointed the new incarnation of death he determines to project a more caring image. He replies to letters, comforts the dying and finds time to go on a date. The long spread of publication indicates the problems in finding people to produce the art for this adaptation of a Piers Anthony novel, with five artists credited over four issues. During this time the primary writer also bailed, and the company went bankrupt before completing the six planned issues. All in all, not much of a success.~WJ

ON THE BUS Stories from the Beaten Generation

Slave Labor: *One-shot 1994*

F. Andrew Taylor had the misfortune to make three bus trips across the USA totalling about 10,000 miles, and here details every ghastly occurrence. It's a successful comic in that it'll make anyone squirm in their comfortable armchair at some point, and offers plenty of practical advice. Diverting, yes, compelling, no.~FP

ON YOUR KNEES BOY

Eros: *One-shot 2001*

This collection of illustrations/scenes of women, mostly naked, on the theme of sex in the kitchen, by Molly Kiely, is briefly diverting, but not really substantial enough.~NF

THE ONE

Marvel/Epic: *6 issue miniseries 1985-1986**

A dystopic examination of the superhero as a weapon of war generously peppered with all the real and psychological fallout that would entail. This brutal meditation was done before anyone else had seriously deconstructed the long underwear genre, yet still reads well in comparison with all later attempts. Creator Rick Veitch did his elegant best to make the package reflect popular culture, with its covers done as ersatz supermarket products. There's a nightmarish look at Nazi scientists applying themselves to the Nietzschian ubermensch concept the same way they actually did with rockets and supersonic flight. We then see the US and the USSR escalate to a less than cold war using super types – and a giant rat – as weapons of mass destruction. World leaders, militia and politicians come off as grotesques and shrill caricatures. Veitch takes no prisoners in his shrugging off of the angst-ridden revenge fantasies of the impotent. Tropes that the genre established in the 1960s where all the cola cans and washing powder boxes hail from. Radical!~SW

ONE-FISTED TALES

Slave Labor: *12 issues 1990-1994*

Sadly, the funniest thing about *One-Fisted Tales*, the humorous, sexy anthology, is its title. That, and the joke brown paper cover on issue 1. The quality of the art lets it down most of all: badly-drawn, anatomically incorrect people getting it on don't get most of us hot under the collar. There's a Cherry story in 3, and 8 has a particularly pointed, if unerotic and poorly drawn, piss-take of Madonna's *Sex*. A collection harvests the best of the run.~FJ

100 BULLETS

DC/Vertigo: *40 issues + 1999 to date*

The initial storylines begin with Agent Graves, who gives people (like ex-cons) with a reason to hold a grudge, an attaché case. It holds evidence of their innocence or the real culprit, a gun, one hundred rounds of ammunition and the promise of total immunity should they choose to use them. Interspersed between these episodes, a complex plot unravels. It appears (8) that Graves and a gun-crazy associate, Lono, are the last of seven Minutemen, who worked for an organisation called The Trust, which betrayed them. The Trust believed the Minutemen were dead in Atlantic City, on the word of a Mr Shepherd, until Graves had one of his targets try to kill Megan Dietrich (4-5), a member of the Trust. 9-10 introduce Cole Burns, both a part of Graves 'game' and a member of the Minutemen, working in an ice cream truck. In 12-14 Dizzy Cordova (whose story is told in 1-3) is sent to Paris by Shepherd to meet Mr Branch, who was also a recipient of an attaché case, and who provides some more background into the Trust, Graves and Shepherd. During a gathering of the thirteen families of the Trust, including Megan, Augustus Medici and his son Benito, Mia Simone, and Daniel Peres, a distraught gambler decides that Benito has his money and Graves makes a statement (23-25). 26 offers a synopsis of the characters introduced so far, as explained by Branch to a prostitute (with pinups by guest artists including Paul Pope, Tim Bradstreet, Jordi Bernet and Frank Miller). In 28-30, Shepherd and Dizzy go looking for another hidden Minuteman on the Mexican border, while private detective, Milo Garret, finds himself caught in a web of deceit that involves a stolen painting, Lono and Megan (31-36). After this longer storyline there are several single-issue tales. Dizzy returns home in 37, while Shepherd and Graves discuss their plans. 38 sees Cole return to the girl he ran out on when his memory returned as two small-time criminals try to hold up a bar, 39 spends a day with Augustus and Benito, and 40 sees Shepherd asking Lono to choose sides. This gritty thriller, from writer, Brian Azzarello, is constantly inventive, from the basic premises of Graves' game and the underlying conflict between Graves and the Trust, to the multifaceted characters, relationships and storytelling techniques. Throughout, Azzarello is supported by the stunning drawings of Eduardo Risso, whose stylish figures and attention to detail are extraordinary. 1-36 are collected in five trade paperbacks.~NF

Recommended: 1-40

100 GREATEST MARVELS

Marvel: *10 issue limited series 2001*

To celebrate the 40th anniversary of *Fantastic Four* 1, which kicked off Marvel's silver age and saved the company from bankruptcy, the current powers that be decided to ask the fans to vote for their 100 favourite Marvel issues. They then printed the winners, three or four issues at a time depending on space. Essentially a collection of reprints, the project is the perfect introduction to the Marvel Universe for less experienced readers curious to explore forty years of history. As one would expect, all the classics are here – the Death of Phoenix, the Galactus Saga, the first appearances of Spider-Man, Wolverine and many other favourites. Every decade is represented, as are all the greatest creators, with recent offerings from the Ultimates line sitting side-by-side with Kirby and Ditko classics.~JC

ONE LIFE

Topps: *One-shot 1996*

As a prelude to his then forthcoming *Elric* series P. Craig Russell (a man with previous as far as Elric is concerned) adapted a Neil Gaiman short story. As always, the Russell art is sumptuous, and he copes surprisingly well with achieving authenticity in this tale of English public-school adolescence. For Gaiman's part, one suspects there are at least elements of autobiography about the tale of a precocious, bookish teenager who's picked up on Moorcock's novels at an early age and wants them to be more than fantasy. While one can see the attraction of an artist adapting how Moorcock's works affected a youthful writer, it's a slim tale, and really only for Gaiman or Russell completists.~FP

ONE MILE UP

Eclipse: *2 issues 1991-1992*

There's a manga and Robert Heinlein feel to this prematurely cancelled tale of armoured federation troopers protecting the galaxy. From the promising artwork one might have expected to see more of Shepherd Hendrix.~WJ

ONE PLUS ONE

Oni Press: *3 issues + 2002 to date*

Leonard sees people the way they'll look when they die, but that's not the way he sees David Coulson, in town looking for someone. There's a reason Coulson appears different, revealed in 1. In 2 we're introduced to callous card shark Eddie and his nice, pregnant girlfriend. Coulson's purpose is the hook of Neal Shaffer's story, which would work better as a novel. There's a lot of space here, a lot of talking heads, and a lot of revisiting the same scenes. Daniel Krall's art has a distant European mood, reminiscent in places of a thinner-lined Marti, but doesn't enliven a dull effort.~FP

ONE POUND GOSPEL

Viz: *4 issue miniseries ('Round One') 1996*, 8 issue limited series ('Round Two') 1997*, 8 issue limited series ('Round Three') 1998**

Another whimsical manga soap opera from Rumiko Takahashi. It tells of omnivorous pugilist Kosaku Hatanaka, who has two obsessions in his life: food, and the lovely but virtuous Sister Angela, a young nun who has taken it upon herself to help him overcome his sin of gluttony and strive for victory. She dismisses Hatanaka's feelings for her as a mere infatuation, secure in her faith, but as time goes by, and she steers him through numerous crises both inside the boxing ring and out, she's forced to acknowledge that her love for him may not be entirely of the spirit. Devoid of any supernatural elements (unless one counts Christianity!), this lightweight romantic farce lacks the poignancy of the author's *Maison Ikkoku*, and the frantic energy of her *Ranma½* but remains a pleasing if insubstantial read. Unfortunately, *One Pound Gospel* is one of Takahashi's 'hobby' works – stories she goes back and tinkers about with in between bigger projects – so its publication schedule is erratic, and it remains unfinished to date.~HS

ONI

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 2001*

There's a little of Judge Dredd's world about this future police state, but officer Oni is an altogether more sympathetic official. Her case involves a corrupt corporation, a massive power drain, and the appearance of ghosts throughout the city. David Land writes a fast-paced action adventure, and the stylish pencils of Sunny Lee appropriate a manga style, but add traditional US storytelling. The design is also noteworthy, with simple, clunky robots a feature, but that might be down to the video game on which this is based. Fun for anyone who enjoys a good action romp.~WJ

ONI DOUBLE FEATURE

Oni Press: *13 issues 1998-1999*

Oni lured some well-regarded creators to this Bob Schreck edited anthology, and by sticking to two strips an issue with an additional one-pager, readers following particular creators could feel they had at least half a good comic. Kevin Smith and Matt Wagner initiate a reasonable start as Jay and Silent Bob drug a dog. Then the Pander brothers offer us the pirate radio high jinks of 'Secret Broadcast' (1-2), simultaneously available on CD. Paul Pope's 'Car Crash'

(2-3) is a study of self-absorption in washed-out pencil and Troy Nixey's 'Bacon' is grotesque seafood horror (3-4). Bill Sienkiewicz offers up 'A River in Egypt' (4-5) in which two detectives trying to enforce a restraining order are constantly shot off the road. Zombie Kid (5-6) by Jim Mahfood ends in unrestrained violence and mayhem. Troy Nixey returns to illustrate P. Craig Russell's adaptation of Neil Gaiman's 'Only the end of the World Again' (6-8*), a werewolf come *Twin Peaks* come H.P. Lovecraft sort of thing. 'Satchel of Weltschmerz' by Jon Lewis and Tom Hart (8-9) features toes in rebellion against the rest of the body. 'Road Trip' by Judd Winick (9-10 and reissued as a one-shot), 'Drive-By' by Steven T. Seagle and Jan Solheim (10-11) and 'The Holy Rollers' by Paul Dini and Tom Fowler (12-13) are 'real-life' dramas, but not especially good. Chynna Clugston-Major provides a homage to Buster Keaton in a one-issue Blue Monday strip (11) and Kevin Smith returns in 12 with an incomplete Bluntman and Chronic strip drawn by Mike Allred. Paul Dini's second strip in the final issue is the introduction of Jingle Belle, Santa Claus' only daughter, with artwork from Stephen DeStefano.

Of note amongst the one-pagers are 'Milk 'n' Cheese' by Evan Dorkin (1), Shannon Wheeler's Too Much Coffee Man (2), Cheetahman by Mike Allred (4), 'Double Feature' by Ed Brubaker (5), Sam & Max by Steve Purcell (10), Usagi Yojimbo by Stan Sakai (11) and 'The Harpooners' by Sergio Aragonés (12). It's difficult to give any unqualified recommendation. Smith, the Pander brothers and Mahfood have a similar, punk attitude, Blue Monday and Jingle Belle are both very entertaining explorations of teen life (though in quite different ways), and there's something of interest in most issues, but only Pope really offers comics above the ordinary. For the rest, there's humour, horror, and some challenging artwork from Sienkiewicz and Nixey.~NF

ONI PRESS Summer Vacation SUPERCOLOR Fun Special

Oni Press: *2 issues 2000-2001*

This is a useful and great looking introduction to lots of Oni writers and artists. In the first issue, some of the strips, such as those by Andi Watson and Scott Morse, look better than they read but, under a Michael Allred cover, there is also an inspired 'Big Monster Planet' by Martin Ontiveros, Paul Dini's Jingle Belle, about what Santa Claus's daughter gets up to while he is on his summer holiday, and Jim Mahfood's cute Smoke Dog in a forlorn search for Waffles. The disappointing second issue (Oni Press Color Special) is notable only for Brian Michael Bendis and Michael Avon Oeming's funny Powers strip, in which they investigate the death of Allred's Madman, and a wonderful wordless short, 'Adventure #206', about children's imaginative play, written and painted by Tom Fowler.~GK

Recommended: Supercolor Fun Special

ONIGAMI

Antarctic: *3 issue miniseries 1998*

This is a sequel to the 'Winter Jade' storyline in *Warrior Nun: Black and White* 4-6, and creator Michel Lacombe certainly throws the reader straight into the deep end in terms of what has gone before. Police Chief Masaomi Oga returns to the scene of an assassination and willingly becomes possessed by the spirit of the dead man. This is Sho Yoshida who conjured the power of some dying Oni (demons) in order to avenge the death of his parents at the hands of Yakuza boss Masaru Tomino. Part ghost story and part classic revenge thriller, there are a number of plot elements that at first seem thrown in rather haphazardly. That said, there's some promise in the storytelling and delicate, detailed pencils, although faces tend to be too static.~NF

ONSLAUGHT Epilogue

Marvel: *One-shot 1997*

The X-Men's Professor Xavier had a profund, albeit temporary, effect on the Marvel Universe in 1996, initiating Onslaught. The result sprawled across Marvel's titles, but this finale, with the Professor incarcerated in a top secret facility, is a tidy and well conceived story, no doubt setting up future events.~WJ

ONYX OVERLORD

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1992-1993*

A tale of Moebius' Airtight Garage, with story by Moebius but script and art by others. Two characters are trying to save the Airtight Garage from the Onyx Overlord, but their efforts are hampered by the fact that they've stumbled into an area of alternate realities, which basically means a lot of rushing around, leaping from steam trains while pterodactyls fly overhead. The artwork's attractive, particularly the colouring, but the story is weak and muddled.~FC

OPEN SEASON

Renegade: *6 issues 1986-1988*
Strawberry Jam: *1 issue (7) 1989*

Domestic comedy that begins with the unprepossessing Jim moving into a new flat at the invitation of Cliff. Jock of the Year Cliff neglected to mention this to already-in-place flatmate Robin, a woman with the ability "to piss people off with little effort at almost any time". *Open Season* is an impressively mature title, as creator Jim Bricker brings a hint of Jules Feiffer and more than a little Berke Breathed (implicitly acknowledged) to both his art and his writing. He takes on board more influences as the title progresses, and having sketched his cast exceedingly well from the off, he manoeuvres them effortlessly and mercilessly through plots that reveal different and surprising facets of each. The series was briefly adapted for the stage (although a one-shot adapting the play was solicited but never published). Also of note are back-up strips by the equally talented and largely unknown Basilio Amaro (2) and Doug Gray (7).~FP

Recommended: 2, 3, 5-7

OPEN SPACE

Marvel: *4 issues 1989, one Shot (0) 1998*

Kurt Busiek shepherds a squad of creators through a series of tales set in a universe where a trans-galactic travel occurs as a result of a feud between rival families. The Etchisons and the Bradys act as link protagonists for a very disparate bunch of uninspired science fiction short stories from such varied creators as Ray Lago, Tom Grummett, Paul Chadwick, Norm Breyfogle and Steve Yeowell. An issue zero was released to capitalise on the success of Alex Ross, and features his story from the never published number 5.~WW

OPERATION STORMBREAKER

Acclaim: *One-shot 1997*

Continuing the series of Acclaim's "event" one-shots offering glimpses into pivotal events in their superhero mythos, this one introduces Doctor Tomorrow prior to his limited series and bands together a group of superheroes to fight the Nazis. Mark Waid and Brian Augustyn turn in an enjoyable slugfest with crowd-pleasing knowing references to future continuity, while the art from Dougie Braithwaite and Robin Riggs is top notch.~WJ

OPERATOR 99

Comics Conspiracy: *One-shot 1999*

Gloomy and wordy comic revealing all those military/commercial interest conspiracy theories you've heard whispers of are actually true. Belle Sands finds out the truth first hand, but can she put a dent in the plans? Very much in the Image/Top Cow style, and produced to that quality, this is connected with, and uses some of the same characters as *The Exec* and *Taxman*.~WJ

OPPOSABLE THUMBS

Alternative Comics: *1 Volume 2001*

Artist Dean Haspiel enters the world of autobiographical, slice of life comics with a selection of short, introspective but ultimately unimpressive tales from his life. Lovers of the genre will approve but there's nothing special to capture the casual reader. Still, the potential is there…~WW

OPTIC NERVE

Drawn & Quarterly: *8 issues + 1995 to date*

Optic Nerve first saw light of day as increasingly lavish minicomics from the then teenaged Adrian Tomine (collected as *32 Stories*). Each Drawn & Quarterly issue occupies the ground somewhere between Jaime Hernandez, Dan Clowes and Chris Ware. Visually Tomine superficially resembles Clowes, but has an impressive grasp of storytelling and is an impressive draughtsman in his own right. While these tales of student romance, urban angst and teenage ennui have the ring of truth to them, they aren't overtly autobiographical, but are compelling, almost voyeuristic, glimpses into other peoples lives. Standouts include 'Dylan and Donovan' in 3, where two teenaged sisters try to come to terms with their divorced father on a cross-country drive, and 'Fourth of July' in 4, superbly conveying the pain and confusion of a child trying to understand the adult world around him. Tomine has continued to grow as a cartoonist and his explorations into alienation and desire, particularly 8's 'Bomb Scare', with its masterful depictions of high-school outsiders, are among the finest comics being published today.~DAR

Recommended: 1-4*, 6-8

ORB

Orb Publications/Productions: *6 issues 1975-1976*

A well-produced magazine-sized anthology, marking a milestone in Canadian comics. While the contributors generally lack that final professional polish, few are outright bad, and among the later known talents who had their first serious work printed in *Orb* are Jim Craig, Gene Day and Ken Steacy, while Peter Hsu is also represented. Day in particular improves issue by issue, as does the comic, a mixture of horror, and offbeat superhero and martial arts strips. One of Canada's earliest superheroes Northern Light runs from 2, but the overall highlight is an eight page strip drawn by the all too rarely seen Bill Payne in 6.~FP

ORBIT

Eclipse: *3 issues 1990*

Adaptations of prose fiction to comics generally result in dashed expectations. To those who know the stories the thrill of seeing them visualised is usually offset by the disappointment incurred by the necessary contractions. Those unfamiliar with the original work have very little reason for sampling, leaving only staunch fans of the artists concerned likely to be happy. So it is with *Orbit*, in which stories originally published in *Issac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* are realised by artists of the quality of John Bolton and Tom Yeates. Both feature in 3, along with John Estes illustrating one of Asimov's better-known stories 'The Last Question', making the best sample.~WJ

The ORDER

Marvel: *6 issue miniseries 2002*

Continuing the storyline from the finale of the second *Defenders* series, Jo Duffy joins Kurt Busiek to help explain how the original Defenders (Doctor Strange, Hulk, Sub-Mariner and Silver Surfer), decide that in order to protect the world they need to bring order to it, with themselves as leaders. The idea, apparently, being to ensure that they cannot be disturbed by world-threatening events, if there aren't any. They're clearly not in their right minds, but the rest of the world's superheroes attack them anyway with only Nighthawk, Valkyrie and Hellcat attempting to stop them by arranging for their feminine sides to be brought into play (Clea, She-Hulk, Namorita and Ardina that is). Five different pencillers attempt to make sense of this excuse for lots of fights, but nothing can redeem a series that makes such extensive use of the offensive Papa Hagg, Nighthawk's spiritual adviser.~NF

Tales of ORDINARY MADNESS

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1992*

Writer Malcolm Bourne, a psychiatrist by trade, turns in a surprisingly naïve and simplistic view of mental illness. This slice-of-life look at a young doctor's reactions to other people's mental decay, and the tragic route his empathy leads him down, could have been much more powerful, but as it is, it comes across as stolid and patronising. Fans of Michael Allred's art might be interested, but leave your expectations at the door.~HS

ORIGIN

Marvel: *6 issue miniseries 2001-2002**

For over twenty-five years Wolverine's origin has been shrouded in a mystery of fleeting, false and inconclusive clues dispensed to readers on a slow drip feed. The hype had been orchestrated to such a crescendo that Marvel were rumoured to be fearful of providing a definitive resolution lest it prove anticlimactic, but the *X-Men* movie changed everything. Realisation dawned that unless Marvel delivered the goods, Hollywood would pre-empt them. Thus in 2001 a big gun committee of Bill Jemas and Joe Quesada co-plotted with Paul Jenkins who also scripted. They did not disappoint. Beautifully measured pacing unambiguously confronts the long standing mysteries of Logan's age and whether Sabretooth is his father. The story is also outstanding in its own right, redolent of pathos, tragedy and charm. Cunning misdirection reveals surprises as early as issue 2 and the narrative closes at Logan's adolescence, with no hint of an adamantium bonded skeleton in sight, thus inviting a sequel. Andy Kubert's pencils and Richard Isanove's digital painting flow seamlessly to produce a package surpassing the high expectations.~APS

Recommended: 1-6

ORION

DC: *25 issues 2000-2002*

Too many revivals of Jack Kirby 1970s DC characters have fallen foul by treating them as part of the superhero genre. The New Gods, The Forever People and Mister Miracle were never superheroes. They were modern myths, gods above and beyond the mortal world, and it needed a creator of Kirby's stature to pull this off. The sheer sense of wonder, of power, of scope contained in the concepts is virtually impossible for creators of lesser ability (i.e. everyone) to harness, but Walt Simonson comes close in this tightly plotted solo outing for New God Orion. Simonson explores familiar themes: the eternal struggle between good and evil and whether where Orion stands or falls is determined more by his bad Apokolips genes or his good New Genesis upbringing, but few writers between him and Kirby have captured the essence of the character so well. As with Kirby at his best, there is always a sense we are witnessing something much, much greater than us at play, a tale of biblical proportions as well as allegories. No Kirby fan could possibly resist the chance to accompany Orion on his Odyssey of self-discovery, his journey to the very depths of his soul and some shocking revelations on the nature of the anti-life equation so important to the Fourth World mythos. The series' ending, which questions whether our lives should be seen as a destiny we cannot escape, is predictable, but nonetheless an intelligent use of the characters and concepts that are often seen as the purest of Kirby's visions. The closest anyone has come to a true revival of the Fourth World. 1-5 are collected.~JC

Masamune Shirow's ORION

Dark Horse: *6 issue miniseries 1992-1993**

Over-exaggerated, vomit-inducing, saccharine whimsy is blended with the manga standbys of scientific technobabble and mystically summoned demons for a story set in the Orion galaxy. Shirow's artwork is adept in both cartoon and pseudo-realistic modes, but the slapstick Japanese humour doesn't translate well, and his cutesy heroine Seska is irritating beyond belief. *Orion* is very highly regarded, and the background detail is immense, so those predisposed to Manga might consider investigating, but it won't make any new converts.~WJ

Batman: ORPHEUS Rising

DC: *5 issue miniseries 2001-2002*

Mob boss Rasputin is fighting with street gang the Deacons over territory at the same time as a series of cop shootings. Orpheus, apparently one of a group of mystery men operating near Washington D.C., arrives in Gotham to represent 'people of colour' as Chief Esterhaus makes plans to crack down on the gangs. This is a straightforward team-up between Batman and Orpheus, with all of the expected threats from the former about Gotham being his town, and little chance for Orpheus to impress as an individual character. However, it's not badly told by Alex Simmons and Danny Miki's inks over Dwayne Turner's pencils soften the angular artwork.~NF

THE OTHERS

Image: *4 issues (0-3) 1995*

There's this race of humanoids under the Earth, all descended from different kinds of animals. There's a bull, a few dinosaur types, goats, birds etc., so it's rilly cool, and the guys all look like the animals and the chicks are all, like, total babes. Forget the funny ears and see their gazongas! And you almost do a couple of times, 'cos there's not much covering their lady bumps. First the animals beat up on the humans, and then on each other, with this big fight between the wolfman and the cockroach in 3. I reckon all the creators must be fourteen 'cos it's mega.~FP

OTIS GOES HOLLYWOOD

Dark Horse: *2 issue microseries 1997*

Otis Pedblocker, mild-mannered abattoir worker, after a fleeting flirtation with the world of performance art, is snapped up by a Hollywood talent scout to make action movies, and unexpectedly reunited with his identical twin, the porno star. Fans of Bob Fingerman's skilfully malicious work on Minimum Wage and his intelligent, thought-provoking *White Like She* will be disappointed in this heavy-handed gory satire.~HS.

OUR ARMY AT WAR

DC: *301 issues 1952-1977*

As DC's flagship war title, *Our Army at War* not only outlasted its companions (in one form or another), but in Sgt Rock it also presented the genre's most important character. In keeping with their fellow DC war titles 1-80 comprised short one-off strips initially drawn by company stalwarts such as Carmine Infantino, Gil Kane, Bob Oksner and Gene Colan. EC regular Bernie Krigstein was an early contributor, with beautiful work in 8-11, 13 and 14. Gradually the company's regular war-story artists arrived, and issues from 32 on are predominantly drawn by Joe Kubert, Irv Novick, Mort Drucker, Jerry Grandenetti, Russ Heath and the team of Ross Andru and Mike Esposito. As ever, the standout artist was Drucker, who produced a substantial body of work here in 2, 7, 25, 29, 37, 41, 67, 68, 70-72, 76, 79, 82. 83, 87, 96 and 100. The principal writers were Robert Kanigher, Ed Herron, Bob Haney and Hank Chapman, assuring that pretty much every issue contained entertaining, if rarely exceptional, stories, and artistically there's barely a bad issue among them.

From 61 the title occasionally featured the adventures of Easy Company, and 81's 'Rock of Easy Company' by Haney, Andru and Esposito starred a Sgt Rocky, and gave a glimpse of what was to come. The real Sgt Rock first appeared two issues later in 'The Rock And The Wall', by the definitive team of Kanigher and Kubert. Over the next few years Rock's colourful battalion was introduced, until Easy Company consisted of Bull Dozer, Zack, Wild Man, Ice Cream Soldier, Jackie Johnson and Little Sure Shot. Rock himself was the perfect Sergeant, gruff but compassionate, possessing a keen battle sense, but ultimately vulnerable, and above all tough! The Rock stories to 96 have been collected in *Sgt Rock Archives* vol 1.

For the most part Kanigher's early stories were quite realistic, and Easy's new recruits, though never the regulars, suffered from a frighteningly high mortality rate. Occasionally, however, his quirkiness got the better of him, notably in 124, in which Rock is brainwashed into thinking he's a Nazi, and 146, which had a story narrated solely by Easy Company's guns. Kanigher's nadir (or peak, depending on one's taste for the bizarre) was in 162-163, teaming Rock with medieval Viking Prince. 158 had the creation of Rock's nemesis, the Iron Major, named for his metal hand, who would periodically reappear to great effect. Another notable tale starred Easy's only black soldier, Jackie Johnson, an ex-boxer, involved in a fight with the star Nazi sparrer. The anti-racist message was thunderously obvious, right down to the inevitable climax of Jackie having to give his injured opponent a blood transfusion, but the story was no less powerful for it.

As issues prior to 100 had revelled in a succession of fine short stories, back-ups after then were surprisingly mediocre. Notable exceptions were art jobs by Heath (104, 120), Colan (169, 173) and some glorious work by a young Neal Adams in 182, 183 and 186. More significantly, 151 introduced the world to another great Kanigher/Kubert creation, the Enemy Ace, also in 153 and 155, who went on to greater things in Showcase and Star-Spangled War. Creatively the Sgt Rock strip was largely stable throughout the 1960s. In fact from 83 to 193 Kanigher only missed one issue (86, by Haney). Artistically, Kubert produced a vast body of work, although he, at least, needed the occasional break and Novick (84, 106), Grandenetti (88, 89, 123) and Heath (108, 118) all pitched in. At one point, however, Kubert began work on the 'Green Berets' newspaper strip, which owed a lot to Sgt Rock, and Heath admirably took over for 172, 175, 178, 180-183, 185 and 187, giving a taste of what was to come.

A major turning-point came with Kubert replacing the long-serving Kanigher as editor. While essentially a realistic strip, Sgt Rock had long had its faults, typified by Easy Company's tendency to punch out the enemy on a regular basis in ever more fevered tableaux of fisticuffs. While never less than professional, Kubert's mid-1960s strips had lacked the conviction of his earlier work, and the Heath issues had rather overshadowed him. With 196's 'Stop the War, I Want to Get Off', Kubert, acting as both artist and writer, delivered the series' first significant story. Decidedly unconventional, it was a look at the horror of war through the ages, and was immeasurably enhanced by its emotionally charged art, Kubert's best on the strip so far. From that point on Sgt Rock gradually became more realistic and Kubert's art returned to its typical high quality. It didn't last, though, with editorial duties meaning that Kubert gave way to Russ Heath with 208, although occasionally filling in to great effect (217, 220, 222, 224, 228, 233, 238). Heath is undoubtedly DC's most underrated artist, and seems quite incapable of drawing badly. Consequently each issue containing his work is worthy of a place in any serious collection. His draughtsmanship, story-telling and detailed inking style made for excellent artwork on every strip, and from time to time he was capable of almost superhumanly good art jobs that surpassed even his high standards; it is these that are recommended. 208 also saw Kanigher's position as principal writer usurped by Kubert, who, along with occasional scripts by Heath, wrote most issues until 230. After returning, Kanigher delivered one of his best-ever stories, 'Head Count', in 233, clearly inspired by the My Lai massacre. To further emphasise the title's anti-war tone, from that issue each strip would end with the legend "Make war no more".

Other notable stories of this period included Heath's magnificent solo job on 'Easy's First Tiger' in 244 and a continued Iron Major story in 251-253. Kanigher and Heath also excelled themselves in an extended continuity (256-260) that had Rock stranded in the South Pacific, though 247's Joan of Arc story was a return to the gimmicky days of old. Editor Kubert ensured that the back-up strips were of a similarly high standard, with contributions from Frank Thorne (199, 227, 236, 260), Wally Wood (249), Neal Adams (240) and Alfredo Alcala (251). As always, the great Alex Toth provided some of the title's finest back-ups in 235 and 254, particularly with Bob Haney's 'Dirty Job' in 241, which powerfully described the Crucifixion through the eyes of three Roman centurions. Generally, however, the back-ups were one of several alternating series, all of which were well crafted.

Ric Estrada's 'Great Battles' series ran occasionally between 213 and 224, and Estrada later went on to become principal artist on 'Robert Kanigher's Gallery of War', which ran from 251. It alternated with Norm Maurer's rather more factual 'Medal of Honor' series, which began in 233, and Sam Glanzman's 'U.S.S. Stevens'. Glanzman was a veteran sailor who was actually stationed on the real U.S.S. Stevens throughout World War II, and his stories were palpably autobiographical, mixing his punchy writing with a Kubertesque art style. It's every bit as good as the lead strip; any episode is worth looking at, with the series running in many issues between 218 and 298. The short-lived 'Sam Glanzman's War Diary' (242, 244, 266, 269) was, if anything, even more powerful, since it consisted of actual letters, translated into short strips, written by the artist during the war.

264 was the last regular issue by Heath, and, though always readable, later issues were never again quite as essential. Heath continued to draw the occasional story (268, 271, 273, 275, 277, 279, 281), for a while alternating with George Evans and John Severin (265, 272), but after his finale the strip was passed from hand to hand. Ric Estrada in 282 was inked by Kubert, Doug Wildey in 283-285 and 287 was hampered by spectacularly bad Mike Grell inking, and eventually Kubert settled on Frank Redondo, an artist very much in his own tradition. Redondo went on to draw the strip for almost ten years (although Kubert himself drew 300). From 302 the title became *Sgt Rock,* though in all other matters it was identical.

164, 177, 190, 203-205, 216 and 242 are all 100% golden reprints, and oversize issues 229, 235-241, 243-245, 269, 275 and 280 all mix new material with classic reprints.~DAR

Recommended: 8-11, 13, 14, 83, 151, 153, 155, 160, 182, 183, 186, 196, 233-235, 240, 241, 244, 248-260, 262, 279

OUR FIGHTING FORCES

DC: *181 issues 1954-1981*

The last and least of DC's major war titles, this nonetheless featured some fine material, but a higher percentage of dross than its companions. In common with them, though, it started by running short one-off stories, often composed around a particular theme each issue, and written and drawn by the same highly talented pool of contributors as worked on the other titles. As ever, the most outstanding art of this early period was that of Mort Drucker (10, 27, 28, 32, 36, 39, 42-44, 49, 53, 55), though a special mention should be made of former EC artists Wally Wood (10) and John Severin (32, 35, 37).

Our Fighting Forces' most prolific artist in the early days was Jerry Grandenetti, so not surprisingly he was assigned to draw its first regular series, 'Gunner and Sarge'. They'd débuted in *All-American Men Of War* 67 before transferring here to run between 45 and 94. Written by Robert Kanigher, it was a fast-moving, humorous affair that had a tendency to go way over the top. From 47 the two stars were joined by Pooch, their canine sidekick, which only heightened the strip's sense of unreality. Still, if you can overcome scenes like our heroes single-handedly blowing up a submarine (underwater, of course), the feature was undemanding fun. Grandenetti at his best could create wonderfully kinetic, expressionistic and powerful art, but he had a tendency towards over-cartooning, and visually the early episodes are by far the best. Other artists included Joe Kubert (51, 52, 74), Irv Novick (67, 68) and Jack Abel (85-94), the latter's contributions being woefully poor and heralding the comic's decline.

Gunner and Sarge was finally followed by Sgt Rock's brother Larry Rock, 'The Fighting Devil Dog' (95-98), and the ill-judged Vietnam strip 'Hunter' (99-107), both by Kanigher and Novick. Novick was soon replaced by Jack Abel, who teamed with Howard Liss to create 'Hunter's Hellcats', World War II strips of the same Lieutenant Hunter. The Hellcats were a bunch of former convicts, and the strip was every bit as unappealing as the premise suggests. Its only notable episodes were courtesy of fill-in artists Russ Heath (114) and Frank Thorne (115-117). Sadly none of the strips had much merit and probably the most outstanding element of this era was the occasional appearance of a Gene Colan back-up (86, 87, 95, 100).

Matters improved with 123 and the first instalment of yet another Kanigher series, The Losers. This brought together the team of Gunner and Sarge, Johnny Cloud (from *All-American Men Of War*) and Captain Storm from his own 1960s title, all losers of one sort or another, hence the name, although cynics might suggest that their main losses were their own strips. After a first instalment drawn by Ken Barr, Ross Andru and Mike Esposito became the art team. It wasn't until John Severin took over in 132 that the series really took off. Kanigher's early stories were jokey, insubstantial affairs, with the lead characters whining on about being losers; the turning-point was 135, where the female freedom fighter Ona was introduced and Capt. Storm was (temporarily) killed off. Subsequent episodes had significantly more continuity and 135-150 make entertaining reading, not least because of Severin's beautiful art. The improved lead feature was matched by a nice variety of back-up strips, including work by veterans Russ Heath (123, 130), Frank Thorne (136) and Severin himself in 124. Younger artists also cropped up, including Bruce Jones (139), Tom Sutton (144) and the underrated Ed Davis (150), but, as ever, the best strips were drawn by the wonderful Alex Toth (134, 144). In fact 'Burma Sky' in 146, a poignant tale written by Archie Goodwin about the Flying Tigers fighter squadron, is the finest war strip DC produced. Toth's art was quite breath-taking.

From 151 to 162 the comic was written and drawn by Jack Kirby, who promptly disregarded everything that had previously occurred in taking the Losers in another direction entirely. Kirby had little interest in continuity or characterisation here, and his writing was at times simplistic, although he did bring an astonishing vitality to the strip. On Kirby's departure Kanigher once again assumed control, this time with George Evans on art, but these were strictly by-the-numbers issues, and none were exceptional in any way.~DAR

Recommended: 10, 27, 28, 32, 36, 39, 42-44, 49, 53, 55, 123, 130, 134-150

OUR LOVE STORY

Marvel: *38 issues 1969-1976*

As with its sister title *My Love,* this series started out strongly, with brand-new stories by Marvel's top-line artists. John Buscema, Gene Colan and Don Heck all appear, but it quickly became a mixture of reprints and a showplace for newcomers (Al Weiss) or old-timers making a comeback (Tarpe Mills, in a peculiarly dated story in 14). It turned all reprint from 18, relying on Marvel's vast inventory of material to fill the pages and satisfy the dwindling romance market until it closed down. A sought-after issue is 5, featuring Jim Steranko's only known work on a romance story.~HS

OUR WORLDS AT WAR

DC: *10 issues (+ 23 tie-ins), Superman: Our Worlds at War Secret Files and Origins 2000*

A monolithic saga of alien invasion. *Superman* 151-153 and 159 introduced a cosmic entity called Imperiex with an agenda to unmake the universe. When a huge flotilla of alien refugees warp into Terran space Earth's heroes realise that they're in for the fight of their lives. The action takes place in ten specials suffixed *Our Worlds at War,* but divided in three discrete sections each corresponding to that month's tie-ins. *Green Lantern, Batman, Young Justice* are all coded as 'Prelude to War'. *JLA, Nightwing, JSA* and *Wonder Woman* are 'All-Out War' chapters and *Flash, Harley Quinn* and *Worlds Finest* are designated 'Casualties of War'. *Superman* 171-173, *Adventures of Superman* 593-595, *Action Comics* 780-782, *Man* *of Steel* 114-117, *Superboy* 89-91, *Supergirl* 59-61, *Wonder Woman* 171-173 and *Young Justice* 35-36 all tie-in to the story.

It is ambitious, as these things always are, but practically all flash and dazzle with little more than posturing and gratuitous shock tactics. One notable exception is the *JSA Special* by Geoff Johns and Javier Saltares, where President Luthor reactivates the World War II All-Star Squadron, which translates as everyone who's ever been connected with the Justice Society of America, for a do-or-die mission. It's to destroy Imperiex's planet-sized supply factory. This thriller combines drama, pathos and all-out stirring, patriotic action in a manner seldom seen in today's instant gratification comic adventures. Also of note is the *Harley Quinn Special*, which concentrates on a relatively quiet subplot as Quinn escorts Jimmy Olsen, burdened with the secret of how to defeat Imperiex, through war-torn America to the safety of Metropolis. It's illustrated by a host of alternative comics talent such as Paul Grist, Paul Chadwick and Amanda Conner. Your scorecard will need a scorecard.~WW
Recommended: *JSA: Our Worlds At War*

OUT FOR BLOOD

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1999*

By the numbers tough cop and sexy student versus gangster vampires and lycanthropes, scripted by Michael Part and Stephen Grant. Black and white exposes the weakness of Gary Erskine's stiff illustration with much dodgy perspective work, which is cannily hidden behind decent colour covers by Kelley Jones in the style, right down to the signature, of Berni Wrightson.~GK

OUT OF THE VORTEX

Dark Horse: *12 issue limited series 1993-1994*

Disappointingly ponderous conclusion to *Comics Greatest World*'s introduction of a new world of superheroes. A shaggy dog story is padded over a dozen issues, and after the final issue you'll probably wonder why you bothered with any of it. If you really like the characters introduced in *Comics Greatest World*, then plenty feature here, but avoid otherwise. There's a continuation of sorts in *Dark Horse Presents* 144.~WJ

OUT OF THIS WORLD

Charlton: *16 issues 1956-1959*

One of the titles from Charlton's late 1950s push that briefly made them the biggest comic publisher In the USA. Besides the usual low quality Charlton regulars, *Out of this World* features a large number of Steve Ditko science fiction and suspense strips in 3-12 written by the likes of Ernie Hart, Joe Gill, Carl Memling and Ralph Newman. Points of interest include the atomically mutated brains in 3's 'The Supermen', 'River's Wrath' in 6, a tale of flood disaster probably written by Ditko, and 7's 'Through the Walls' where an unjustly imprisoned man leaves his body as a white ghostlike form just as Dr.Strange would do 5 years later. 'From All Our Darkrooms' in 4 and 'Journey's End' in 9 both feature plot elements re-used at Marvel in the 1960s. The best covers are invariably by Ditko too, particularly 11's space gun. 7 and 8 are 68 page issues. In 1989 Robin Snyder published a black and white, digest-sized collection of 13 Ditko stories from this comic. Any Ditko enthusiast would enjoy this collection.~SW
Recommended: 5 and the collection

OUT OF THIS WORLD

Malibu: *One-shot 1989*

The value of this publication is in reprinting two Everett Raymond Kinstler stories from the 1950s *Strange Worlds* 6 and 9, although the issue 6 strip is taken from the 1958 reprint *Strange Planets* 16. Kinstler was one of the few top notch artists of the period who didn't end up working for EC. His ornate style was influenced by the illustrations of Charles Dana Gibson and James Montgomery Flagg, and his craftsmanship shines through even on these stories hacked out by the writers. The only other item of note is very early cover artwork from Bruce Timm.~FP

OUT THERE

Cliffhanger: *15 issues + 2001 to date*

Brian Augustyn and Humberto Ramos obviously watched a few too many episodes of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, but that's not automatically a bad thing. This finely tuned and entertainingly diverting series follows the fortunes of four teenagers: prom queen, jock, geek and indie goth girl before you think any unnecessary originality might have crept in. They discover that the adults of their small American town have made a deal with demons in order to maintain law and order. Thus begins a round of demonic showdowns, general weirdness and a roadtrip across America under the guardianship of a female preacher and a mute war veteran. It's all good clean fun, although its blatant Christian undertones can be somewhat grating if you're not a believer yourself. Pray to God hard enough and you beat any demon bad guys, kids. Nothing to really dislike about it, though, and it is nicely drawn.~JC

The OUTCAST

Valiant: *One-shot 1995*

The introduction of a new character to Valiant's continuity. Former A-grade student Lenny is retarded after an accident, but, as compensation for his reduction in mental acuity, he can transform into a nine-foot superstrong creature. In addition to a nod in John Steinbeck's direction, Lenny's home town is called Valiant. It's all competently produced, and might have had a greater resonance had Valiant's entire line not been cancelled soon afterwards.~WJ

OUTCASTS

DC: *12 issue limited series 1987-1988*

When all around them were turning out grim, gritty and 'realistic' titles, the writing team of John Wagner and Alan Grant put the comedy back into comics. *Outcasts* is hilarious, packed with black humour, funny dialogue and enough good ideas to keep lesser writers in plots for years. It starts slowly as the team is formed to combat administrative corruption after the assassination of a leading political figure. Once the plot is set in motion, though, the characters take over, and it's fun, fun, fun all the way. Top moments include Al the Human Anaconda (2), trench-coated robot assassins The Satan Brothers (6, 10-12), punch-drunk former Slaughterbowl player B.D. Rickenbacker having to re-form the team with old colleagues (7), Suicide Park (9), and surely the only hero in a bucket ever. And there's plenty more where that lot came from. Artists Cam Kennedy and Steve Montano depict the ongoing lunacy in magnificent fashion, and the surviving Outcasts cross paths with the Satan Brothers again in the *Lobo* miniseries 'UnAmerican Gladiators'.~FP
Recommended: 6-12

Bruce Jones' OUTER EDGE

Innovation: *One-shot 1993*

Four short science fiction/horror stories, written and drawn by Bruce Jones. They're well drawn, in a Wrightson-esque style though 'The Secret Place' is equally reminiscent of Al Williamson in its detailed forest setting. All stories have a twist ending, whether it be a comedy comeuppance, redemption, or ironic. Only the third is really successful, in which a mute boy develops a friendship with creature that then appears to be killing his tormentors.~NF

OUTER SPACE

Charlton: *9 issues (17-25) 1958-1959*

This carries on the numbering of *This Magazine is Haunted* and in its brief run featured the usual poor quality Charlton science fiction fare, written mainly by Joe Gill. As usual the strips drawn by Steve Ditko, in 18-20, stand out.~SW

OUTLANDER

Malibu: *4 issues 1987-1988*
Eternity: *2 issues (5-6) 1988*

Surprisingly well-conceived and interestingly executed thriller concentrating on Adam Gallow, the Outlander of the title. He's been trained by The Institute to become their foremost weapon, but rejects the idea and breaks loose. As he searches for Cassandra, a powerful empath, so he's stalked by The Institute, which isn't about to give up on their prized asset so easily. If not entirely successful, writer Scott Finley is attempting a little more than the recycling of old ideas, and the same can be said for artist Brooks Hagan, whose style is seemingly European-influenced. Try 3, in which Gallow's participation is minimal, as Cassandra encounters a mad motorcyclist.~FP

OUTLANDERS

Dark Horse: *34 issues (0-33), 1 Special 1988-1991**

When the Earth is invaded by its original inhabitants, the Santovasku Empire, who believe that humans are little more than vermin polluting their Sacred Mother Planet, there's a faction within the military establishment who seem to have been expecting their return. Tetsuya, a photographer, finds himself in the company of the invading emperor's runaway daughter Kahm, and Outlanders is principally the story of their romance, set against the backdrop of the Earth's desperate defence as loyalties shift on both sides.

Truly epic in scope and vision, Johji Manabe's storytelling is pacey where it needs to be but full of humour and character that counterpoints what might otherwise be a grim tale. More space opera than hard science, it's still innovative and colourful. Issue 0 (1992) is a one-off Kahm (mis)adventure set before she arrives on Earth; the 1993 special stars Battia, Kahm's best friend. *Outlanders Epilogue* (1994) is the strip's final appearance, a moving reunion between the survivors of the war and the spirits of those who died.~NF

OUTLAW KID

Atlas: *19 issues 1954-1957*
Marvel: *30 issues 1970-1975*

Mild-mannered Lance Taylor's father has him to swear on his mother's grave that he will never stoop to violence, much to the dismay of girlfriend Belle Taylor. Lance takes to dealing with the troublemakers of Caliber City as the masked Outlaw Kid astride his horse Thunder. The stories are all five to seven pages long and as such are very one-dimensional. The feature's main artist Doug Wildey relies heavily on photo reference, which makes for a lack of dynamism, but his skills as a draughtsman still impart a great consistency to the feature. There are also numerous non-feature shorts by the likes of Al Williamson, John Severin and Joe Maneely. Marvel started a reprint title in 1970 running mostly the Wildey strips behind garish Herb Trimpe covers, but there's also a new two page story by Bill Everett in 2. In 10-16 new stories established the Kid as a misunderstood Robin Hood-style character. The lacklustre art was by Dick Ayers and Mike Friedrich did an enthusiastic, if a little clumsy, job of writing 10-12 before Gary Friedrich (no relation) took over with 13... unlucky for some. Later issues were reprints of the reprints followed by reprints of 10-12.~SW

OUTLAW NATION

DC/Vertigo: *19 issues 2000-2002*

The Johnsons are a dynasty of American misfits, ranging from killers and misanthropes to cranks and crazies. Old man Asa Johnson is an industrialist who spends his time being preserved by pin-up nurse Dolores. His son Story is the alternative good guy, an adventure writer, managing to stumble over most branches of his family except his son by the forthright Ruth 'Sweetcakes' Hoag. Young Sundance – or Sonny – McGee has married Rosa Cao-Tri who gives birth to another generation in 18. Story's half-brother is a psychopathic killer and sexual deviant known as Mister Gloves whose excesses border on the humourous. Naturally there's a policeman involved too, the aging Sheriff John Law. All the family members gradually accumulate for a climax at Old Asa's hollowed out mesa headquarters in 19.

There's a suitably organic nature to Jamie Delano's plot and the writing is very well-balanced. The opening sequence where Story is writing a distinctly purple memoir still retains some genuine passion as he remembers his Vietnamese wife "War Baby" being killed by a landmine. To begin with the artwork is by the excellent Goran Sudzuka, inked by Sebastian Camagajevac in 4-8. In 9 Goran Parlov takes on the pencils with Sudzuka inking with no loss of style or clarity. Well written, well drawn – well, what are you waiting for?~SW

OUTLAW 7

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 2001-2002*

In a fantasy world a group of heroes gather to protect a young man who's destined to wield great power against the darkness that threatens the land. Many characters are introduced, one of whom doesn't survive, but the frenetic pace allows little room for characterisation though some imagination is shown in the set up. Otherwise, Logan Lubera's superheroic fantasy quest is like many another (though lead Bayman Ford is a very dull character) and only begins to examine relationships and origins. Lubera's bumpy, stylised artwork, is similar, but inferior, to Joe Madureira's.~NF

OUTLAWS

DC: *8 issues 1991-1992*

Michael Jan Friedman's intelligent script, set in a dystopian feudal society following a plague, uses elements from versions of the *Robin Hood* story but gives it a twist by making protagonists aware of the fact that they are aping the actions of a legendary hero. Unfortunately, Luke McDonnell's artwork is scratchy and unappealing. If the script aspires to Richard Carpenter's *Robin of Sherwood* the artwork's sub-Kevin Costner.~NF

The OUTSIDERS

DC: *Series one 28 issues, 1 Annual, 1 Special 1985-1988, series two 26 issues (0, 1Alpha, 1Omega, 2-24) 1993-1995*

Moribund superteam comprising old failures such as Black Lightning and Metamorpho and all new no-hopers Halo, Katana, Looker and Geo-Force that struggled to find its place after the subtraction of the prefix *Batman and...* . Replacing the Batman team-up title with a series dedicated to a new squad of 'outlaw' heroes was always an uncomfortable mix, and eventually led to the separation of leader and team. As part of a marketing experiment DC created a higher production values version called *The Outsiders*, set one year ahead of then current continuity. Mike W. Barr and Jim Aparo switched to the new title leaving Barr and Alan Davis to continue on the regular comic, retitled *Adventures of the Outsiders*. Given the arena of a presumably more sophisticated and dedicated audience, there was actually a drop in quality for the content as second rate stories were given the undeserved glamour of glossy packaging and fancy foldouts. In drab succession the robotic Nuclear Family and Duke of Oil were trashed, evil commies Bad Samaritan and Peoples Heroes were sent packing and staple villains such as Eclipso and Kobra made brief trouble for our vagabond band. The only redeeming feature for many issues was guest artists on short back-up features such as Brian Bolland (6, 18) or Jerry Ordway (10), John Byrne (11) and Steve Ditko (13). In marked contrast, the annual, with artwork by Kevin Nowlan, is a sharp, taut thriller featuring Kobra at his spooky best, making the regular issues even poorer by comparison. Reintroducing Batman in the latter days didn't help and the series was killed as part of the *Millennium* crossover event.

The second series revived the surviving heroes, supplementing them with a smattering of new characters, but the result was much the same. Splitting into two teams, necessitating a pair of first issues with some different pages in each, the heroes find themselves framed for various evil

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* Available in a collected edition

deeds they did not do and must strive to clear themselves. Despite numerous guest shots from DC big shots, it 's as bad as it sounds. A pitiful waste of talented creators.~WW
Recommended: Annual 1

OVERTURE!

All-American: *2 issues 1990*

Last seen in their own title, the misfit Lunatic Fringe have a member abducted, and quarrel all the way to the rescue, while *Popeye* is a major influence on the Sputnik feature. The mentally challenged Blatherskite rounds out the first issue. George Broderick is a good, adaptable cartoonist on all features, and there are a reasonable amount of laughs to be had.~FP

THE OWL

Gold Key: *2 issues 1967-1968*

1940s hero in a grey costume is revived, given a camp workover and relaunched to cash in on the *Batman* craze that's sweeping the USA. Feeble stuff that falls shy of being so bad it's good.~FP

OWLHOOTS

Kitchen Sink: *2 issues 1991*

Unfinished attempt at something different by James Vance and John Garcia. Illustrated as though a series of sepia photographs, the story explores the relationship between early cinema and the Western heroes who were starting to feel out of place in an increasingly 'civilised' world and found a ready audience for their stories in Hollywood.~NF

OZ

Caliber: *21 issues (0-20), 4 Specials 1994-1997, 3 issue miniseries ('Romance in Rags') 1996, 3 issue miniseries ('Straw and Sorcery') 1997*
Arrow: *5 issue miniseries ('Dark Oz'), 1 Special 1997-1998*

A magical tome transports three adolescents and the obligatory dog to the land of Oz, several years after Dorothy's jaunt. The land is now dark and foreboding. Evil rules in the form of the Nome King. The original heroes are under his thrall. Writers Stuart Kerr and Ralph Griffith extrapolate from Frank L. Baum's concepts, introducing new, fantastic creatures and endowing them with much of the charm of the original stories. 1-15 form a tightly plotted continued story in which the new heroes trigger the revolution to restore to Oz all that is good and right, so it's a shame only 1-10 and the specials are collected. Although rather stiff at first the story does grow on you, albeit hampered by some questionable plot developments and Bill Bryan's art, which is too cluttered for a black and white production. Much care and thought has gone into this classically styled fairy tale, which is suitable for young and old kids alike. The double-sized 17 has a full-length 'Boston Bombers' back-up strip. 16 starts a new story arc in which the Earthlings go home and a liberated but weakened Oz must fend for herself against the gathering menaces of the Goblin King, Wicked Witch and Quadlings. This plotline is in need of tighter control. After premature cancellation with 20, the story continues in Arrow's *Dark Oz* miniseries. This lives up to its name as the skirmishes escalate into full blooded war. In the finale, many heroes die and *Dark Oz* 5's confrontation between the Wickedest Witch and Queen Ozma is little short of cataclysmic.

'Romance in Rags' is a tale of courage and sacrifice featuring Scarecrow and his fair lady, Scraps the Patchwork Girl, set during the time when Scarecrow was under the Nome King's thrall. Issue 1's cover shows just how good Bill Bryan's art looks in colour. 'Straw and Sorcery' features more of the same, but fails to advance the plot one single iota.

The cover month policy (there aren't any) and numeration (all the Specials are numbered 1) create a nightmare for back-issue readers. The internal chronology is: issue 0, *Scarecrow Special, Lion Special, Tinman Special, Freedom Fighters Special*, Romance in Rags miniseries 1-3, 'Straw and Sorcery' miniseries 1-3, regular issues 1-20, *Dark Oz* 1-4, *Wogglebug Special, Dark Oz* 5. All bar the regular issues and Dark Oz are second-string, unessential background reading.~APS

OZ Graphic Novels

First: *4 volumes 1986-1988*
Dark Horse: *1 volume 1992*

Eric Shanower produces some excellently drawn and decently told new stories of the Oz mythos. The characters he creates are imaginative, and interact well with the cast from the novels (rather than the film), and his plots are faithful to the mood established in them. Where Shanower is perhaps even better is invoking a lump in the throat. The best of the run is *The Enchanted Apples of Oz*, wherein the secret of Oz's magic is threatened, but Oz fans should also enjoy *The Ice King*, and *The Secret Island. The Forgotten Forest of Oz* is equally good, but concentrates more on Shanower's cast at the expense of those of Oz creator Frank Baum. When First collapsed, Shanower had almost completed *The Blue Witch of Oz*, answering the question about why there's no Good Witch of the East. It maintains his high standards.~FP
Recommended: 1-4, *The Blue Witch of Oz*

OZ SQUAD

Brave New Worlds: *Series one 1 issue 1991, series two 3 issues 1992*
Patchwork Press: *10 issues 1994-1996*
Millennium: *1 Special 1995*

In this controversial reworking of Frank Baum's Oz characters, Earth and Oz have a diplomatic relationship. The Tin Man, Lion, a manic-depressive Scarecrow and a fully grown and proactive witch Dorothy are now CIA agents. So what is it about this potentially ridiculous concept that attracted three publishers? Well, it's well drawn by the team of Andrew Murphy and Ande Parks to start with, and Terry Loh develops into a very good artist from 5. Writer Steven Ahlquist comes up with good plots, but offers too many detours from his main theme, never able to sacrifice a good idea for the sake of the story. The second Brave New Worlds issue 1 reprints the first, and Patchwork Press reprint the three Brave New Worlds issues simultaneously with continuing the series. The Millennium issue was completed before 1, and, in circumstances detailed in 6's editorial, out of continuity.~FP

THE OZ-WONDERLAND WAR

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1986*

Funny-animal superheroes Captain Carrot and his Amazing Zoo Crew find themselves caught up in a long-winded adventure featuring the characters of Frank L. Baum and Lewis Carroll. Although presumably intended for a young audience, the complicated script by E. Nelson Bridwell and Joey Cavalieri – about an evil wizard named Roquat and his attempts to enslave the entire land of Oz – seems like pretty musty stuff compared to a good computer game. Crammed full of pointless in-jokes and obsessive continuity, the series is further hampered by Carol Lay's crowded artwork, which needlessly tries to re-create the work of original book illustrators John Tenniel and W.W. Denslow.~AL

OZZY OSBOURNE

Image: *1 issue 1999*

This pre-*The Osbournes* bio-mag gives us the old dark-satanic-overlord-of-evil Ozzy rather than the now more familiar beloved-befuddled-TV-Dad Ozzy, and as such will mainly appeal to non-ironic Black Sabbath fans. Writer Paul Jenkins doesn't come close to capturing the obscenity-strewn highways and byways of the singer's actual speech, settling instead for such risible bits of narration as "I was a rotten little bugger in them days. A bit like a kidney salad – all piss and vinegar, and impossible to get yer hands on". The script does contain the odd biographical nugget – Ozzy's character-forming spell in a slaughterhouse is brought into play, for example – but mostly settles for formulaic horror tropes and weak satirical snipes at the many enemies of metal. The painted artwork, by Dean Ormston, is at the very least on a par with any horrible Molly Hatchet album cover from the late 1970s.~AL

P CITY PARADE

Horse Press: *One-shot 1997*

Another unfinished, experimental work from Paul Pope, in this case a children's story mixing his American, European and Japanese influences. The premise is that H. R. Watson, of *THB*, is helping her friend, Lottie, babysit the latter's two younger sisters. The segments presented include the arrival of guests before the whole party departs for the opera and part of the girls' favourite television show, *Gangster Strip Dragway*. In an introduction, Pope explains the relationship of this to *THB*, his ambitions for the strip and comments on the difference between manga and American comics. Visually wonderful, but frustratingly incomplete, this is still essential reading.~NF

Recommended

PABLO'S INFERNO

Abismo: *5 issue miniseries 2000-2001*

A little boy is killed and takes a journey through the afterlife. This isn't as tragic as it sounds, and Pablo's innocence and intuitive nature helps him cope with various threats as creator Rhode Montijo painlessly inserts all sorts of information about Aztec folklore and Mexican culture. His cartooning is dark, sinister and very good, and the pervading gloom is often leavened by humour. Also, for all the trappings this is very much a life-affirming story. All in all, a gem that should appeal to the same people who buy *Squee* and *Lenore*.~FP

Recommended: 1-5

PACIFIC PRESENTS

Pacific: *4 issues 1982-1984*

The first three issues of *Pacific Presents* feature one of Steve Ditko's oddest creations, the Missing Man, a superhero whose head, arms and legs are the only parts of him visible. The stories are the usual moral, overwrought dramas, beautifully drawn. The other star of this title was only in the first two issues: Dave Stevens' Rocketeer story, continued from the back-up in *Starslayer*, was intended to be in three issues but was eventually completed in a Special. A return to the action-adventure atmosphere of the 1930s, The Rocketeer looked ravishing (as did Stevens' wife, drawn to resemble Betty Page), and though hardly demanding it's full of good story-telling. The first appearance of Will Meugniot's Vanity (3) can't disguise the weakness of the material in the two final issues.~NF

Recommended: 1-2

The PACT

Image: *3 issue miniseries 1994*

Mindless violence between preposterously proportioned individuals.~FP

PAINKILLER JANE

Event: *9 issues (0-8), 1997-1999, one-shot (Painkiller Jane Darkchylde) 1998, one-shot (Painkiller Jane Hellboy) 1998*

The unlikely titular sobriquet belongs to a former policewoman murdered by the mob, then restored to life through mystical mumbo-jumbo and able to heal her body instantly. The downside is that Jane still experiences all the associated pain. It's not a gimmick that withstands any serious consideration, but otherwise writers Mark Waid and Brian Augustyn turn out a decent action comic ably illustrated by Rick Leonardi. The pick of the bunch is the zero issue released after the series, nicely drawn by Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti with Joe Quesada and Palmiotti supplying Jane's origin story. Only the most avid fans need bother with the Hellboy or Darkchylde team-ups.~WJ

PAKKINS' LAND

Tapestry: *7 issues 1997* (0-6)*

Caliber: *6 issue miniseries ('Quest for Kings') 1997-1998*, 3 issues ('Forgotten Dreams') 1998-1999**

Image: *1 issue 2000*

A remote land with sentient animals who care for a small human boy brings to mind *The Jungle Book*, but in comic terms the nearest touchstone is *Bone*. Both operate in fantasy territory, and are accessible to all ages, although there's no intentional humour located here. The twee elements sometimes monopolise, and as with much fantasy fiction the quest and interruptions are all, and those not thoroughly immersed will quickly lose interest. On the plus side Gary Shipman's art gradually loses the initial stiffness to fulfil the promise of an attractive cartoon style. Fantasy fans should investigate, but anyone else should tread carefully. Being taken on then immediately dropped by Image appears to have resulted in the series being cancelled, although for updates check http://home.att.net/~pakkins-land.~FP

PALESTINE

Fantagraphics: *9 issue limited series 1993-1995**

Palestine is almost unique, being a form of emotional comics journalism. In 1991 Joe Sacco spent two months in the Israeli-occupied areas of the West Bank (1-5) and Gaza Strip (6-9), learning about the repressive conditions the Palestinians had to live under, events rarely reported or known to the outside world. He was told of detention and deprivation without due reason, the appalling conditions in the prison camps and government-sanctioned torture, and relates it all with a passionate sense of horror. There's no lack of harrowing experiences. In 4 a Palestinian is forcibly removed from his home at night by security troops, chained to a pipe with a dried-urine-smelling sack over his head, and held without good reason for nineteen days. In 8 an old lady recalls the loss of two family members and the appalling attitude of the occupying troops: the policy of depriving already poor families of what little livelihood they have by chopping down their olive groves is a resonant image of persecution. The final issue takes some space to examine the situation from the Israeli viewpoint, but the sequence is clumsy in comparison with the remainder of the run.

Sacco's is a powerful voice in relating these stories. Fully cognisant of his own shortcomings, and of the voyeuristic-ghoul aspects of what he's doing, he has a sympathetic outsider's perspective on events, but maintains an awareness of the conflicts within Palestinian society. The short sequence in 5 concerning women wearing traditional Koran-approved dress is both informative and puzzling from the Western viewpoint, as is 6's discussion of Koran-approved methods of retribution that seem barbaric to Westerners.

The art can initially be off-putting, with Sacco's self-caricature sitting ill alongside the more naturalistic portrayal of others, but it sucks the reader in very quickly, and by later issues there's some excellent work. The depiction of the squalid Gaza refugee camp opening 6 is an exceptionally well noted (and depressing) panorama. It's harder to adjust to the blocks of handwritten lettering pasted over the art. This has the deliberate effect of adding an urgency to the text not available by more conventional placing, but it's also often a distraction, inhibiting the story it's supposed to enhance. This is, though, a minor caveat concerning an otherwise excellent title. One hopes it's had some effect beyond being fifteen minutes reading an issue.~FP

Recommended: 1-8

PALOOKAVILLE

Drawn & Quarterly: *16 issues + 1991 to date*

There are so many cartoonists telling tales of their everyday lives in downtown Toronto, it's a wonder you don't have to fight them off with a shitty stick the moment you walk into any retro diner. Seth stakes a very different ground to Joe Matt or Chester Brown in his quiet, driven stories. His characters are all searching for something while researching personal or local history, whether it's an obscure editorial cartoonist, the origin of postcards with giant vegetables on them, or the identity of a relative. In 4-9 he attempts to track down a forgotten cartoonist. Serialised over a long period, the story toyed with the conventions of autobiographical comics and caused considerable ill-will among those joining Seth's search when he revealed the object to be fictitious. As that's not the point of the story, it survives this revelation. He then begins to explore other aspects of longing and examination in 'Clyde Fans', in which the path of a failed fan salesman who's terrified of having to make deals and all too aware of his own inadequacies is retraced in the present day. Both tone and line are extremely cool, yet somehow charming. Seth's 1950s-influenced art style, which draws upon advertising art as well as the work of gentle humorists like Raymond Peynet, adds even more balance and distance. The strip occasionally teeters on the brink of becoming self-aware and is the epitome of what people who hate autobiographical works complain about. However, it remains clever, sharply observed, and dryly humorous. The lead strips (to 15) have been collected.~FJ

PANDEMONIUM

Chaos!: *One-shot 1998*

Killed defending Manicore, Pandemonium is resurrected in Africa as protector of the Naktu tribe, currently threatened by mercenaries working for the sorcerer, Epitaph. This is an odd, but unsatisfying, spin on the 'jungle girl' tale.~NF

PANIC

EC: *12 issues 1954-1956**

Gemstone: *12 issues 1997-1999**

The success of Harvey Kurtzman's groundbreaking satirical comic *Mad*, inspired numerous inferior imitations from rival companies. Naturally enough, *Mad* owner and publisher William M. Gaines decided to get in on the act himself, much to Kurtzman's annoyance, and so *Panic* was launched two years after *Mad* made its first appearance on American newsstands. Productive writer/artist Al Feldstein was appointed to edit the new title, while illustration duties were handled by many of the same artists who worked on *Mad*, or on EC's outstanding line of non-humour titles. Key contributors included Jack Davis, Wally Wood, Will Elder and Joe Orlando, all of them producing lively, obsessively detailed artwork that still seems remarkably fresh and inventive nearly fifty years later. Alas, the same cannot be said of the scripts, written chiefly by Feldstein and Gaines, for while they may mimic the more obvious features of Kurtzman's brand of parody, they generally lack the wit, insight and often barely disguised savagery that made the original *Mad* so different and distinctive. The range of cultural products lampooned in *Panic* is nonetheless impressive, from Tennessee Williams ('Come Back Little Street Car' in 2) to Dick Tracy ('Tick Dracy' in issue 5). A fair number of the targets, though, such as the game show satirised in 7's 'You Axed For It', are now all but lost to the mists of time. *Panic* inevitably suffers when compared to its more illustrious companion title, probably due to the difference between genius and craftmanship, but Feldstein's utterly professional approach made him the natural successor to Kurtzman as editor of *Mad*, not long after *Panic*'s cancellation. Fans of good humour drawing should at the very least sample one of the Gemstone reprint editions, with 4, bearing a terrific Basil Wolverton cover, a good representative issue.~AL

PANIC

Panic Publ (Farrell): *6 issues 1958-1959, 3 issues (Vol.2 10-12) 1965-1966*

In the wake of *Mad*'s success, the newsstands were swamped by a mini-industry of humour magazines, of which *Panic* was not the worst but by no means the best. Publisher Robert Farrell made a career of trend-jumping, and *Panic* is a *Mad* clone in every way bar quality. Artistically, there are a number of strips by Bob Powell, Jack Davis and Angelo Torres, but in general there is nothing essential here. The 1960s issues are mostly reprints. *Panic*'s enduring legacy is leaving one to wonder how the publishers could issue a *Mad* imitation under the same title as EC's "Official *Mad* Imitation" a mere two years after that title folded.~DAR

PANTHA

Harris: One-shot *('Haunted Passion') 1997, one-shot (Pantha vs Vampirella) 1997*

Rather a disappointment all round for those familiar with the were-girl as the first one-shot just reprints her origin and first adventure from the 1970s *Vampirella* 31-32, while the second is exactly the same as (and was released simultaneously with) *Vampirella vs Pantha*. A widely promoted third one-shot eventually ended up as *Vampirella* 24.~WW

PANTHEON

Lone Star Press: *12 issue limited series, 1 Special ('Ancient History') 1998-2003*

With superhero comics approaching pensionable age, it's common and not illogical to assume every ability has been utilised and every scenario played out. *Pantheon* erodes that theory in three issues. The Freedom Machine have dealt with all super-villains on their world, whereupon one of the most powerful believes it's time the group took charge of humanity, while most of the others abhor this notion. At this point the series opens. In addition to constructing an intriguing scenario, apparently the route he intended for his aborted *Elementals* series, writer Bill Willingham develops some fascinating super-powered characters. This is particularly true of his villains, who almost all have a "gosh, wow!" factor. One kills with a glance and has to be dealt with in a desert (2-3), while the more people Chaos Nation absorbs the more abilities he develops. He's not impervious, but transfers any injury to someone he's absorbed, who's then discarded, usually deceased. And his purpose in the story is merely distraction.

Willingham also plays out a real-world political scenario with duplicity high on the agenda, adding another layer to an already complex tale. Mike Leeke pencils most of 1-8, with Paul Ryan on board from 10, both inked by Bill Williams, who's also the publisher. They excel at clear storytelling, and Leeke's misproportioned gathering on the cover to 1 is not indicative of his interiors. This was plotted as a twelve issue limited series, which permits a unsentimental look at superheroes, with many mere cannon fodder irrespective of appeal. The special is slight, spotlighting a heroine involved in early issues in the manner that other characters were fleshed out in *Heroic Tales*. *Pantheon* lacks the depth or poetry of *Watchmen*, but as a cracking good superhero story there have been few other limited series to match it. All issues are still available from Lone Star, from whom your comic shop can order them for you. Anyone who enjoys their superheroes shouldn't miss this.~FP

Recommended: 1-3, 6-11

PANTS ANT TROUSER HOUR

Slave Labor: *One-shot 2001*

The insect vigilante who wears enormous cybernetic pants to defend the righteous from all manner of trouser-related tomfoolery spins off from *Sugar Buzz* to find, and lose, true love while protecting the city of Gaberdine, a.k.a. "The Big Gusset". Woodrow Phoenix's art is deliciously nouveau-retro, and Ian Carney's script presents lots of amusing moments along the way, but the plot, sadly, is too thin, the humour (especially our hero's irritating verbal mannerisms) too repetitive, and, well, the pants are just too long.~HS

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* Available in a collected edition

PAPER MUSEUM

Jungle Boy Press: *1 issue + 2002 to date*

Peculiar anthology title in which two strips by Nick Derrington resemble 1940s anthology comic material, and two written by Jai Nitz that have more depth. There's a version of *Rumpelstiltskin* drawn by Tom Fowler, while Phil Hester, Lafe Smith and Mick Gray combine for a story set in the Amazon jungle. It's all nicely produced, but none of it will ever be read more than once.~WJ

PAPER TALES

CLG Comics: *2 issues 1993-1994*

Another one of those personal zines, this produced by Seattle's Bruce Chrislip. The author has very little to say and even less flair in conveying it. Feeble.~SW

PARA TROOP

Comics Conspiracy: *6 issues 1998-1999, one-shot (0) 1999*

Doug Miers weaves a hefty dose of Fortean topics into this series of folk with paranormal abilities. So far you've seen it before, but what lifts this a step above is the engaging cast. The most powerful of them, Willow, has known everything since a childhood encounter with the alien Quim, but understands very little. Quim himself is a mysterious little fellow, and the burning Max who can only consume combustibles feels responsible for his wife's murder. There's also a violent psychotic, but he serves a purpose. 1-3 unite the cast, and their mission is revealed in 4. Unfortunately, the assorted artists aren't quite of professional standard. The only time the art matches the ambition is with David Birdsong's enticing fine-lined depictions in the one-shot, but if you can prioritise writing above art this series is worth your while.~FP

Recommended: One-shot

PARADIGM

Two Irish Guys Press: *1 issue 2002*

Image: *5 issues + 2002 to date*

Creators Matthew Cashel and Jeremy Haun cite the protracted sagas of *Sandman* and *Starman* as examples of what they hope to achieve, and they claim the premise permits any type of story. The plot to date concerns various characters' reactions to reality slippages in the city of Bogsdale. After a generous minimum of thirty story pages per issue, ambiguity still reigns, and more questions are raised every issue. Like "Why are there so many urination and toilet scenes?" There is promise: *Paradigm* is a well-crafted series to a degree, and certainly an accomplished first comic. Haun's art impresses, but is overly reliant on photo referencing. If there really is a strong enough premise it'll survive a few revelations, but after five issues the enigmatic dialogue, much of which reads smart but conveys nothing, is pasted over so much smoke. Shit or get off the pot, boys. The initial first issue is reprinted with a few new pages as the first Image issue.~WJ

Terry Moore's PARADISE, TOO!

Abstract Studio: *9 issues + 2000 to date*

This collection of Terry Moore's repeated lame attempts to create a successful syndicated newspaper strip should appeal to fans of his *Strangers in Paradise* because it includes early versions of characters from that comic. Stuff in early issues is very derivative of strips such as *Pogo* and *Bloom County*, but it is interesting to follow the artist's development. The best character is a naughty cake-eating fairy called Kixie. She should have her own comic. And someone should shoot the nauseating sad polar bear in the Wonderland strip.~GK

PARADISE X

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries (Heralds) 2001-2002, 6 issues + (0-5) 2002 to date*

The third Marvel X series kicks off in the aftermath of catastrophe with *Heralds*, billed as a prelude to *Paradise X*. Jim Krueger and Steve Pugh recount how seven envoys of X-51, the robotic Watcher, are dispatched throughout the Multiverse to warn all the Earths of an alien threat incubating at their cores. They assist in destroying them, eventually arriving on Earth X. As usual things are not going well. This time, against a grand plan to build a Heaven for all the dead beings trapped in a kind of Purgatory of self-delusion, the surviving dystopic heroes must find a solution to a new mystery, namely, why can't anyone alive on Earth X die any more? Krueger and Dougie Braithwaite reunite for the actual series to produce another good looking but confused piece of grim'n'gritty Armageddon-chic which seems to be nothing more than a dubious attempt to bring a catalogue of old Marvel has-beens and *What If?* tales into a Greater Marvel Continuity. Overblown and approaching ridiculous.~WW

PARADOX

Dark Angel: *2 issues 1994*

The star of the show here is artist David Treadaway, who at this point had a shaky grasp of anatomy, but a great sense of design to his artwork, sometimes at the expense of storytelling. Joe Phillips also contributes decent art to a story in 2, but both he and Treadaway are drawing sophomoric horror rubbish, so anyone interested in a story should stay away.~FP

PARAGON

AC: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

Paragon (originally Captain Paragon) is to AC what Superman is to DC, and in the year of AC's tenth anniversary this miniseries was intended to reintroduce and redefine his character for the 1990s. These issues can be read on their own, but the story does cross over into *FemForce* (58-60) as Paragon is manipulated into frustrating the Black Commando's vengeance on those he believes ruined his life. Bill Black's love of Golden Age superheroes is evident in all that he (and AC Comics) does, but the convoluted plot and dull artwork combine to make this one for FemForce completists only.~NF

PARALLAX: Emerald Night

DC: *One-shot 1996*

Creators Ron Marz, Mike McKone and Mark McKenna are on decent form as Hal Jordan, ex-Green Lantern and now the all-powerful Parallax takes revenge on the Superman Cyborg that destroyed Jordan's home town, Coast City. His replacement, Kyle Rayner seeks him out to help fight the Sun-Eater that's going to devour Earth. After some soul-searching and meeting his old supporting cast off he goes to do battle in *Final Night* 4.~HY

PARANOIA

Adventure: *6 issues 1991-1992*

Based on a role-playing game that has a computer controlled world, *Paranoia* has clones of a man named King.R-THR involved in constantly shifting scenarios. Confusion is so rife, few can have made it to the final issue.~WJ

PARASYTE

Tokyopop: *12 volume limited series 1998-2002*

When teenager, Shin, discovers an alien conspiracy, an alien parasite attacks him, but failing to reach his brain, becomes stuck in his left hand. 'Lefty' and Shin are forced to co-exist and become the target for other aliens, who feed off humans and whose ability to transform their host bodies into deadly weapons makes for some dramatic and fierce battles. As the series progresses, the authorities begin to understand the nature of the invasion as mutilated bodies are discovered throughout Japan. Shin must deal with an attack on his parents (1-3), a classmate at school (4-5), and an investigation of his relationship with 'Lefty' by Tamara Rockford, whose attempts to find a way to live amongst humans by bearing a human child eventually put her at odds with the other aliens (6-9). The final battles begin with the police's use of a serial killer as a means of identifying the aliens amongst the humans.

Hitosi Iwaaki's artwork is simple, with minimal backgrounds and limited character expressions, but this doesn't detract from the strength of the storytelling and adds to the alienated atmosphere in which Shin finds himself, cut off from humanity and his own emotions, whilst the alien transformations are both imaginative and gruesome. The first four volumes include reprints of the series from the *MixxZine* and *Tokypop* anthologies.~NF

Recommended: 1-12

PARIS THE Man Of Plaster

Harrier: *6 issues 1987-1988*

Glenn Dakin and Steve Way's daft Parisian crimefighter is the lead strip, backed up with assorted superhero spoofs. It's all reasonably enjoyable, but pales in comparison to the consistently excellent 'Temptation' one-pagers in which the Devil attempts to obtain a soul by deceit, bribery or any other means.~FP

PARSIFAL

Star*Reach: One-shot 1978

Collection of the first two episodes from the *Star*Reach* series with the third and final part of Patrick Mason and P. Craig Russell's adaptation of Richard Wagner's opera. Parts one and two are recoloured here for consistency and though the paper on which the title is printed isn't very good, the muted colours provide some lovely images. On the whole, this is perhaps too much of an early work for Russell, his rendering sometimes tentative and his characters' expressions too wide-eyed or inelegant.~NF

PARTICLE DREAMS

Fantagraphics: *6 issues 1986-1987*

Vehicle for some of Matt Howarth's science-fiction strips. 'This Fear of Gods' (2-3), telling of the Galation Empress War, is part of Keif Llama's ancient history. Howarth continues with stories about Keif, a resourceful woman whose job it is to resolve conflicts with aliens, which requires her to keep all her wits about her. Howarth's straightforward, heavily crosshatched artwork perfectly suits the alien landscapes Keif frequently finds herself dumped in. Diverting if you like traditional science-fiction stories rather than fights in space.~NF

Recommended: 4, 5

PARTNERS IN PANDEMONIUM

Caliber: *2 issues 1991*

Comedy with two demons from hell arriving on Earth to cause chaos, finding a place to stay with Marty. In the second issue they learn they're not the only demons on Earth, and try finding employment. There's nothing fundamentally wrong with this buddy title, but it prompts slight grins rather than the belly laughs presumably intended.~FP

PARTS OF A HOLE

Caliber: *One-shot 1990*

Collection of short pieces by Brian Michael Bendis, none of any particular consequence, and lacking the compelling characterisation that makes his later work so fascinating.~FP

PARTS UNKNOWN

Eclipse: *4 issue miniseries 1992*, 1 issue 1993*
Image: *4 issue miniseries ('Hostile Takeover') 2000*

Remember the tongue-in-cheek camp humour film *Mars Needs Women*? Well, someone thought it would be a good idea to re-work the plot with plenty of underwear shots and extra violence. It wasn't. The second series, titled 'The Next Invasion', was left uncompleted for seven years until it acquired a different title and publisher. It seems the alien infestation wasn't dealt with first time around, so here's another go, also saturated in b-movie excess. It was preceded by a one-shot promo mag titled 'Killing Attractions'.~WJ

Siegel + Simon's PARTY Comics

Siegel & Simon: *One-shot 1980*

Very feeble self-published humour comic. It's as if two ageing hippies half-remember Robert Crumb strips, have thought "We can do that", and have gone on to prove they can't. There's the oldster making a fool of himself at a punk gig (Oh, my aching sides), the sad cartoon freak (I think they're splitting now), the 1950s sit-com parody (Nurse, nurse), and the drug tragedy as cartoon inspiration (sutures, please). The strips are all well illustrated, and in most there's a different pair of smug fuckers pulling the strings. Not worth a wank.~FP

PASSOVER

Maximum Press: *1 issue 1996*

Another appallingly un-kosher babes and blades pose-fest featuring Avengelyne. And if that's not enough you can also play "spot the knock-off" in a derivative tale of demonic possession. A dreary mess that's just not forgettable enough.~WW

THE PATH

CrossGen: *10 issues + (Prequel, 1-9) 2002 to date*

The monk, Obo-san, refuses to honour the rituals at his brother's funeral and defies Nayado's Emperor, Mitsumune, whom he believes is leading the country to destruction. Wulf and Aiko assist Obo-san to escape with the Weapon of Heaven in his possession. The Emperor wants this in order to allow him to defeat his enemies in rival Shinacea. Ryuichi, an old friend, and the Emperor's leading general, is sent after Obo-San to retrieve the weapon, at which point Shinacea invades and only Obo-San can prevent the complete destruction of Ryuichi's army.

Written by Ron Marz and drawn by Bart Sears (Walt Simonson guest pencils the story of the barbarian, Wulf, in 5), this is an atmospheric and largely successful attempt at a samurai epic. Sears' artwork looks like Tom Mandrake crossed with Frank Miller, but the colours are too dark, detracting from the storytelling.~NF

PATHWAYS TO FANTASY

Pacific Comics: *1 issue 1984*

Editor Bruce Jones rounds up an entirely predictable selection of the more sensitive members of the comics community to deliver an arty-farty first issue which, to no one's surprise, turned out to be a one-off. However, it's a lesson for all publishers, containing as it does a lot of well-respected names (Windsor-Smith, Jeff Jones, Scott Hampton, John Bolton and portfolio queen Lela Dowling – too bad she can't actually draw). On the whole, pretty, lacking stories and awfully wet.~FJ

PATRICK THE WOLF BOY

BlindWolf Studios: *One-shot 2000, one-shot ('Halloween Special') 2000, one-shot ('Christmas Special') 2000, one-shot ('Valentine's Day Special') 2001, one-shot ('Mother's Day Special') 2001, one-shot ('Summer Special') 2001, one-shot ('Next Halloween Special') 2001, one-shot ('Superhero Special') 2002, one-shot ('Sci-Fi Special') 2002, one-shot ('Another Halloween Special') 2002*

When people relate anecdotes about their children do you never seem to find them as funny as they do? Well, that feeling pervades this series, with gags that occasionally raise a slight grin somehow successful enough to run three years and two collections. Patrick is a human kid with fangs, exhibiting some wolf behaviour traits in strips rarely running to more than four pages. The repeated cover pose in different costumes works well, though. If you do like other people's stories about their children and the 'Life's Like That!' column in *Reader's Digest*, you'll love this.~FP

THE PATRIOTS

WildStorm: *10 issues 2000*

After the murder of Roxanne (Rocky) Boorman's partner, his replacement, Zach Donovan must come to her rescue when she's captured by Tomas Zorn, whose powers over the mind have already turned several operatives against the

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* Available in a collected edition

International Operations organisation that they work for (1-4). Super spy, Nigel Harrington is introduced in 6 as Rocky and Zach travel to London to deal with some missing human biological weapons (5-8). 9-10 conclude the storyline from the *Psi-Tech* miniseries and a plot to flood the world to give mankind a fresh start. Begun by Brandon Choi and Jonathan Peterson (1-7) and completed by Peterson on his own, this is a well-written series that at least attempts to look beyond the action into the hearts of the characters and the nature of the world of espionage. Michael Ryan's storytelling adds to the experience, though his pencils seem rushed towards the end of the series.~NF

PATSY WALKER

Marvel: *125 issues 1945-1965, one-shot ('Fashion Parade') 1966*

"The Girl Who Could Be You!" reads the blurb above early issues of this title. Not without some major liposuction, babe. Anyway. Attractive, red-haired teenager lives in Centreville, USA with her long-suffering parents. Her best friend, and deadliest rival, is scheming brunette Hedy Wolfe. Her high-school sweetheart is Buzz Baxter. And... that's it, really. Amazingly, these innocuous tales of comedic romance, without either the diverse cast (!) or the overtly cartoony style of Archie, became his closest rivals for longevity, sustaining not only 125 issues of Patsy's own comic, but also starring roles for Patsy and her pals in *Patsy and Hedy* (110 issues, 1 annual 1952-1967), *A Date With Patsy* (1 issue 1957), *Girl's Life* (6 issues 1954), *Miss America Magazine* (93 issues 1944-1958), *Patsy and Her Pals* (29 issues, 1953-1957) and Hedy Wolfe (1 issue 1957). Patsy Walker was one of only two Marvel characters to be published uninterrupted from the 1940s to the 1960s (the other being Millie the Model), and, at the time of her cancellation, had appeared in more stories than any other Marvel character. Notably, in a male-dominated industry, her earliest adventures were drawn by Ruth Atkinson, with Chris Rule a major artist throughout the 1950s. One of her spin-offs, *Patsy and Hedy*, survived slightly longer than the parent title, but only thanks to the novelty of the girls finally graduating (after twenty years!) and setting out as 'Patsy & Hedy, Career Girls'. An oddity was the one-shot *Patsy Walker's Fashion Parade* of 1966, published a full year after Patsy's own comic folded. It featured not a single story, but instead page after page of pin-ups, hairdos and 'Fashions From Fans'...a sad, final collection of sweepings from the hairdresser's floor. In the early 1970s, Patsy and her husband, Buzz, were brought back from limbo as supporting-cast members in the Beast's solo strip in *Amazing Adventures*, after which she went on to become, bizarrely, the superheroine Hellcat in *Avengers* and *Defenders*.~HS

PATTY CAKE

Permanent Press: *9 issues 1994-1996, one-shot ('Prime Collection') 1997, one-shot (A Patty Cake Christmas) 1999*
Tapestry: *3 issues 1996-1997, one-shot (A Patty Cake Christmas) 1996*
Slave Labor: *One-shot 1997, 15 issues (& Friends) 1997-1999*
Amaze Ink: *7 issues + (& Friends) 2000 to date*

Patty Cake is Patricia Bakerman, seven years old and precocious. She bullies her best friend Irving who's five, and a little slow on the uptake. She's tolerated by the ten-year-old Jose and always at odds with Susie McBee. The stories consider all aspects of a small girl's life, from the delight of a summer's day to the fear of being abandoned when her mother's late to pick her up; from rivalry with Susie over a babysitter's attention to the danger of letting grown-ups become involved in your games. Along the way, Patty Cake learns lessons and teaches Irving a thing or two. She bickers with her older sister Sandy who's a bit of a rebel and she antagonises her parents, both of whom try to explain things with more or less success. Later issues cover making a mistake (10), the school play (12), Summer Camp (15), Sandy's school dance (series two 3), her friend, Phoebe's new bike (series two 5) and a visit from her Dutch grandparents that explains a lot about Sandy's behaviour (series two 10).

Scott Roberts has a tremendous feel for these characters. His understanding of childhood and his ear for dialogue seem unnervingly accurate. Alternating issue-length stories with shorter strips, Roberts keeps the title fresh, his simply drawn figures suddenly exploding in emotional contortions – the whole suffused with the enthusiasm of the very young. The 'Prime Collection' includes a selection of stories from the Permanent Press series as well as some previously unpublished material and the strips published in *Cerebus*, *Negative Burn* and *Comics Buyer's Guide*. The Permanent Press edition of *A Patty Cake Christmas* is an extended version of that from Tapestry, while two separate collections from Slave Labor reprint the Permanent Press strips from 1-3 and 4-6. The series keeps getting better as Roberts becomes more confident and bolder in his storytelling. The issue-length tale of the solar eclipse in *Patty Cake & Friends* 8 is particularly notable.~NF

Recommended: *A Patty Cake Christmas* (Permanent Press), *Patty Cake & Friends*, 1-15, series two 1-7

PAUL The Samurai

NEC: *3 issue miniseries 1990-1991*, 10 issues 1992-1994*

The ludicrously pompous Paul attempts to follow his warrior's code of honour in American society, where Japanese culture is typified by a ninja-themed sushi takeaway. Spinning off from *The Tick*, this is very much in the same mould, with preposterous characters played as relatively straight superheroes with portentous dialogue. There's plenty of neat touches from writer Clay Griffith initially (Paul conceals his sword in a baguette to avoid arrest), but midway through the ongoing series it runs out of steam. 9-10* form one long story with the final two issues of *Man-Eating Cow*, and guest-star the Tick. Sample the first two issues of the regular series featuring a strip of silly superheroes based on other Japanese stereotypes, and if you like them dive in further.~WJ

PEACEMAKER

Charlton: *5 issues 1967*

The bizarre concept of the man who loves peace so much he's willing to fight for it falls on US UN envoy Christopher Smith. Joe Gill and Pat Boyette turn out frankly dull stories, but masterpieces in comparison with the Fightin' 5 back-ups. Peacemaker began as a back-up in *Fightin'* 5 40 and 41, so presumably had a debt to repay.~FP

PEACEMAKER

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1988*

At DC there was no compunction about exploiting the inherent illogic of Peacemaker's stance as the man who loves peace so much he's willing to fight for it. Smith is portrayed as a man diving over the edge on a regular basis, tormented by the ghost of his Nazi father, yet still somehow able to function effectively as a vigilante. It's not outstanding, but there's enough action and ideas to see out four issues. He later becomes part of *Checkmate*.~FP

PEANUT BUTTER & JEREMY

Alternative Comics: *3 issues + 2000 to date*

James Kochalka's charming, if slight, tales of a talking kitten, Peanutbutter, and a crow, Jeremy, who is always trying to barter with Peanutbutter for something, but is convinced, every time, that the kitten is trying to cheat him. This creates most of the tensions within the strip, as the kitten is far too naïve to try anything of the sort.~NF

PEARL HARBOR

Antarctic: *2 issue microseries 2001*

A very detailed shorthand primer of the events leading up to Japan's attack on American forces stationed in the Pacific in 1941. In 1 Ted Nomura chronicles events from the Japanese perspective, while 2 is the US point of view. It's very well researched, and permits Nomura to indulge in his love of drawing planes and ships while being reined in to a degree by the limitations of historical accuracy. Anyone wanting the basic information could do far worse than consult these. The release of the second issue coincided with another surprise attack on the USA.~FP

THE PEASANT AND THE DEVIL

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1998*

More mediocre comics and accompanying art-wank justification from Simon Grennan and Christopher Sperandio. This time some mates have acted out fairy tales of their own devising for the 'art' process to transform them into blurry exposures. An issue of *Ghost Rider* has more merit.~FP

PEDESTRIAN VULGARITY

Fantagraphics: One-shot 1990

Certainly living up to the title, this reprints short strips created by Dennis Worden between 1981 and 1989. Quality varies wildly, but there are plenty of laughs and it isn't always the later material that's superior.~WJ

PEDRO AND ME

Henry Holt: *Graphic Novel 2000*

In 1993 Judd Winick was a struggling cartoonist who successfully auditioned for a part in MTV's reality show *The Real World*: San Francisco. He would share a house with five others for six months, with their lives being filmed. A housemate Winick became close to was a young gay HIV-Positive Cuban born immigrant, Pedro Zamora. While to a certain extent this is Winick's autobiography, it's basically Pedro's story: how he came to live in the States, how at seventeen he tested positive for the HIV virus, about his relationships and how he became an AIDS awareness lecturer, and how through *The Real World* he was able to spread his message to millions. It's a moving account of a remarkable young man and his untimely death. Also remarkable is how Winick sheds his white middle class attitudes and prejudices to accept Pedro for what he was. It's perhaps a bit too sentimental in places where heart-strings are meant to be pulled, but Winick is trying to be sincere. He's not the greatest of illustrators, but his storytelling technique is spot on. Once you start reading, you'll be captivated. A moving and wonderful tribute to a friend.~HY

Recommended

Joe Matt's PEEP SHOW

Drawn And Quarterly: *13 issues + 1992 to date*

The one page 'Peep Show' strips were a highlight of anthology titles such as *Snarf* and *Drawn & Quarterly* in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Frankly confessional in nature, the diary-style pages of anything up to forty panels revealed Joe Matt as a parsimonious, compulsive obsessive with plenty of personal habits to make the average reader squirm, yet were all the more compelling for doing so. All the strips originally published in anthology comics are compiled in the essential *Peep Show* collection. For the regular title, Matt dropped the minute panels in favour of a more traditional format, but initially the content still examined his day-to-day life and relationships. Expanding stories over an entire issue permits more in-depth exploration of Matt's motivations for his often unsavoury behaviour, while reservations concerning the fly-on-the-wall position of the readership are dispelled by Matt's continuing compulsion to portray himself in the worst possible light. Although surely not his intention, Matt has tapped into elements of the 'new lad' persona, wanting his cake and a fair proportion of other people's as long as he doesn't have to pay for it. Of course, if not in financial terms, payment is always due, and 1-3 chronicle the disintegration of his long-term relationship. The consequent thrashing around is detailed in 4-6, collected with the previous issues as *That Poor Bastard*. There's an abrupt change of tack from 7, as Matt begins relating events that occurred when he was ten years old. It retains the car-crash-style compulsion as developing facets of Matt's character come to the fore, but is prolonged to 10 beyond a natural lifespan. 11 starts a new story very slowly, devoting the entire issue to a disagreement with a friend and a discussion of porn videos. It drags, and at one time Matt would have dealt with everything here in two pages, although two years after the preceding issues 13 is a return to form as Matt is chastised by friend and fellow cartoonist Seth. He's a good cartoonist, but the appeal of Matt's work lies strongly in his acknowledging that plenty of his habits and facets of his personality are off-putting and distressing to others, yet presenting them without shame, leaving one to wonder about further horrors he's not revealing. This is coupled with constant agonising over why people don't get on with him. Lacking the expressive art and constant seam of humour there might be nothing endearing about Matt's work, yet as it is he can be compulsive reading.~WJ

Recommended: 1-6, 13

PELLEAS AND MELISANDE

Eclipse: *2 issues 1985*

Pelleas and Melisande (also known as *Night Music* 4 and 5) is adapted from the stage play by Maurice Maeterlinck, which was written in 1892. It's the story of Melisande, married to Golaud but, seemingly inevitably, drawn to Pelleas, Golaud's half-brother. As Pelleas declares his love, however, he is killed by Golaud, who has been watching the couple's growing intimacy with anger. Maeterlinck asks questions rather than offering solutions. His strongest influences are the French Symbolist poets; it is the expression of their ideas that concern him and which P. Craig Russell so carefully captures with his artwork. If the text is oblique, the story is carried by image and gesture. Russell's rich, sensitive artwork provides the emotional intensity to carry a play that is best known for Debussy's opera based on it.~NF

Recommended: 1, 2

PELLESTAR

Eternity: *2 issues 1987*

There's a decent enough story going here about Brian, on the cusp of adulthood and unsure where life's going to take him. The problem is, he's been having these dreams involving a vicious beast. When his grandfather dies Brian begins to learn the truth about what he is, and what the old stuff in the attic is, and it's quite a shock. The fantasy elements are minimal beyond the dreams, and the potential of this series was never realised, as it remained incomplete. That being the case, it's chiefly memorable for the early pencilling of Richard Case and the early inking of Doug Hazlewood and Jimmy Palmiotti. One wonders what happened to writer Peter Palmer, who definitely showed promise.~WJ

Knights Of PENDRAGON

Marvel UK: *15 issues 1992-1993*

Few traces of the ecological subtext of the previous series (for which see under 'Knights') remain by the new first issue. The Arthurian legend aspects are played up, though, with all sorts of tiresome exposition on what it means to be a Pendragon, with new abilities and members popping up all the time. On the positive side, at least Grace gets to wear something other than her sci-fi slut gear. Writers Dan Abnett and John Tomlinson have put a lot of thought into the background, but given the grand idea that the Knights are the 20th-century equivalent of the Round Table, protecting Britain in her hour of need, there's an awful lot of basic superhero punch-'em-ups. John Royle is the main penciller, starting with 3, and begins in a nice sub-Alan Davis style devolving into a ghastly lines-all-over-the place format by the end. Altogether unmemorable.~FP

PENGUIN & PENCILGUIN

Fragments West: *5 issues 1987-1998*

International Humor Advisory Council: *3 issues (6-8) 1989-1994*

At the South Pole, live Penguin and Pencilguin, distinguished by the shape of their noses – a pen or a pencil. They dream of becoming famous artists and writers, while working in the ice cream shop of their father, Dadguin. Pencilguin's children, Glenguin and Gwenguin are taught by their Auntie Arktic, Punguin is a cousin of Dadguin's and Momguin is currently on her travels around the world. Each story is a lesson about the value of reading on behalf of the Cartoonists Across America program, promoting literacy, creativity and humour. The strips themselves, in Phil Yeh's florid cartoony style, are mostly based on well known stories like 'Aladguin and 1001 Flavors' (1), but sometimes also on television shows ('The Simpsguins' 8). Usagi Yojimbo has a cameo in 1 and even cartoonists make occasional guest appearances as themselves, including Sergio Aragonés (3), Alfredo Alcala (4), and Moebius (5). There is also a Patrick Rabbit backup in 4-6. In the end, Leigh Rubin and Yeh's strips just manage to avoid being overly preachy, mostly because they're fun and funny (if you're fond of puns, at least).~NF

PENNY CENTURY

Fantagraphics: *7 issues 1997-2000*

After twenty years it's all too easy to take Jaime Hernandez for granted, but, as this magnificent title proves, he is still working at the peak of his powers. *Penny Century* charts the adventures of Hernandez' regular cast of characters from *Love and Rockets*, Maggie, Hopey, Izzie and so on with extraordinary humour, skill and insight. Hernandez is one of the true giants of the comics world and demonstrates his mastery of the form by displaying a wide range of approaches to the different strips: a light, open style for the frivolous adventures of the eponymous Penny, oppressively dark artwork for the woozy late-night cruising of Ray, and cartoony Little Archie artwork for Maggies' childhood tales. The standout strip is 2's taut 'Chiller', as good an exploitation of the paranoia of a late night drive in the dark as you'll ever come across, but each issue is a masterpiece in its own right. 1-4 are collected as *Locas In Love*.~DAR

Recommended: 1-7

PENTACLE The Sign of the Five

Eternity: *4 issue miniseries 1991*

There's some thought applied to refreshing the concept of *Warlock* 5 by *Men In Black* creator Lowell Cunningham, who also re-introduces characters from other Eternity series, most prominently Werewolf at Large. There's much ado about the power selecting recipients, including a very out of place astronaut, that predictably resolves itself in one large fight. The art of John Ross has improved since earlier outings, but still falls into the 'promising' rather than 'good' category.~FP

PENTHOUSE COMIX

Penthouse: *33 issues 1994-1998*

If anyone could set up a successful soft-porn newsstand comic you'd have thought it would be *Penthouse*. When this débuted in 1994 it looked great, very slick and shiny, and benefiting from artwork by the likes of Gary Leach, Arthur Suydam, Kevin Nowlan, Gray Morrow and Adam Hughes. Apart from Mark Beachum, whose painted artwork appears in 4-8, 11 and 12, and Arthur Suydam, whose fantasies grace 1-8 and 13, the art was tight, highly finished and realistic. The early stories were a different matter. Largely written by editor George Caragonne, they were repetitive and poorly paced takes on superheroes and space opera, featuring aged jokes and heavy-duty bondage. Caragonne persuaded some interesting artists to work with him, however, including Russ Heath and Curt Swan in 5. The high point of the early issues was 'Scion', a series about psychics in Russia drawn, with great elegance and grace, by Kevin Nowlan in a pared-down, controlled version of his earlier fine-lined style. The sex was restrained but erotic, and there was an interesting thriller plot. Unfortunately it disappeared after issue 5, unfinished.

When experienced letch Dave Elliott replaced Caragonne the title became softer and more humour-driven, and it attracted a still more glittering array of names, including Moebius and Steranko (11), Richard Corben (15-17) and John M. Burns (17). Apart from a preview of Milo Manara's *Click 3*, *Penthouse Comix* concentrated on commissioned material, but Elliott began a series of quality European reprints. These included Leroi and Gibrat's *Pinocchia* (14-16*) and Manara's 'Hidden Camera' (17 on). Essentially this is *Heavy Metal* with a higher tits-and-ass quotient, concentrating on parodies, sexy superheroes and space-bondage fantasies. It's fine for whiling away a quiet afternoon, but don't look to it for insights.~FJ

Recommended: 1-5 for the Kevin Nowlan artwork

PENTHOUSE MAX

Penthouse: *2 issues, 1 Special 1996*

After the failure of *Penthouse Comix* spin-off *Men's Adventure*, this was another go at developing a second title by concentrating on popular, established characters (or as established as any character in Penthouse Comix could be said to be) preferably ones with big knockers and nymphomaniac tendencies. The 96 Election Special was very different, a series of short skits in flip-book format, one half and cover lampooning Clinton and the other half sending up Dole. Numerous comics names contributed, including many of the *Penthouse* regulars, plus Dan Jurgens, Dick Giordano, Scott Hampton, Bill Sienkiewicz, Keith Giffen, Lovern Kindzierski, Rick Geary, Kev O'Neill and Hilary Barta.~FJ

THE PEOPLE'S COMICS

Golden Gate/Kitchen Sink: *One-shot 1972*

A one-shot by a Robert Crumb in transition. By 1972 he'd been the most fêted underground cartoonist for over five years, and was obviously feeling pigeonholed by his standing and his characters. The boorish *Fritz the Cat* was being adapted, none too successfully, for a movie, and Crumb's images and catchphrases had propelled him to a public-awareness factor way beyond most counterculture creators. It's with *The People's Comics* that he begins to turn away from the underground, leaving Fritz's tombstone at the conclusion of a vitriolic strip concerning his perception of Hollywood types. It contains the usual dose of wish-fulfilment sex, as does the remainder of the comic, but what marks this is as turning-point is Crumb producing personal material moving beyond sexual fantasy and distancing himself from his presumed associations. It's the half-hearted manner in which he does so that makes this inessential Crumb. Always portraying himself as insecure, he seems uncertain about straying too far away from the market he no longer felt in tune with. Originally published by Golden Gate Press, there have been numerous reprints over the years, the most recent being Kitchen Sink's 1995 edition.~WJ

PERAZIM

Antarctic: *1 issue 1996*

Planned as three issues, Antarctic pulled the plug on this one very quickly, probably when the art arrived. It's an attempt at Moebius with a robot, a funny animal and an explorer, but it's really not very good at all.~FP

PERRAMUS

Fantagraphics: *4 issue miniseries 1991-1992*

The late Argentinian artist Alberto Breccia began this complex political fable in 1984, towards the end of a long and distinguished comics career. Born in Uruguay in 1919, Breccia drew his first professional cartoons in 1936. By 1945 he'd joined the staff of Patoruzito, Argentina's first comic book, where he began his début feature, Jean de la Martinica. Breccia made his name with the 1956 strip *Sherlock Time*, written by the prolific Hector Oesterheld, who also scripted Breccia's most popular work, *Mort Cinder*, first published in 1964. The artist's continuing mastery of the black and white medium was now complemented by restless technical experimentation, a highly influential blend of collage, photography, painting and breath-takingly assured line-work, techniques which also help to make *Perramus* such a visual treat.

Written by Juan Sasturain, *Perramus* concerns a man without a memory searching for his real identity, in a post-Peron Argentina, haunted by the memory of those 'disappeared' (murdered) radicals who dared to oppose the 1977 military dictatorship. Oesterheld, who once produced a biography of Che Guevara with Breccia, was himself 'disappeared' in 1977, along with his four daughters. Conceived in the aftermath of the Falklands War, *Perramus* is

a complex, teasing, often obscurely allusive fantasy which features a guest appearance from Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges in 2. Borges was obsessed with games, riddles, enigmas; *Perramus* shares some of the same concerns. This also serves as a fine introduction to the peerless artwork of Breccia, one of the greatest of all comic artists.~AL
Recommended: 1-4

PERVERT CLUB

A.M. Works: *12 issues 1995-1998*

High School student Malcolm Davis is a teenage transvestite. This foible draws him to the attention of Calvin High's 'Spirit Club', in reality an all-female group of fetishists led by the power-crazed Julia Davner. Malcolm is invited to become the first male to join, but is he to be their willing accomplice in their stated agenda – to obliterate society's taboos – or their helpless pawn? Is their stated agenda their only goal? Can his girlfriend April handle a relationship with someone who looks better in a dress than she does? Does his sister Mallory love him only as a brother, or is there more going on? And how is he going to deal with Brad the Quarterback, who's asked 'him' out on a hot date?

The title is a misjudgement, prompting expectations of a wank comic, which this isn't. It does talk about sex frankly, but there are no explicit sexual depictions, and almost none of the 'Pervert Club' move beyond one-note ciphers. People who picked it up because of the title would have been disappointed, and the title would deter many who might find it interesting. Mostly, it's a story about alienation from one's peers, developed from an admittedly unusual viewpoint, and, while sometimes clumsily expressed, it is often oddly moving. Writer and artist Will Allison's etiolated pseudo-manga style will not be to everyone's taste, but the series has an offbeat appeal, and Allison is to be commended for his perseverance. Despite diminishing sales he persisted long enough to draw the series to a bittersweet and, given the absurd initial premise, surprisingly pragmatic resolution.~HS

PET

Eros: *One-shot 1997*

Let's face it, for those whose inclinations run that way there's precious few places where you can see a gorilla performing cunnilingus, or indeed receiving a blow job. Well look no further. The irony is that the story of the future society Tayyar Ozkan has created to justify the above sequences is far more interesting than the ape sex.~FP

PETE The P.O.'D Postal Worker

Sharkbait Press: *11 issues, 2 Specials 1997-2002*

Pete is the perfect mailman. Nothing will keep him from making his appointed deliveries. In a world where he must be on his guard even in the sorting office, lest his nervous colleagues shoot him accidentally, he's always fully armed and prepared for the worst that can be thrown at him. That includes a well-armed gang terrorising the neighbourhood, prison inmates, inhabitants of an anti-authority bunker (holding the FBI at bay), aliens in Roswell and the IRA, during an enforced vacation in England, where he's no longer welcome after that unfortunate incident with the Queen. All of this in the first five issues (conveniently collected). In later issues he faces a traitor within the postal service (6, 11), becomes the Postman on Elm Street (7-8), appears on the Jerry Ringer Show (9) and revives the Pony Express (10). The specials contain a Christmas adventure with Santa and a trip to Afghanistan to deliver a letter to Osama Bin Laden. These have their moments, but are not as consistently funny. Written by Marcus Pierce Jr (except 10), this is very black humour. Pete's inane, almost permanently fixed grin (bonhomie cut with tension), calm (in a wired way) and grim determination see him through each day. He's frighteningly intense, utterly single minded and every inch a hero to cheer for. Pete Garcia's cartoony artwork is reminiscent of a finer lined Matt Howarth, but there's something too of Keith Giffen, in the expressions.~NF
Recommended: 1-5

PETER PORKER, SPIDER-HAM

Marvel: *One-shot 1981*

Anthropomorphic humour. Allegedly. The title says it all, really.~FJ

PETRA ETCETERA

Gratuitous Bunny Comix: *3 issues + 2000 to date*

Petra is the kid sister of Jo Dribble whose adventures in time and space feature in *Tales from Sleaze Castle*. Petra's story is planted firmly in Jo's kitchen sink in Newcastle. Drink, parties, arguments, introspection and dodgy liasons are the order of the day. Terry Wiley displays considerable skill in portraying Petra's day to day interaction with Jo's student set convincingly, and Adrian Kermode's dialogue is authentic without being intrusive. Both creators manage to co-plot an entertaining everyday continuity, reminding us that this is still a comic strip with interludes and references to various styles.~SW

THE Sandman Presents: PETREFAX

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 2000*

Fantasy adventure, set in the land of Malegrise, where most people have magical powers. Petrefax is an undertaker whose latest commission, Calcinia, has had part of her soul stolen by her fiancé, Lord Bulgus. Now, with Petrefax's help, she must prove that Bulgus killed the rightful heir to his title before her body rots completely. Mike Carey's knowing script doesn't offer many surprises, but it's entertaining, the characters have spirit and Steve Leialoha's decorative artwork is a major plus.~NF

PHAGE: SHADOW DEATH

Big Entertainment: *6 issue miniseries 1996*

Bryan Talbot writes a story featuring the dinosaur despot he drew in *Teknophage*. It's a tale of intrigue, insurrection, sex and brutality, and Talbot stays a step ahead of the reader throughout. Mr Henry Phage is being troubled by a particularly resilient and persistent assassin, while the hedonistic Lady Messalina is discovering the allure of the illicit. The pencils are by the vastly under-rated David Pugh, here provider of fine grime and debauchery, and the whole is probably the best story to emerge from the vastly over-hyped Tekno/Big product.~FP
Recommended: 1-6

THE PHANTOM

Gold Key: *17 issues 1962-1966*

In 1560 Kit Walker loses his family when he's shipwrecked by pirates in the Bay of Bengal. He's washed ashore and raised by the Bandar jungle tribe, and grows to manhood swearing vengeance against the killers of his family and all wrongdoers. He becomes the first Phantom: The Ghost Who Walks to the jungle folk of the area; a fearsome champion of justice operating from a set of caves that resemble a skull. There's a one-page summary of this origin in 1, which is reprinted in 9. The torch is passed to each generation of the Walker family giving the strip a 400 year historical stage. The current Phantom's boyhood is serialised in 5-7, including his earliest encounter with Diana, his future mate. Comparisons with *Tarzan*, *Batman* and, more recently, *Tom Strong* are not without substance. The four page 'King, Queen and Jack' backup in 2-11 is replaced by 'Track Hunter' in 12-17. There's also a short Jungle Patrol feature in 10. All issues, quarterly until 1965, have one or two *Phantom* features with earlier stories written by editor Bill Harris. The series is drawn by Bill Lignante, who unsuccessfully applied to draw the syndicated strip. One or two episodes of 'Track Hunter' have Al Micale artwork but the back-ups are usually Lignante too, so you really have to like his nondescript style to be able to bear reading this title. Many of the painted covers are by the great George Wilson including 6-11 and 14-17.~SW

THE PHANTOM

King: *11 issues (18-28) 1966-1967*

Each issue features one story about the jungle lawman, with a female Phantom from the 19th Century in 20 and 24. The lame Bill Lignante artwork continues throughout except for the syndicated strip reprint in 25. Most stories are written by editor Bill Harris with the exception of 18 by Dave Wood and 20 by Pat Fortunato. There are several short back-up features including Flash Gordon by Wally Wood in 18 and Gil Kane in 19-20; Mandrake drawn by Andre LeBlanc in 21-23 and then Brick Bradford by Paul Norris in 26-28. Numerous military fillers appear from 24 on written by Raymond Marais with art by Tim Battersby-Brent, Jeff Jones in 25 and Ric Estrada in 28. There is no issue 29.~SW

THE PHANTOM

Charlton: *45 issues (30-74) 1969-1976*

After some leftover material from King Comics, Charlton continue new adventures focusing on the present-day Phantom. Jim Aparo draws some beautiful pages in 31-34, 36-38 all scripted by Steve Skeates around the same time they were both producing their memorable *Aquaman* issues for DC. With 39 artist Pat Boyette takes over, teaming up with Joe Gill whose scripts are, sadly, dismissive at best. After complaints from the syndicate about the quality of the comic in 1975, Charlton replaced Boyette with Frank Bolle, the lifeless Don Sherwood and some very poor Spanish artists, but retained Joe Gill. If anything, this constituted a drop in quality. When it was too late to really mend things, artist Don Newton managed a stellar run with numerous writers in 67-74. We see the Phantom die and pass the torch to his son in 67, the World War II Phantom's visit to Casablanca in 71, whilst the last issue is arguably the best Bicentennial comic to be published.~SW

THE PHANTOM

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1988, 13 issues 1989-1990*

One of the many comics adaptations of Lee Falk's newspaper strip superhero, started in 1934 and still going. Being the Phantom is a family business: 400 years ago, the original Phantom saw his father murdered by pirates and vowed to dedicate his life and those of his son, grandson, etc., to revenge and justice (with priority given to pirates). Here in 1988, Kit Walker is the twenty-first of this unbroken line. The miniseries acts as an introduction to the dynasty, recounting exploits in the careers of Phantoms 1, 13 and 21. Peter David's writing is leaden and Joe Orlando's story-telling confused, with at least one serious mistake at a critical moment. A thoroughly tedious read, unleavened by humour or any genuine human contact, and full of smug, self-important lectures. The Phantom may have the worst case of a God Complex in all of superherodom: he has his Chosen People tattooed with a sign that shows they are under his protection, and he can be found saying "There are man's laws, there are God's laws, and there are the Phantom's laws." Really, there's no reason to read this comic, except as a study of twenty-one generations of mental illness – that's one hell of a persistent gene on that Y chromosome. The ongoing series by other creators is mostly one- or two- issue stories, but each is so boring, it feels about four times the length. It earns some points for continuity in preserving all of the faults of the 1988 series and resisting any urge to make improvements.~FC

THE PHANTOM

Moonstone: *3 issues + 2002 to date*

Single issue stories, featuring the modern Phantom (and his family), set in Bagalla. 'Ghost Killer' has a smuggler hire a female assassin to kill the Phantom, who's stopped one too many shipments. 'The Singh Web' features a Chinese monk, destined to end the curse of the title, and some inept archaeologists. Then the Phantom goes hunting for 'The Treasures of Bagalla', stolen from the museum by mercenaries. While they're all entertaining enough, they're hardly pushing at any boundaries.~NF

PHANTOM FORCE

Image: *2 issues 1993*
Genesis West: *9 issues (0, 3-10) 1994-1995*

A generic band of adventurers comprising martial artists, wizards and cosmic warlords charge about in a quest to save the universe. Jack Kirby's last work is shanghaied, first by Image who merely overwhelm the art, and latterly by long time collaborator Mike Thibodeaux, whose inks and even plots seem greatly at odds with what Kirby intended. A sad waste of time.~WW

PHANTOM GUARD

Image: *6 issue miniseries 1997-1998*

Don't be misled by the inexplicably off-putting covers, which conceal a densely plotted thriller set on a U.S. colonised Mars in 2020, excellently realised by artist Ryan Benjamin. Once the mystery is solved *Phantom Guard* progresses into a good action series. The Phantom Guard are law officers of a sort, but without jurisdiction in certain areas. This makes their investigation of Mars' greatest industrialist a difficult matter, particularly as he uses his own superbeings. Sean Ruffner's plot keeps the pages turning, and Benjamin, generally a decent artist anyway, hits a career peak.~WJ
Recommended: 1-6

PHANTOM LADY

Fox Features: *11 issues (13-23) 1947-1949*
Verotik: *1 issue 1994*

The 'good-girl' art of Matt Baker is what most distinguishes *The Phantom Lady*, though her adventures (against everything from thieves and murderers to werewolves) are a cut above most others of the period with their emphasis on detection and mysteries. Phantom Lady herself is Sandra Knight, senator's daughter, who puts on a skimpy costume (but manages to avoid recognition without a mask) and wields a ray of black light against her adversaries.

The Verotik issue contains reprints from 14-17 and two from *All-Top Comics*, with pin-ups by Adam Hughes.~NF

PHANTOM OF FEAR CITY

Claypool: *12 issues 1993-1994*

A supernatural romance, this twist on the Flying Dutchman legend starred Juup Van Derdecken as the eponymous spirit, cursed to wander the earth, but every seven years made flesh, briefly, to seek the love of a woman who might free him. Along the way he encounters business sharks, serial killers, opera divas and more in a blend of *Dallas* and *Dark Shadows*. Steve Englehart's script is painstaking and evocative and the artwork, initially by Matt Haley, later by Nick Choles, quite lovely.~HS
Recommended: 1-12

THE PHANTOM STRANGER

DC: *Series one 6 issues 1952-1953, series two 41 issues 1969-1976, 4 issue miniseries 1987-1988*
DC/Vertigo: *One-shot 1993*

Débuting earlier than most people realise, the first series by John Broome, Carmine Infantino and Sy Barry had the Stranger solving supernatural happenings, and exposing fakes. Although visually similar to later versions in slouch hat, black suit and cloak, he had no particular abilities other than being able to manifest like a phantom. One of these stories is reprinted in *Showcase* 80 with a new framing sequence, with three more in 1-3 of the second series, as our man, in the company of Ghostbreaker Terry Thirteen, argues the merits of the supernatural cases represented. Robert Kanigher and Neal Adams provide all new material in 4, introducing a recurring adversary in sorceress Tala. The strange combination of Mike Sekowsky and Murphy Anderson draws 5, which is monopolised by a group of youngsters resembling nothing so much as the human cast of *Scooby Doo*. Regular artist Jim Aparo arrives on 6, and writer Gerry Conway's début in 10 rids us of Tala and the annoying teenagers while retaining the skeptical Terry Thirteen back-ups, now drawn by Tony DeZuniga, and introducing a new mystical menace, Tannarak. Except for Kanigher's brief return on 12 and 13, The Stranger was now an active participant in the stories.

Len Wein becomes writer with 14, and 17 is the first appearance of Cassandra Craft, a blind telepath who cares for the Stranger after he's been mugged in the subway! Tannarak is also on hand, obsessed with attaining immortality. Wein peaked here between 18, nicely drawn by DeZuniga, and 25. 20 introduces evil mystical organisation The Dark Circle, who would recur throughout, and 22 begins the best story of the run, with Cassandra kidnapped and controlled by the Circle. To locate them, the Stranger seeks the aid of Tannarak, by now a marvellously sarcastic character. 23 starts a back-up strip 'The Spawn of Frankenstein', written by Marv Wolfman and drawn by Mike Kaluta. Both were in their prime for a marvellously produced run, which progressed to a full-length teaming with the Phantom Stranger in 26. It continued in 27-30, drawn by Bernard Baily.

Wein left with 27, and the comic declined as the Stranger reverted to small cameo appearances in mystery stories mainly illustrated by Gerry Talaoc under a huge procession of writers. Subsequent issues are notable for the Black Orchid back-up, run irregularly in 31-41. Continued from *Adventure Comics*, by Sheldon Mayer and Nestor Redondo, it maintained the mystery of this crimefighter in moody stories. In 38 the strip was drawn by Fred Carillo, now also drawing the lead feature. In an effort to increase sales, Deadman, drawn by Mike Grell, appeared in 33 and was popular enough to return for 39-41, along with Cassandra Craft.

After cancellation the Phantom Stranger popped up in guest roles in other series, including the seemingly incompatible *Justice League*. Mike Mignola and P. Craig Russell ensure that the 1987 series looks excellent, but much detail is lost in the printing. Despite a lacklustre start from writer Paul Kupperberg, it ends in spectacular fashion. The series works on two levels, as a supernatural battle and as a crime thriller, but is severely hampered by the strange dialogue inflicted on the Stranger, who sounds more like Marvel's Thor than any previous incarnation. He would next appear in the back of *Action Comics*, but that run never matched the miniseries. The Vertigo title has the Stranger trapped in a strange house and separated from his body, written by Alisa Kwitney, and illustrated by Guy Davis. It's an atmospheric and creepy story, involving all manner of strange demons and creatures in a to-hell-and-back saga.~HY
Recommended: 4, 17, 18, 20-26, one-shot

PHANTOM 2040

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1995*

Based on the animated cartoon. Setting this Phantom's adventures in 21st century Metropia, a vast city-state in crisis, has separated the character from its encumbering 20th century baggage. Here a young college student named Kit Walker discovers his family's legacy rather than having trained for it, and his college friends Jenna and Tranh are often caught up in his adventures. As 24th generation Phantom he's added invisibility, a bulletproof protective suit and a hoverbike to his arsenal. Kit is backed up by Guran, the wrinkled retainer of his father who's been missing since 2024, and Rebecca Madison and her influential Maximum Corp prove to be implacable enemies when The Phantom reappears after 16 years. Kit also meets the deluded Lady Phantom in 4. Scripts are by Peter Quinones with artwork by Steve Ditko inked by Bill Reinhold making a good combined effort. The undertheme of corporate crime, especially pollution, is well evoked with the Phantom's jungle coming off as an environment in need of protection.~SW

THE PHANTOM ZONE

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1982*

Before Superman's home planet Krypton exploded, The Phantom Zone was a special dimension where Kryptonian villains were imprisoned in phantom form as a humane alternative to execution. This epic miniseries, masterfully written by Steve Gerber and beautifully drawn by Gene Colan, deals with the many mysteries surrounding the Phantom Zone and its prisoners. While Superman is trapped in the zone, the escaped Kryptonian villains, all superbly characterised, cause havoc on Earth, and both the Justice League of America and Supergirl are required to stop them. Nuff said?~HY
Recommended: 1-4

PHAZE

Eclipse: *2 issues 1988*

A candidate for All-Time Stinker. The germ of a decent time-travel plot is successfully buried as writer Fred Burke attempts a complex story before he can manage a simple one. *Phaze* exhibits appalling storytelling amid a plethora of talking heads. It's a rare character that can be recognised from panel to panel, never mind from page to page, a confusion compounded by the decision to colour directly over Rafael Kayanan's pencils, then to use at least three colourists an issue so there's no consistency. Just in case someone does start to figure out what's going on, there's a succession of confusing montage pages. Eclipse wisely gave this a premature burial two issues into a planned six-issue run.~FP

PHENOMERAMA

Caliber: *1 issue 1997*

A selection of short stories by Scott Morse. They're nicely drawn, but take time to say little and a common response to most is likely to be "so?" Strangely, the most charming is the shortest, about a woman planning to attend college whose life is changed when the bus stops.~WJ

PHOENIX

Atlas: *4 issues 1975*

Much like Marvel's *Warlock* series, *Phoenix* was a futuristic superhero with strong messianic overtones. 1-3 were decently written by Jeff Rovin and well drawn by the under-rated Sal Amendola, though perhaps the comic's greatest claim to fame is featuring Carmine Infantino as one of its characters. With 4 the title changed to *Phoenix the Protector* and gained a far less impressive costume and creative team. It's worth noting 3's back-up, The Dark Avenger, wryly written by John Albano and well drawn by Pat Broderick and Terry Austin.~DAR
Recommended: 3

PHOENIX

Viz: *1 volume + 2002 to date*

The first volume, 'A Tale of the Future', is actually the second of twelve by Osamu Tezuka, originally published in Japan between 1967 and 1988, though the series remains unfinished after his death in 1989. All are linked by the presence of the mythical Firebird, guardian of the universal life force. Beginning with early civilisation, each volume jumps forward and then backward in time, moving towards a convergence in the present. 'A Tale of the Future' is the story of Space Patrolman, Masato Yamanobe's love for the beautiful alien, Tamami, a moopie, which, without a natural shape, can take on any form, even human. Moopies have been kept as pets until outlawed and exterminated as counter-productive to the control of man's desires in the harsh world of the future, where Masoto lives in one of the five, underground, Eternal Capitals. Masato's superior, Roc, tells him that he must destroy Tamami, but he can't, and instead escapes with her to the above ground outpost of Dr Saruta, who is trying to create a synthetic creature that can survive the hostile atmosphere. This is just the start of the final days of mankind and the transformation of Masato. Addressing fundamental questions about existence, with the Phoenix as a witness to countless evolutions and destructions of different life forms, Tezuka also depicts an epic love story and an alternate future, which is ultimately hopeful. Considered by some to be the pinnacle of Tezuka's career, this is one of the greatest comics ever.~NF
Recommended

PHOENIX The Untold Story

Marvel: *One-shot 1984*

In the planned ending to the 'Dark Phoenix' saga (*Uncanny X-Men* 129-137), Jean Grey was stripped of her powers and returned to her team-mates to live happily ever after. Editor-in-chief Jim Shooter objected: she had committed genocide and this amounted to little more than having her wrists slapped, so he forced Chris Claremont and John Byrne to rethink. This presents the story that would have appeared in *X-Men* 137 without Shooter's interference, and is surprisingly bland and anticlimactic next to the 'real' version. There is also an interview with Byrne, Claremont and Shooter, and scenes from the issues that would have followed. An interesting collectors' piece.~JC

THE PHOENIX RESURRECTION

Malibu: *3 issues 1996*

Previously purged in the memorable *X-Men* 137, Phoenix is an all-powerful symbiotic alien entity that bonds itself to an appropriate host. A big event was required to promote the merging of the Malibu Ultraverse into Marvel's titles following a corporate buyout, so Phoenix was revived. Trailed in the second issues of all the relaunched Ultraverse titles, this series sees Phoenix once again manifesting to fight the X-Men, Exiles and Ultraforce in the first two unnumbered issues, titled *Genesis* and *Revelation*. No obvious biblical title was available for *Aftermath*, and it's also very little to do with the remainder of the series, a pointless coda set in the future introducing Foxfire. Overall this is no better than average, and although the art is decent, the continuous switching of pencillers jars.~FP

PHOENIX SQUARE

Slave Labor: *3 issues 1997, Graphic Novel 2001*

Eccentric, picturesque concoction detailing the various transient and long-term residents of the peculiar artistic colony in Victorian Chameleon Bay on the Yorkshire Coast known as Phoenix Square. Young Troy has had a sheltered upbringing in Leeds where he was an apprentice in a Draper's shop before uprooting himself and his estranged sister Lucinda and relocating to the coast. As they establish themselves events increasingly mysterious unfold into a web of intrigue, corrupted innocence and the preternatural. The narrative uses the device of extracts from the lost diaries which is much in keeping with the over theme of pastiching gothic novels from the turn of the 19th century. Paul Barlow produces a slow moving and gracefully darkening tale. The series ends abortively but is concluded in the graphic novel. Entertaining, but not to everyone's taste.~WW

THE PHONY PAGES

Renegade: *2 issues 1986*

This spoofs famous strips and characters from throughout the history of comics. Starting with 'The Blue Kid' (mixing Gainsborough's 'Blue Boy' and Outcault's 'Yellow Kid'), there's 'Little Nimoy in Slumberland' (cue *Star Trek* gags in the style of Winsor McCay), through 'Prince Valium' to 'Brooke Shields, agent of F.U.R.Y.' As artwork, Terry Beatty's pastiches are accomplished, but the jokes just aren't funny enough.~FC

PICKLE

Tragedy Strikes: *2 issues 1992-1993*
Black Eye: *8 issues (3-10) 1994-1996*

Ostensibly the venue for writer/artist Dylan Horrocks, but closer examination allows no easy description of its contents. The title's main feature is the ongoing 'Hicksville', an American's attempt to trace the roots of comic artist Dick Burger back to a curious, comics-aware community in Hicks Bay, New Zealand. Most of the male cast of Hicksville – Sam Zabel, Tisco George, Kupe and the mysterious Augustus E – are cartoonists and are occasionally credited as the artists on features. Needless to say, the entire comic is drawn in Horrocks' economic style. The female cast includes town comics-librarian Dolan Hicks (Mrs.), who also answers letters to Pickle, and the mercurial Grace Pekapeka, tragically torn between two lovers. 'Cornucopia' in 5 recounts Grace's visit to a fictitious European country and its revered master cartoonist Emil Kopen, and is a highlight. 'Stars' in 6, 7 and 8 is a strip within the 'Hicksville' strip offering a historical sidebar on Dick Burger, but also evoking some real emotion. The guest-appearance by Stan Lee in 7's episode is hilarious. There's also an ongoing history of the European settlement of Hicks Bay by Augustus E whose pages usually crop up as ironic devices that nevertheless have their own continuity. We're additionally shown occasional glimpses of Dick Burger's American comic strips 'Captain Tomorrow' and 'Lady Night' and Emil Kopen's 'Valja Domena'. The 'Hicksville' cycle, which comes to some kind of resolution in 10, offers an extremely deft weaving of fictions within fictions. Horrocks balances the comic strip's inherent lack of realism with a fascinating web of inferred relationships and undocumented events. It's a masterpiece. 'The Last Fox Story' in 3 reprints a 104 page mini comic from 1990 that serves as an overture to all of Horrocks' 1990s work. 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6 also feature the unfinished 'Cafe Underground' a human drama set in Auckland amidst the subtle turmoil caused by Halley's Comet approaching in 1986. Individual issues can be unwelcoming but there's something insightful to be found in every story. The *Hicksville* collection reprints most, but not all of 1-10, other than 'Café Underground' and 'The Last Fox Story', and also includes extra material.~SW

Recommended: 1-10

PICTOPIA

Fantagraphics: *4 issues 1991-1992*

On the basis of the first issue one might almost think publisher and co-editor Gary Groth was running an experiment to see how far he could push his audience before a cry of 'King's new clothes' issued forth. Almost wilfully empty and insubstantial strips jostle for place with material that its creators seem to consider avant-garde, and the only notable content in seventy-two squarebound magazine-sized pages is Solano Lopez and Panosetti's harrowing strip about the Argentinian police junta. As Ambrose Bierce had it, the covers are too far apart. 2 starts with much more of the same before being redeemed by a glorious Jim Woodring 'Frank' strip, and the hefty opening chunk of Jacques Tardi's 'Griffu', which concerns a 'legal adviser' for whom a simple case becomes a complex web of property fraud and murder. Tardi's on top form interpreting Manchette's well-paced plot, and it's the highlight of the following two issues. They're also blighted by substandard filler material from known and obscure alike, although, covers apart, there's a rare chance to see Chris Ware's work in colour. It's oddly distracting and sadly disappointing. There's so much poor content, no issue can be wholeheartedly recommended, but the Tardi strip is worth anyone's time.~FP

THE PICTURE TAKER

Slave Labor: *One-shot 1998*

A short story written by Phillip Hester and drawn by Mike Worley. The protagonist is Jeff, a young parapsychology researcher, who returns to his home town to bail out one of his experimental subjects and is reminded of his high-school years as an unhappy bystander and observer. The artwork is in the style of Hanna-Barbera animation, but it's obvious by the third page that this is a serious, indeed, sombre story about alienation. This is a fine piece of short fiction, which makes particularly good use of the supernatural elements.~FC

Recommended

PIGHEAD

Skip Williamson: *One-shot 1993*

Underground Comix veteran Skip Williamson self-published this one-off collection of all new strips plus a rather self-indulgent prose piece. The artist's smooth, pop art style appears to have changed remarkably little since the 1960s, and the first strip, 'Halsted Street', is something of a neglected gem. This frank and funny look back at the author's involvement with various crooks, thugs, mobsters, cokehead girlfriends and pornographers completely overshadows the rest of the title's rather mediocre content.~AL

PIN-UP

Blasé Publishing: *3 Volumes 1998*

Dottie is girlfriend to G.I. jerk Joe, who is shipping out to the Pacific theatre to fight in 1942. The story follows their lives after their romantic split, with Dottie becoming the model for Poison Ivy, a vampy propaganda newspaper strip, while Joe is suffering a nightmare war. He finds some comfort in the Poison Ivy strips, and becomes obsessed with the character, oblivious to the fact that it's his ex-girlfriend. Dottie is a thinly-veiled Bettie Page, down to the recreation of some famous poses, and cameos by others associated with her. This is a good, multi-layered story by Yann, with excellent artwork by Berthet and colouring by Topaze, which gives the books a convincing 1940s look. The series has continued in France for a further two albums.~DB

PINEAPPLE ARMY

Viz: *10 issues 1988-1989**

A translation of the Japanese comic written by Kazuya Kudo and drawn by Naoki Urasawa. Jed Goshi has bushels of combat experience, and now he lives in New York offering combat instruction to civilians. At the beginning of each assignment he sternly tells the client that he'll teach them to fight but won't do their fighting for them – but guess what's happened by the end of the issue. The first few stories (1-3) are fairly down-to-earth, dealing with ordinary New Yorkers faced with trouble they can't face alone. These are quite fresh and imaginative, especially 1, although the logic and psychology in each is... eccentric. However, from 4 on, it's all foreign governments and guerrillas, spies and gangsters and heroic mercenaries, and we go from eccentric to boring and witless. The art is consistent and effective throughout, and particularly good at differentiating characters with just a few lines.~FC

Recommended: 1

PINHEAD

Marvel/Epic: *7 issues 1993-1994*

Spin-off from Clive Barker's *Hellraiser* series starring eponymous demon and sundry Cenobite pals'n'gals. Leaden writing and sub-professional artwork make what should be stomach-turning violence seem very dull indeed.~HS

PINHEAD/MARSHAL LAW: Law In Hell

Marvel/Epic: *2 issue microseries 1993*

Pat Mills and Kev O'Neill's vigilante takes on the villain from the *Hellraiser* movies, in a pointless crossover that just proves both characters are way past their sell-by date.~HS

PINK DUST Morphine Dreams

Kitchen Sink: *One-shot 1998*

James O'Barr's name is prominent on the cover, and he describes the contents as an exercise in self-indulgence, which should tell you all you need to know. While it's odd to see O'Barr attempting humour, this is still an issue too long.~DB

PINKY AND THE BRAIN

DC: *27 issues, 1 Special 1996-1998*

Making their TV and comic debut in *Animaniacs*, where they returned after cancellation. Pinky is the good-hearted but dumb "assistant" of The Brain, an evil genius hell-bent on conquering the world. Only two things really stand in the mastermind's way. One is, of course, Pinky. The other is the fact that they are both laboratory mice. Disappointing series of anemic stories that concentrates far too much on parodies and with watered down jokes that generally fail to match the skill or pace of the TV show. On very rare occasions, however, it does all fall into place such as in the sequel to 3's awful 'Verminator', entitled 'Verminator II' (16) or 25, the full length 'The Dark Pinky Returns', itself a follow up to the lead story lampooning Batman in the first issue. Dedicated fans only.~WW

PINT SIZED X-BABIES

Marvel: *One-shot ('Murderama') 1998*

This features the baby-sized X-Men created by Mojo, the interdimensional villain who used to rule a universe governed by the laws of television as opposed to physics or any other system that makes sense. Their enemies are the Brotherhood of Mutant Bullies and the plot involves the two teams of mutant rugrats in a rigged game show, all for the delectation of the ratings-hungry Mojo. It's a complete mess, fraudulently passed off as a fun romp.~WW

PIPSQUEAK PAPERS

Woodworks: *One-shot 1976*

Eros: *One-shot 1996*

Wally Wood drew the three episodes of his naughty fairy fantasy for his *Witzend* magazine in 1967 and 1968. The hero is homunculus Pip, who is in love with beauteous nymph Nudine. These are a delight to read although the humour is distinctly adult. The 1976 collection also includes his later strip 'Dragonella' from 1975's *Heroes Inc.* 2, which sexes up a few fairytale clichés. In the Eros reprint these strips are accompanied by three more risqué pastiches – 'Handsel and Feetsel', 'Sinner Ella' and the unforgettable 'Disenchanted Prince'.~SW

PIRACY

EC: *7 issues 1954-1955**

Gemstone: *7 issues 1997-1998*

Commonly perceived as being introduced by EC when forced to discontinue their horror and crime lines, this was actually published as a complementary title, not a replacement. Historical seagoing stories obviously appealed to artist Reed Crandall, who is on top form throughout the run, with his finest tales being the mystery of pirate Jean Lafitte in 5, and Blackbeard's encounters with the scheming Stede Bonnett in 3. Wally Wood's tale of mutiny in 1, and the work of George Evans throughout, are also excellent, while mention must be made of Bernie Krigstein's simple yet stunning cover to 6. A blazing orange sun shines down on a floating castaway, and Krigstein's bold use of colour and space are outstanding. His interior work also continues his tinkering with the approved format for comic pages, and he's given strong material, the best being 'Salvage', a superior EC-style story of revenge and retribution. Sadly, over the entire run there are a few too many of these stories along with dumb twist-in-the-tail features, and Graham Ingels is wasted on a fair proportion of them. His best is 3's 'Slave Ship', concerning a kidnapped farmer. For some reason the odd numbered issues are consistently superior to the even, but all are collected hardbound in a slipcase alongside collections of *Aces High*, *Extra!* and *Psychoanalysis*. The Gemstone issues are facsimilies, collected in two bound volumes.~WJ

Recommended: 1, 3, 5, 7

PIRANHA PRESS Graphic Novels

DC's early 1990s Piranha Press imprint thrashed around with little identity beyond the cover designs, stringing together such disparate items as children's fairy tales and drug-fuelled private detectives. By and large wilfully uncommercial and seemingly unedited, the list appears to have taken the 'throw it at the wall and see what sticks' approach. The pick of the bunch is Kyle Baker's *Why I Love Saturn*, a wryly observed dissection of twenty-something values and relationships with astonishingly sharp dialogue and stunningly expressive, yet simple art. It's also screamingly funny, commendably unsentimental and just waiting to become a movie (without a word changed, please). *The Hiding Place* is also noteworthy. Sumptuously illustrated by Steve Parkhouse, Charlie Boatner's modern fairy-tale mixes a human child with mythical and extinct creatures, the last of whom gravitate towards this hidden land. Having to save the hidden world from troglodytes causing industrial pollution, Jonathan proves resourceful. If the allegories to reality are occasionally a little too marked, Parkhouse's excellent cartooning always compensates, and there's a refreshing lack of the twee factor that often scuppers similar ventures.

As for the remainder, well, it's difficult to love or cherish any of them. The work of Alec Stevens is very much an acquired taste. *Sinners* has a knowing narrative as the errors of youth are contemplated with hindsight, drawn in a delicate, heavily contrasted style, and *Hardcore* concerns a gang of skinheads and what occurs when a member wants a change of lifestyle. Stevens' art is stylised gloom, and largely inappropriate for both of his stories. *The Wasteland* is a collection of one-page cartoons from the people responsible for the illustrated fiction of *Beautiful Stories for Ugly Children.* Dave Louapre writes, and Dan Sweetman illustrates largely pithy downbeat comments on the human condition. Infuriatingly recondite references mixed with shallow observation makes for an unsatisfying and rarely funny combination. If you want to read about a delusionary psychotic who believes he's a private eye, don't bother with *The Drowned Girl,* get *The Bogie Man* instead. The former's combination of ugly art and nonsensical story is intended as a commentary on the hollow values of society, but the total lack of any wit in making the point renders it impotent. If you ignore the advice, and enjoy *The Drowned Girl,* there's plenty more thrashing at society with a balloon on a stick in Jon Hammer's following graphic novel, *Nation of Snitches. Mars on Earth* is mundane prose with illustrations. Straining to be hip and knowing, it's derivative and obvious, with not an original observation in sight.~WJ

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* Available in a collected edition

Recommended: *The Hiding Place, Why I Love Saturn*

PIRATE CORP$!

Eternity: *4 issues 1987-1988**

Slave Labor: *6 issues, 1 Special 1989-1993, one-shot ('The Bummer Trilogy') 2001*

Pirate Corp$!* began as an interstellar adventure strip with a dash of humour, and the Eternity issues follow that through. In his introduction to Slave Labor's reprinting of these issues as *Pirate Corp$!: 'The Blunder Years', creator Even Dorkin calls them 'awkward and amateurish'. He's lying. They're solidly crafted stories displaying a precocious talent and a very confident début, their only failing being that they don't match the later material. The science-fiction adventure aspects are minimised in the special which bridges the first and second series, and the Slave Labor issues concentrate more on the cast, with Dorkin's alter ego Halby more often than not centre stage. 3's trip to the supermarket or 6's trying time in police custody give a good feel of the series as a whole. The one-shot *Vroom Socko Special* reprints a story originally run in the UK's *Deadline,* featuring the unpleasant pirate-ship captain. 1-4 and the special are collected. From 6 *Pirate Corp$!* is retitled *Hectic Planet,* as belated affirmation of the change of emphasis, and *Hectic Planet* stories can be found in *Dark Horse Presents* 118-120, three good stories of failed love conveniently reprinted as 'The Bummer Trilogy'.~FP

Recommended: Series one 4, Series two 1-6, one-shot

The P.I.'s

First: *3 issue miniseries 1983-1984*

Detective title shared by Michael Mauser, seedy detective from *E-Man,* and Ms Tree. The mixture of humour and pathos essential to Mauser strips doesn't mix well with the more traditional detective fiction of *Ms Tree.*~WJ

PITT

Image: *9 issues 1993-1995*

Full Bleed: *12 issues (1/2, 10-20), one shot ('The Blood') 1995-1999, 5 issue miniseries (Pitt Crew) 1998-1999*

Created by Dale Keown immediately after his stint on *The Hulk,* Pitt is an unstoppable monster warrior who channels the aggression used against him to augment his own strength. He shares his consciousness with a benign intelligence named Jereb, and has a genetic code identical to that of Earth boy Timmy Bracken, who lives with his Gran'pa (Pitt is actually Timmy's unborn twin). The war planet that bred him consider Pitt a possession to be returned, and on Earth he's tracked by an agency of super-powered operatives. Another key member of the cast is formidable werewoman Lupé Silva, who debuts in 5. Keown plots and draws throughout, using various scripters, including Steve Gerber on 9-10, the first of which has Pitt's origins revealed to him by Jereb. By this time Jereb has also bonded with Timmy, and we learn more of Pitt's background in 11. In 15, another key issue, we learn how Pitt first encountered Jereb, and when he returns to Earth after five years it's to a newly teenaged and delinquent Tim Bracken, who meets Lupé in 17. When Pitt later advances on The White House the military are desperate enough to take World War II experiment Captain Curtis (Jacob Kurtzman) and his sidekick Buchman out of the freezer to defend their President.

Pitt Crew is reserved for tales outside the main continuity plotted by Keown, but drawn by other artists. Pitt is an unchallenging concept, but Keown uses his considerable skills to deliver the "hulk smash" payload with impact and a minimum of extraneous detail. 1-9 were reprinted in two paperbacks.~SW

The PITT

Marvel: *One-shot 1988*

This one-shot ties into the *Starbrand* and *DP7* continuities, although it's characters from *Spitfire* that play the largest part. It details an explosion that turns Pittsburgh, and several miles surrounding the city, into radioactive mutagenic goop, and the aftermath thereof. It sets up tragic repercussions for several characters, and the story continues in another one-shot *The Draft.* It's formula material throughout.~HS

PIXY JUNKET

Viz: *6 issue miniseries 1993**

A mythical woman buried for centuries emerges alive and well, causing a six issue chase between assorted parties interested in controlling her. The pay-off in 6 is interesting, but doesn't compensate for the lack of plot in the preceding five issues.~WJ

P. J. WARLOCK

Eclipse: *3 issues 1986-1987*

What few royalties this outrageously wholesale *Cheech Wizard* rip-off may have earned should have been passed to Vaughn Bodé's estate. Lame humour abounds from newspaper cartoonist Bill Schorr.~FP

PLACES THAT ARE GONE

Aeon: *2 issue microseries 1994*

A day in the life of Joe, who's unemployed, but has been unable to get started on his art for several months, although he is conceptualising. With his girlfriend demanding some progress, Joe wanders Seattle bumping into friends and acquaintances, justifying his lack of progress to each. Mark Campos pulls of the difficult trick of sustaining a talking heads comic over forty-four pages via a varied cast. Not quite satire, it depends on recognition of type and will irritate as many people as it entertains.~FP

PLAN 9 FROM OUTER SPACE Thirty Years Later

Eternity: *3 issue miniseries 1990*

The joy of the original film *Plan 9 from Outer Space* was director Ed Wood's exuberant ineptitude, revealed in the shaky sets, appalling cuts, bad acting and nonsensical plot. Thirty years later we have a comics sequel, dubiously claimed to be authorised. It's played relatively straight by writer John Wooley and artists Joe Zabel, Greg Budgett and Gary Dumm resulting in just another mundane comic.~WJ

Basil Wolverton's PLANET OF TERROR

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1987*

Black and white reprinting of some of the most bizarre science-fiction/horror stories of the 1940s and 1950s. Represented are 'Monsters on Mars', 'Devil Birds', 'Planet of Terror' and the infamous 'The End of the World', which foreshadows his later work illustrating the Bible, especially the section dealing with the Revelations of St John. Also includes a text history, and a cover by Alan Moore.~WW

Recommended

PLANET OF THE APES

Marvel: *29 issues 1974-1977*

Movie adaptations are always very tricky to handle, and with a licensed title like *Planet of the Apes* the results could have been disastrous. Luckily, writer Doug Moench was just the man for the job. In addition to adapting all five films, he successfully expanded the Apes concept with his own highly inventive spin-offs that at the time even transcended the source material.

Of the adaptations, *Planet of the Apes* (1-6) was hampered by George Tuska's totally inappropriate artwork, while *Battle for the Planet of the Apes* (23-28) was scuppered by a very unsettled creative team. On the other hand *Escape from the Planet of the Apes* (12-16), drawn by Rico Rival, was suitably poignant, while *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (7-11) and *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* (17-21) were both extremely successful, thanks in no small part to Alfredo Alcala's beautiful visuals. The first two adaptations were reprinted in colour as eleven issues of *Adventures on the Planet of the Apes*.

The magazine's highspot, however, was Moench's original creation 'The Chronicles of the Planet of the Apes', which was effectively a highly imaginative fantasy strip only tangentially ape-based. In Tom Sutton he had an artist of seemingly limitless imagination, and all its instalments (12, 15, 17, 24, 29) are well worth a look. Moench's other original strip, 'Terror on the Planet of the Apes' (1-4, 6, 8, 11, 13, 14, 19), also had an excellent start due to Mike Ploog's superb artwork. While these early instalments kept closely to the milieu of the first two films (and, indeed, to the TV show), the strip went horribly askew with the introduction of some very inappropriate science-fiction elements, and the post-Ploog issues (20, 23, 26-28) are simply a mess.~DAR

Recommended: 1-4, 6, 8, 11-15, 17, 24, 29

PLANET OF THE APES

Adventure: *24 issues, 1 Annual 1990-1992*

Given the concept of *Planet of the Apes*, it's a curious editorial decision to present it as episodes of *Dallas* (and occasionally *The Waltons*) with apes and the occasional bout of violence. Even stranger then that the cast are consistently bland, with only the morally questionable scientist Dr Moto evincing any strong characteristics. Starting the run with a battle for control of Ape City, 6 follows, serving as a primer to the city and its inhabitants. Thereafter it's largely soap opera all the way. The initial Kirbyesque art of Kent Burles and Barb Kaalberg succeeds in creating an individual world, but their successors, M.C. Wyman and Terry Pallot (from 12), stick closer to the look familiar from films and TV. Charles Marshall writes the entire series, and his most successful effort is the concluding storyline in 21-24. It returns the vindictive Governor Breck from the film *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* (which was reprised from a different viewpoint in 19). It also evokes the atmosphere of the films for the first time, and sheds the complacency affecting the title by dispensing with some regular characters. Unfortunately, by this point Wyman is being inked by Peter Murphy, resulting in substandard art. Those wanting more of this version should also look for the *Ape City* and *Urshak's Folly* miniseries, and a teaming with the characters from *Alien Nation* in *Ape Nation*, while 1-4 are collected.~FP

PLANET OF THE APES

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 2001*, 6 issues 2001-2002**

The miniseries, subtitled 'The Human War', is a good representation of the flavour of the franchise, heavy on the allegory and super-violent, but the rest is tedious and sexist, abounding with clichés, solecisms, and a rotten mystery ghost-robot-ape. It's tough to keep track of which ape is which, and the effort is not repaid, plus: the super covers are mostly photorealistic but inside it's the old "I wonder if we should make it a little bit more manga-ey" art.~GK

PLANET OF VAMPIRES

Atlas: *3 issues 1975*

A team of astronauts return from a ten-year mission to discover there have been some changes back home. Humanity now consists of a small group of technologically advanced vampires, and the scavenging majority living in ruins. As a variation on *Planet of the Apes* it's dull stuff, not at all redeemed by dashed-off Russ Heath art in the third issue.~FP

PLANET TERRY

Star: *9 issues 1985-1986*

When Harvey stopped publishing Marvel employed their staff for the Star line, a blatant attempt to develop characters for young children that could be licensed for the lucrative TV and toy market. They were almost all awful, the contrived nature of the project resulting in the vomit-inducing likes of *Strawberry Shortcake*. The one concept to transcend the creation-by-committee origin was *Planet Terry*. Make no mistake, it's still a strip intended for the very young, but, as written by Dave Manak, from the title pun on down there's a charm and innocence that works. In no small part this is due to the simple and excellent art of Warren Kremer. Terry is searching the universe for his parents, accompanied by surrogates in the form of the alien Omnus and a decidedly female robot. If you have to investigate the Star line this is the title to find, and any issue will do as a sample.~FP

PLANET 29

Caliber: *2 issues 1991*

Kevin Atkinson has enough interesting ideas and characters to sustain a whole line of titles, but forces so many into his story that there's little room remaining for a coherent plot. His art is a still developing almost *Mad*-type parody style, and this series was curtailed after two issues of a proposed four.~WJ

PLANETARY

WildStorm: *15 issues, one-shot (Planetary/Authority:'Ruling The World') 1999-2001, one-shot (Planetary/JLA: 'Terra Oculta') 2002*

It's difficult to describe or review *Planetary* in a way that does it justice without giving away its almighty twist. The more you know about the comic medium's history the more you'll get from this incredibly multi-layered opus in which Warren Ellis and John Cassaday reach the zenith of WildStorm's mission to drag mainstream comics out of the ghetto and into the 21st century. Imagine Grant Morrison's *Doom Patrol* raised on *2000AD*, slipped a tab of acid and asked to create a *Challengers of the Unknown* for the new millennium and you might have an idea of the heights this series reaches.

On 1's cover, the eponymous group of heroes are referred to once, and once only, as "Archaeologists of the Impossible". Don't forget that, nor dismiss any of the apparent in-jokes or homages as anything less than another stitch in a very rich tapestry. And remember that mainstream comics haven't always been dominated by superheroes. The adventure starts with operative Jakita Wagner approaching Elijah Snow and offering him a job with Planetary, a mysterious organisation funded by the even more mysterious Fourth Man. Snow is 100 years old but, like many WildStorm characters, doesn't appear to age. Neither does Doc Brass, a 1940s hero whom they free from fifty years of guarding a terrible discovery on the nature of reality. After that, each issue is a self-contained story as Planetary investigate and save things that have been forgotten or lost, the absence of which makes the world a less interesting place. Except there is so much more bubbling only just under the surface. "The universe is unreal" states Hark in issue 1, "A multitude of possible alternatives, none of them quite real, all of them contributing towards the actual reality." Blink and you might miss the truth of what this series is really about.

Recommending individual issues is difficult; the bigger picture is greater than the sum of its parts, and while you can dip in and out, this isn't where the real joy of *Planetary* lies. If you haven't got the twist by 6, this issue – Planetary's first encounter with their ongoing nemeses The Four – smacks you in the face with it. Ellis uses 7 to get his own back on DC for his departure from *Hellblazer*. From then on, *Planetary* continue to excavate the "Secret History of the World" as Snow tries to piece together missing pieces of his memory. Figure out for yourself exactly what it is that needs to be remembered and, once, you have, go back and read the series again so that you can pick up all the pieces of the jigsaw you missed the first time round.

Whether the series was intended to finish with 15 is unclear. You can read a definite end into it, but publication simply became more and more sporadic until the comic didn't come out again. Nonetheless, 15, and in particular its final panel, works nicely as a tie-up. Perhaps the easiest way to describe *Planetary* is as *1963*'s evil twin, but perhaps it's really the other way round. 1-12 are available in two collections.

For 'Ruling the World' artist Phil Jimenez joins Warren Ellis, the regular scribe of both titles, as he pens a crossover in which the two teams never actually meet. Entertaining enough but, like most crossovers for the sake of it, ultimately pointless. Planetary/JLA asks "What If Planetary were Bruce Wayne, Clark Kent and Diana Prince?" They wouldn't be as interesting as the real *Planetary*, or the *JLA*, is the simple answer. This ill-thought out cash in makes absolutely no sense whatsoever unless you've read and figured out the entire run of Planetary, and if you have, it's still pointless. Best not to bother. ~JC

Recommended: 3, 6, 8

PLASMER

Marvel UK: *4 issues 1993-1994*

Evil scientist attempts to give herself superpowers, but the experiment goes awry, generating a separate, powerful being embodying her darkest secret...her conscience! Probably the worst art ever in an allegedly professional comic from Pascual Ferry, but wacky, irreverent scripting by Glenn Dakin makes this a fun read.~HS

PLASTIC FORKS

Marvel/Epic: *5 issue miniseries 1990**

In this short and simple story Ted McKeever asks some very big questions. Like: "What is humanity?" The plastic fork of the title is a metaphor for a society so throwaway that it's losing a grip on what makes us human. All this within an adventure story about the not very heroic or sympathetic Henry Apt, who, like Dr Frankenstein, realises his mistake in dabbling with nature too late. He tries to make a device that allows a single person to create and fertilise their own eggs. His mad partner grafts it onto Henry's groin when he's attacked by the lab animals he's been experimenting on and he's suddenly transformed from God-like doctor to victim of science. Issue 1 kicks off with a load of nonsensical technobabble, which doesn't matter because it's all symbolic anyway. Bear with it. After this slow start the pace of the series builds inexorably to a crushing climax. McKeever's painted art for the series is bright, lush and expressionistic, making bold use of splash pages and half-page frames to tell his fable. An excellent – and deceptively simple – series.~FJ

PLASTIC LITTLE

CPM: *5 issue miniseries 1997**

Based on a Japanese cartoon show, this translated manga by Satoshi Urushihara features the further adventures of the Petshop Hunter Spaceship Cha Cha Maru, and her crew as they rescue animals from the atmosphere of a gas giant planet. One suspects poor or savage editing as none of it makes much sense, and story pages seem to have been sacrificed for repeated scenes of the heroine taking her top off or having a shower. For only the lonely.~WW

PLASTIC MAN

DC: *20 issues 1966-1968 (1-10), 1976-1977 (11-20), 4 issue miniseries 1989, special 1999*

Jack Cole's *Plastic Man* is one of the standout comic strips of the 1940s. Small-time crook Eel O'Brian escapes in the wrong direction after a robbery, standing under a tipped acid vat, stumbling through a swamp and awakening in a monastery able to stretch or mould his body into any shape or form. Instantly repenting, he decides to use the ability for good. That was the origin from *Police Comics* 1. Cole wasn't interested in straight superheroics. His *Plastic Man* was a well plotted gag vehicle from the off, and his penchant for slapstick was astounding, matching the best cartoon shorts. Accompanied by rotund, inept helper Woozy Winks, a man who couldn't be harmed in any fashion, Plastic Man's career was further complicated by maintaining his O'Brian persona to ingratiate himself with the underworld for information. A decent selection of Cole's *Plastic Man* is reprinted in *DC Special* 15, and there are also three bootleg comics reprinting Cole's *Plastic Man* issued by a company called Super, who'd acquired the original printing plates. Those who can afford it, though, should go for the four hardcover *Plastic Man Archives* volumes reprinting *Police Comics* 1-49.

Cole's *Plastic Man* set the standard for all humorous superheroes to follow, and DC's 1960s revival just wasn't up to scratch. A try-out of sorts had been planted in *House of Mystery* 160, and the series followed. Win Mortimer's stiff art was unsuitable, and the scripts concentrated on TV, film and comics parody, shoehorning Plastic Man into uncharted territory. DC might as well have created a new character for all the relation this had to the original. There were some surprisingly successful team-ups with Batman in *The Brave and the Bold*, all the more astonishing for Plastic Man being played straight in 95, and the idea working. The 1970s continuation was far better. While the scripts were generally weak, Ramona Fradon successfully recreated the visual gags and cartoon style. Sample any one for the art. Also of an acceptable standard was an early 1980s run in *Adventure Comics*.

The 1980s miniseries was excellent and controversial. While sticking largely to Cole's vision, with some brilliant cartooning from Hilary Barta, it attempted to rationalise Plastic Man as part of DC's ongoing continuity. That being the case, though, it was clear Plastic Man's wacky, distorted world couldn't be the same one that Superman and Batman occupied. Or could it? Sadly, it could, and while one should be thankful that the contrived explanation leaves Plastic Man and his world intact, it seemed pointless. It did allow for some nice 'reality check' pages from Kevin Nowlan, and, the continuity apart, Phil Foglio writes a great *Plastic Man*. Starting with a revised origin, it's manic gag-filled heaven from beginning to end, and one suspects Cole would have been pleased with the results. One might have thought he'd also be happy at the idea of a Ty Templeton written special, but while gag-packed and never bad, it just doesn't quite gel either.~FP

Recommended: Miniseries 1-4

PLASTIC SODA

Didactic Chocolate Press: *4 issues 1996*

There's a certain stubborn persistence to be admired about anyone who can put out so many issues of an anthology where almost all the contributors lack any talent for comics whatsoever. It's also odd in the face of the intelligent essays about various topics in 1. Don't be fooled by the intriguing covers, there are no comics of interest to be found inside.~WJ

PLASTRON CAFÉ

Mirage: *5 issues 1993*

Sooner or later every publisher seems compelled to issue an anthology. Mirage's seems a little more eclectic than many. Primarily science-fiction-based, it resurrects some good, defunct series as well as previewing new titles. In the former category are Anthony Smith and Eric Vincent's 'Alien Fire' (reprinted in *Alien Fire*: 'Pass In Thunder') and Tom Stazer's 'Spaced', both short-lived series from the mid-1980s, which

* Available in a collected edition

appear in 3 and 4. Best of the new material, 'North by Downeast' is a spin-off from *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* featuring space lobsters, written by Kevin Eastman and drawn by Rick Veitch (1-5). Previews include A.C. Farley's 'Bioneers' (4,5) and 'Xenotech' by Michael Dooney, both of which are promising.~NF

PLATINUM GRIT

Dead Numbat: *10 issues 1994-1998*

Where to start? Perhaps, if such a thing is conceivable without reading the comics, that this is a combination of *Tank Girl* and 1950s British film comedies. The alluring and appallingly behaved Nils works in the Platinum Grit café, as does Jeremy, who's on the verge of inheriting a Scottish castle. All that stands in his way is the homicidal Dougal. Thereafter there's a lunatic detective, abduction by aliens and assorted other madness, all incorporated in impressively logical fashion. Doug Bayne and Danny Murphy's scripts move from extreme slapstick violence to fantasy, underpinned by a great sense of humour and a dash of the surreal. The jokes are good and the cast are extremely confidently defined, particularly Nils. The excellent lively cartooning of Trudy Cooper, who also contributes to plots, is instantly likeable and the greatest shame is that *Platinum Grit* has been little seen outside its original Australian publication. A sample for overseas is numbered '1 & 2', and combines those issues. Anyone looking for a good laugh from their comics has no excuse for not logging onto www.platinumgrit.com where all issues are being made available online. Slowly. "We're easily distracted", the creators claim. Even better, a never published 11 can be found, which is just as well considering Jeremy's predicament at the end of 10.~FP

Recommended: 1-10

PLAY-GROUNDS

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1991*

Two interesting and well-drawn black and white stories by Peter Rees. The first is a slightly scary *Toy Story* affair; the second deals with the history of murder and death in a small town. Mature without being pretentious, so what adult comics should be.~DB

Recommended

PLEASANTLY DISTURBED

La Comédie Illustrée: *2 issues 1996-1997*

A French production translated into English, 1 details that awkward dinner at which a young man introduces his fiancée to his family. Sharply observational writing from Christopher and almost cubist freehand cartooning from Jean-Philippe Peyraud make for an appealing dish. Adding that final touch of elegance, recipes for each course consumed are included as text pages. It's fine stuff, as are 2's stories of the unwelcome visitor, and how an old flame causes marital tensions.~WJ

Recommended: 1-2

PLEEBUS

Orchard Books: *4 volumes 1996-1998*

Rising Trout Press: *4 volumes 2001*

Four sixty-two page pocket sized paperbacks by Nick Abadzis about a plucky boy and girl who are visited, in 1, *The Amazing Mr. Pleebus*, from the mysterious planet Pleebus by the gentle white shape-changing horticulturalist Mr. Pleebus, whose only utterances are his own name or slight variations on it. The sweet cartooning easily conveys the joys of unembittered imagination. The invasion of the children's school in 2, *The Freaky Beastie of Hill Road School*, by Subeelp the Anti-Pleebus, is particularly thrilling. 3, *The Magic Skateboard*, suffers slightly from the relatively late appearance of Mr. Pleebus but the skateboard, Mr Frog, and Eric The Lighthouse are all good characters. 4 is *Voyage to Planet Zoon*, which is oddly reminiscent of the Death Star from *Star Wars*, though inhabited not by Imperial goons but by a naughty little alien. These are smashing fun for kids, but only miserable bleeders of any age wouldn't enjoy them, and they'd enjoy them better in the Rising Trout editions, which are larger and printed on better paper.~GK

PLOP!

DC: *24 issues 1973-1976*

Plop! was subtitled "The magazine of weird humour", and on the whole lived up to it in wonderful fashion, mixing single-panel gags with amusing, macabre tales by some top talents. 1-19 featured unique covers either by Basil Wolverton or Wally Wood. Inside you could find the art of Berni Wrightson in 1 and 5, Nick Cardy in 4, Mike Sekowsky in 6, George Evans in 1, Murphy Anderson in 5, Frank Robbins in 4 and 17, Ramona Fradon in 8, Alex Toth in 11, Steve Ditko in 16 and Wally Wood in 4. Mainstays were Lee Marrs and David Manak, while the most prolific regular scripter was Steve Skeates, who worked wonderfully with Sergio Aragonés, the comic's real star. He contributed to every issue and usually drew the amusing framing sequences staring Cain, Abel and Eve, hosts of DC's more realistic mystery titles. The earlier issues are the funnier, appeal diminishing as *Plop!* became giant-sized from 21, with strip-gag covers. Nevertheless *Plop!* remains a milestone in DC humour publishing.~HY

Recommended: 1-6, 8, 11, 14, 16

POE

Cheese Comics: *6 issues 1996-1997**

Sirius: *24 issues, 1 Special 1997-2000*

After the death of his wife Lenore, Edgar Allan Poe meets an angel, Israfel, who tells him to follow the raven in order to defeat twelve demons and be reunited with her. Gaining a cat, Pluto, some magical trinkets from a witch, the companionship of Dr Patrick Ravenwood and Finster Habersham, and a recurring foe in Mad Meg Mayflower, Poe faces the first demon in New York before the end of the Cheese Comics run. 1-6 of the Sirius series begin with Mama Zagroot's Mid-Nite Carnival, before Poe faces the second demon in the House of Usher. Poe visits the small town of Dover in 8-12 and faces the third demon. 14 Introduces Charles Auguste Dupin, who joins the group in search of a killer leading to the conclusion of the first third of the story in 18. 19-24 has Poe facing danger on a balloon journey over the Atlantic as well as a backup story, drawn by Rick Geary, featuring Mad Meg, a demon in a bottle, the Lords of Brass (from Cheese Comics 4-5), The Silent Order and revelations about the true relationship between Poe and Meg. In the 1998 Colour Special Mad Meg and Poe come to an understanding, before continuing Poe's quest together. Jason Asala has incorporated Poe's life and works into his strip (in themes, story titles and characters) in an interesting and entertaining manner, but only Mad Meg really stands out as a developed supporting character. The artwork improves throughout the series, from a less extreme Ted McKeever, in heavy greyscale, to a less blocky style, with more realistic features.~NF

POGO

Fantagraphics: *11 Volumes 1992-2000*

Pogo is regarded among the all time great newspaper strips, yet more than any of its fellows, it is an acquired taste today. Set in the Okefenokee swamp, Pogo resides among a startling selection of eccentric creatures, loosely based on stereotypical human perception of their personalities, but parading their idiosyncrasies. Pogo the possum is an innocent among the knowing, which include the crafty Albert, an alligator not averse to the threat of brutality, the perpetually grumpy Porkypine, fraudulent scientist Howland Owl, and the turtle Churchy Lafemme. The latter's name indicates the type of humour to be found in the early years of Pogo. Walt Kelly moved the 'funny animal' genre a few steps ahead of its Disney influenced predecessors, most obviously drawing on music hall comedy. From the earliest days of the strip in 1948 Kelly proves a master of the vaudeville gag as his cast acted their way through his increasingly offbeat scenarios, most based on misunderstandings or misheard words. In one instance, though, he's not above appropriating Abbott and Costello's 'Who's on First' routine, and variations are not uncommon.

Kelly's CV included stints as a Disney animator and comic artist for Dell, where a prototype Pogo first appeared in *Animal Comics*. This background assured his cast was illustrated with a charm and panache learned from experience, and probably for Kelly's occasional and impressive use of visual puns. It meant that *Pogo* was an accomplished strip from the start. Satirical elements were a later addition, certain repeated jokes evolved over time, and recurring characters were added at a phenomenal rate, but almost all the fundamentals that saw the strip through 25 years of syndication were present from the beginning. Among Kelly's innovations was the courage, or instinct, to incorporate pure whimsy, sometimes eschewing a conventional gag altogether. He also instituted typefaces as a guide to character, initiated in 1950 during his first, muted, spell of political commentary with the gothic script used for the pompous Deacon Mushrat (4). The fast wordplay, puns and slapstick that constitute much of volumes 1-7, although masterfully constructed, are facets of humour not currently in vogue, and as such the reader's own liking for the style will determine their reaction to *Pogo*. Read en masse, as never originally intended, the style can become repetitive and the earlier volumes, while technically sound, have a limited entertainment value.

It's for political satire, though, that Pogo is best remembered, and although trial runs are reprinted in 4, 6 and 7 it's not until the strips in 8, from 1952, that Kelly decided to broaden the feature's focus. Small morality plays had been presented from the off, but Kelly's ire at the continuing anti-Communist witch hunts instituted and fanned by Senator Joe McCarthy, propelled Pogo's transformation. Many strips expose the hollow nature of McCarthy's rantings, and the 1952 elections were held amid widespread national paranoia, permitting Kelly to indulge in memorable wry observation. This really comes to the fore in 10, with McCarthy at the peak of his influence in 1953. Kelly satirises a misguided senator as the short-sighted Mole MacCarony, known as the world's leading bird brain, whose persecution of birds and their habits isn't in the least hindered by his constantly misidentifying them. Kelly then introduces a McCarthy caricature in the sinister and brutal Simple J. Malarky, as for over three months he savagely makes his point in strips reprinted in 10. Beyond the passion, the strength of this sequence is that it can still be read as innocent tomfoolery. Thereafter, for the most part, the strip returned to the vaudeville knockabouts.

These volumes each present approximately six months worth of strips, reprinting *Pogo* to 1954 with 11. They suffer from variable reproduction, with the early volumes in particular containing a few strips so poorly reprinted that significant artistic detail is lost, although this is a minor complaint when set against the availability of long out of print material. Mention must also be made of R.C. Harvey's informed introductions placing the strips in a wider context and pointing out references, for the most part beyond the knowledge of today's reader.~FP

Recommended: 9, 10

POINT BLANK

WildStorm: *5 issue miniseries 2002-2003*

Cole Cash (Grifter) has to play detective to find out who shot fellow Team 7 member, John Lynch. He asks the Midnighter for information, which points to the involvement of ex-WildC.A.T.S. member, Tao as well as of Marc Slayton (Backlash). Ed Brubaker's hardboiled dialogue underscores this mystery, examining the continuing relationships of Team 7, but it's Colin Wilson's excellent, European-style artwork that makes this a treat.~NF

Professor Challenger:The POISON BELT

Tome: *One-shot 1997*

Adapted from the story by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle by Donald Marquez, whose art resembles that of Paul Gulacy or Bernie Wrightson in places. There's not a lot of action, but the growing atmosphere of dread is deftly handled as Challenger claims that a belt of air-borne poison is assaulting the Earth and gathers a small group of fellow adventurers at this house to find a solution or await their fate.~NF

POISON ELVES

Mulehide: *13 issues (8-20) 1993-1994*

Sirius: 70 issues +, 1 Special 1995 to date, 4 issue miniseries ('Lusipher & Lirilith') 2001, 3 issue miniseries ('Parintachin') 2001

The Mulehide issues continue numbering from *I, Lusiphur*, and also continue at magazine size to 15. There's a gradual progression in both the writing and drawing abilities of creator Drew Hayes for the first dozen or so issues, after which he has progressed to poor, but develops no further. Hayes very much bases his title on *Cerebus*. Similar page layouts and graphic elements recur, the pacing is similar, the deliberately ridiculous recurring character in early issues, Purple Marauder, behaves in similar fashion to the *Cerebus* loony and Hayes also has a story of several hundred issues to tell, broken into distinct story arcs. Sadly, he's not the storyteller, artist or satirist that Dave Sim is, so his perseverance is exemplary. The change from self-publishing to Sirius enables Hayes to take stock, and the title is stronger for it. Lusiphur joins a rogues-and-assassins clearing house in 2, broadening the supporting cast. The perpetually surly Lusiphur is largely one-dimensional, but the issues offering insight into his unsociable behaviour are among the best, particularly the harrowing recollections as he's confronted by his inner self while unconscious in 8. Otherwise *Poison Elves* is a curious blend. Some issues are little but fights (3, 15, 31), while others are more interesting pub conversations (11), and every now and then Hayes will throw in a completely contradictory element to shock (1, 35). Then there's the ability to ridicule his usually po-faced cast, such as the carnival issue 66. Countering this is the frequent inclusion of pages of text, often characterising a superfluous character, which do nothing to advance the story. Legitimate literary device, or waste of space, you decide.

From 30 the altogether more reasonable, but no less deadly, elf Jace has become a regular fixture, although he's been around since the early days. 38 and 39 end the story begun in 1, with some revelations about Lusipher, and the pair then begin travelling eventually stumbling into a quest on behalf of the elves council. Beefing up the cast from this point is the insecure, yet immensely potent, Wisp. Recovering from a life-threatening illness, detailed in 70, Hayes has placed *Poison Elves* on hiatus, although intends to continue when able.

The first miniseries details the relationship between Lusipher and the love of his life Lirilith, hinted at in the main title, but never explored in depth. It's a touching story in places, and puts the parent title to shame by having an artist, Jason Alexander, who can not only draw, but draw well. If you're tempted by *Poison Elves*, it doesn't get better than this. 'Parintachin' deals with the demon inhabiting Lusipher's cranium, who falls in love. It's drawn by the Fillbach brothers. Don't bother. The most interesting aspect of the title overall is the editorial page, which charts Hayes' progression from perpetual adolescent party animal to something approaching social responsibility via a string of failed relationships. Best noted as an acquired taste, *Poison Elves* maintains an passionate and vocal fanbase who vastly overrate the title.~FP

POKÉMON

Viz: *4 issue miniseries ('Electric Tale of Pikachu') 1998-1999*, 4 issue miniseries ('Pikachu Shocks Back') 1999*, 4 issue miniseries ('Electric Pikachu Boogaloo') 1999*, 4 issue miniseries ('Surf's Up Pikachu') 1999-2000*, 6 issue miniseries (Pokemon Adventures Part 1) 1999-2000*, 6 issue miniseries (Pokemon Adventures Part 2) 2000*, 7 issue limited series (Pokemon Adventures Part 3) 2000-2001*, 4 issue miniseries (Pokemon Adventures Part 4) 2001*, 5 issue miniseries (Pokemon Adventures Part 5) 2001*, 4 issue miniseries (Pokemon Adventures Part 6) 2001-2002*, 5 issue miniseries (Pokemon Adventures Part 7) 2002**

POKÉMON : MOVIE ANIMATION COMICS

Viz: *4 issue miniseries ('Mewtwo Strikes Back') 1999*, one-shot ('Pikachu's Vacation') 1999, one-shot ('The Movie 2000') 2000*,*

* Available in a collected edition

one-shot ('Revalation Lugla') 2000, one-shot ('Pikachu's Rescue Adventure') 2000, 3 issue miniseries ('The Power of One') 2000*

Magical POKÉMON Journey Magazine

Viz: *4 issue miniseries ('Part I') 2000, 4 issue miniseries ('Part II') 2000, 4 issue miniseries ('Part III') 2000, 4 issue miniseries ('Part IV'), 2000-2001, 4 issue miniseries ('Part V') 2001*

Toshiro Ono gets the credit and/or blame for the absolute torrent of comics material that followed in the wake of the *Pokémon* craze. In the future Pokémon (that's pocket monsters to you – and the young, cute, unevolved form of them, at that) are everywhere and young humans are actively encouraged to take a year out from their studies to capture, train and compete with the ones they have. Ash Ketchum is the boy who could be you, dedicated, decent and honest, and he just wants to be the best Pokémon trainer in the world. His special favourite is the yellow electrical mouse-monster Pikachu, and together with all the other Pokémon they've acquired together they wander the green and pleasant land (since most of the future looks like Kew Gardens) dueling other trainers and capturing more beasties. In 'The Electric Tale of Pikachu' they head to the mountains in search of Professor Oak, the world's top Pokémon expert and compiler of the Pokédex reference computer, the bible of the sport/philosophy/religion, capturing a Clefairy Pokémon on the way. This pretty much sets the scene for all following adventures: wander about, meet and be embarrassed by a girl, beat another Pokémon trainer. Usually that means the dastardly duo Team Rocket and their talking Pokémon cat (see 'Electric Pikachu Boogaloo') as they vie to gather more little monsters and slowly advance to the rank of Pokémon Master. It's formula comics production of the most basic kind, with one adventure indistinguishable from the next. The only variations are which new monsters are on show, or what new trick they've learned, such as 'Pikachu Shocks Back', which takes four issues to decide which Pokémon is the fastest in the Pokémon Derby.

As the movies were released the element of saccharine sweetness masquerading as an ecological message became much more obvious, even as traditional villain figures are brought in to move the stories towards a more westernised children's adventure model – at least for the various adaptations. Mewtwo is a cloned super-Pokémon who wants all the other pocket monsters for his own experiments, and the evil Pokémon collector in the second movie almost destroys the planet because he only hordes and does not use the Pokémon he captures. However the changes are not reflected in the regular "magazine" (in effect a comic with lots of puzzles and feature pages as well as strips) appearances, which kept to the simple, uncomplicated basics. Competently cynical, highly professional and totally unfathomable to any one over the age of seven.~WW

POLICE ACADEMY

Marvel: *9 issues 1989-1990*

Based on the Saturday morning cartoon rather than the movie series, this comic is a dismal effort with lacklustre scripts that even the excellent artwork of Howie Post can't make readable.~WW

POLLY AND HER PALS

Eternity: *5 issue miniseries 1990-1991*
Kitchen Sink: *2 volumes 1990-1991*

Cliff Sterrett's *Polly and her Pals* newspaper strip ran for over forty years, was consistently inventive and innovative, and remains a highspot in comics. At his peak Sterrett successfully combined straightforward gag humour with almost surreal illustration and sure sense of graphic design. The title is a misnomer, as the strip soon moved away from the glamourous Polly to concentrate on her father Pa Perkins, and his constant search for a quiet life in a house populated by an endless stream of Polly's suitors, dopey relatives, misbehaving pets and his dominant wife. Pa's a natural enemy of any mechanical contrivance and can be relied upon to fall asleep at the most inopportune moments, but has his wits about him and is generally more than a match for any situation. Commendably Eternity used a landscape format to reprint the black and white daily strips from 1927. The eccentric backgrounds and design are present, and while monochrome and the four panel structure limit Sterrett, in 1 at worst these are very good gag strips, and sometimes there are truly stunning elements. Early in 1927, though, Sterrett decided to step away from family comedy to produce a continuing adventure strip with the same cast. Editorial ineptitude means the contents of issues 2 and 3 are transposed, and while the strip is well drawn, the settings restrict the design, and Sterrett played far better with gags than adventure. It's on the colour Sunday pages that Sterrett's graphic innovation and whimsy is displayed to best effect, though, and the Kitchen Sink volumes collect those from 1926 to 1929. By this stage Sterrett had been drawing the strip for over fourteen years, and was combining elements of surrealism and cubism with straightforward narrative. The combination of first-class slapstick humour and strikingly designed artwork, the like of which wasn't seen again until the underground comics of the 1960s, makes for a neglected masterpiece, and it's tragic that sales apparently only warranted two collections.~WJ

Recommended: Eternity 1, Kitchen Sink vols 1 and 2

POOT

Fantagraphics: *4 issues 1997-1998*

It's rare that a title promises so much and fails to deliver quite in the manner of *Poot*. Walt Holcombe's previous work had been immensely promising, but this tale of lovesick bugs and snails (and, in 3, a naked man in a barrel) simply fails to connect, despite some beautiful artwork. Holcombe is clearly a major talent, but needs a different direction to bring that talent to fruition. The comics are almost pamphlet-like productions in odd sizes.~DAR

POP GUN WAR

Absence of Ink: *4 issues + 2001 to date*

Farel Dalrymple is a very talented artist capable of producing intriguing imagery in a variety of styles. What he's not managed to do is work his characters into any kind of cohesive narrative. Looks great, reading not advised.~FP

POP LIFE

Fantagraphics: *5 issues 1998-2001*

This anthology of stories by Ho Che Anderson and his associate Wilfred Santiago sets out, quite immodestly, to change comics history. Writer Anderson fancies this as a latter-day *Love and Rockets* with the main features being about the social life of a bunch of struggling musicians ('Naked Girls') and a girl's first time away from the family nest ('Miles From Home'). Santiago does a good, expressive job drawing 'Naked Girls' when he's interested (in 2 and in 5's 'Faith At 30') and Anderson's beautiful mix of woodcut-style chiroscuro and an excellent design sense never fails to impress. The first page of 4's stark 'Scream Queen' appears to be on the inside back cover of 3. The bottom line is that Anderson's writing just doesn't have the chops to deliver. *Pop Life* is full of strong visuals that are pissed away on his undisciplined, self-regarding witterings.~SW

POPCORN

Discovery: *One-shot 1993*

The term 'wholesome children's comic' is likely to cause grimaces in these days of political correctness, indicating an item devoid of any intellectual content or amusement value. Thankfully, *Popcorn* is precisely the opposite. In the manner of the best Disney material it's an absolutely delightful tale, to be enjoyed by everyone. Scott Deschaine's simple layouts and Bob Donovan's expressive cartooning ensures the younger readers won't be alienated, while Deschaine's plot about a department-store salesman working for a tyrannical, child-hating owner is sentimental in the best sense of the term. If only everything that can be categorised under old-fashioned values was as much fun.~FP

Recommended

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* Available in a collected edition

The Complete E.C. Segar POPEYE

Fantagraphics: *11 volumes 1986-1990*

In 1919 Elzie Crisler Segar started a newspaper strip for William Randolph Hearst called *Thimble Theatre*. Initially a gag strip about members of the theatre, it soon developed a strong cast, including Olive Oyl, Castor Oyl and Ham Gravy, and began to include longer adventures, without, however, neglecting the need for humour and a daily joke. Rumoured to be published by Hearst because he liked it (like *Krazy Kat*) rather than because it had a large initial following, all that changed with the introduction of an ugly sailor in January 1929.

In this story Popeye is employed as a one-man crew to take Ham and Castor (and a stowaway Olive) to a Pacific island that has a gambling den, where Castor intends to break the bank with the help of a magic whiffle hen. After he's done so, the boat is bordered by the villain, Jack Snork, who shoots Popeye fifteen times and takes the others captive. Rather than his famous spinach, it is rubbing the head of the whiffle hen that restores Popeye and gives him his wondrous strength. Popeye then quickly beats Snork and, after getting everyone home, leaves the strip. Just over a month later, however, he's back to rebuff one of Olive's suitors – and the strip would never be the same again.

The first four volumes of Fantagraphics' reprint series are large-size books that contain all Segar's Sunday pages featuring Popeye. The Sundays were kept as a separate continuity from the daily pages and normally contained single gag strips, but occasionally longer stories were included, such as those involving the Sea Hag (the marvellous 'Plunder Island', December 1933 to July 1934, which introduces Alice the Goon and Popeye's old friend, Bill Barnacle) and a sequence with the cast out West, both in volumes 2-3. Volume 5 starts a series of more traditional-sized paperbacks, and begins with the sequence that introduces Popeye in the dailies, and successive volumes, each containing about sixteen months of strips, run through to Segar's final episode on 17 February 1938.

Segar takes Popeye through his paces as a prize-fighter, and feats of strength become an important element of the strip, but not to the detriment of storytelling or humour. Along the way we're introduced to J. Wellington Wimpy, a scoundrel forever looking for a free meal or handout, Swee'Pea, a child delivered in a wooden crate whom Popeye adopts, Eugene the Jeep (*Popeye* not only named the first major hamburger franchise, it also added the words 'jeep' and 'goon' to the English language), an orchid-eating creature that is able to move through dimensions and has magical abilities. Later, Popeye's father Poopdeck Pappy arrived to dominate much of the action in Segar's final year, and was even more anti-social than Popeye himself. Snork returns for the 'Mystery House' (vol 6), while King Blozo and the nation of Nazalia are featured in several episodes in 6, 7 and 9. Vols 9 and 10 contain an eleven- month story ark which sees Popeye the dictator of Spinachola, while 'The Search for Popeye's Poppa' rounds off volume 10.

Segar's *Thimble Theatre* is a great work by a true master of the medium. His stories are elaborate adventures full of drama, romance and humour, and if the plot drifts for the sake of some joke then it's well worth the detour. His drawings might seem simplistic to those who expect more 'realism' in their artwork but Segar understood his craft completely – no lines are wasted. Few comics have bettered this.~NF

Recommended: 2, 3, 5-10

PORTIA PRINZ

Eclipse: *6 issues 1986-1987*

"The World's Foremost Pseudo-Intellectual Super-Heroine" is the somewhat misleading tagline for Richard Howell's witty and loquacious series. Certainly, the pseudo-intellectual appellation is appropriate, though Portia herself would dispute the 'pseudo'. The 'super-heroine' line is inapt, as the Princess of the Glamazons doesn't don a distinctive outfit and fight crime, but devotes herself to the pursuit of social engagements and philosophical debates, in which she can show off her education and accomplishments. Those who don't like Portia hate it a lot. They find the oratorical and declamatory style pretentious and off-putting. Others warm to the charm and engagingly flawed characters. Don't expect any brain-busting battle scenes in what is probably the single most word-crammed comic to date.~HS

George Komninos' PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG MAN AS A CARTOONIST

Hammer & Anvil: *8 issue limited series 1996-1997*

Those who complain that too many non-fantasy oriented comics are navel-gazing works of self-absorption and little consequence are directed here for ammunition. From the arrogance of the title (and the ignorance to admit he's never read its source) George Komninos invites invidious comparison, and the tedium of two days in the life of whining wannabe comic artist Mark Hampton comes off second best by an immense distance. Sketchily drawn and paced at a comatose level, one can only marvel at Komninos' misguided faith and tenacity in publishing eight issues.~FP

POSSIBLEMAN

Blackthorne: *2 issues 1987*

William Van Horn's humorous superhero. Comic fan Dexter Smeal becomes the 'puffacious' Possibleman, defender of Squatsburg, USA. Charming, lightweight stuff from the future star of Disney's Duck strips in the 1990s.~SW

Those Annoying POST BROTHERS

Vortex: *18 issues 1985-1990*

Rip-Off: *20 issues (19-38) 1991-1994*

Aeon: *25 issues (39-63), 3 Annuals 1994-1998*

Ron and Russell Post are the two people most of us would least like to meet, any time, anywhere. Inhabitants of Bugtown (where, if you die, you just regenerate), with the ability to shift effortlessly between all possible realities, they're mad, bad, dangerous to know and extremely trigger-happy sadists. On the plus side they are fond of the Bulldaggers, a musical combo that includes their friend Savage Henry, as well as the great god C'thulu, which makes touring interesting, to say the least. Initially co-scripted by Lou Stathis, from 5 Matt Howarth took complete control. Shorter stories are mixed with epics such as 'The Shell Game' (10-14), which involves among other things Ron being sealed in his girlfriend's house by the landlord, Big Al, who's about the only person the brothers respect. 'Video Party' (17-20) leads to Ron and Jeri's marriage and 21-26 has a rematch with the very nasty Hiroshima, who used to be in the Bulldaggers but was ejected for being power-mad. A later story (54-58) begins with a simple scheme to kidnap a debt defaulter on the world of Lysurgia, but becomes something more sinister when reality is warped and mind parasites make people forget each other's existence.

The Post Brothers reputation makes them hated and feared wherever they go. Russell is always looking for the angle to gain any sort of advantage, and Howarth continues to create imaginative ways for them to kill, be killed or be transformed as they (mis)use their reality-shifting powers. It's all good fun, but becomes repetitive once you know the characters, although Howarth's humour and musical references (a very important part of the work) help keep it fresh. In the final issue, Ron and Russell decide to kill the readers, but Professor Ed unplugs them from the matrix (a term used long before the film) and declares that they'll have no more adventures. Howarth's artwork is unique with tight, spiky lines heavily and roughly cross-hatched with few blacks, which gives the book an other-worldly feel. It's not for the squeamish, and not to all tastes, but it's worth sampling. Try the 1995 annual, co-written by Nancy A. Collins or 27, set at a comic convention.~NF

POST MORTEM

Red Hills: *1 issue 1999*

"Slice and dice, baby!!! Any way you cut it you're goin' down!" What else would the response be but "Shut-up and fight, bitch!!!". With class dialogue, and no genre cliché unused in this story of an armed black bounty hunter coping with an outbreak of zombies, it might be expected this is a tongue in cheek blaxploitation movie pastiche. Sadly, it's just crap.~FP

POTENTIAL

Slave Labor: *6 issues 1998-1999*

Ariel Schrag produced autobiographical minicomics about her bisexual romantic/sex life, and this is a magazine sized continuation, with each issue labelled a unit, rather than numbered. The cartoon style art has a crude appeal, but the succession of "we went there with a, b, and c and met d, e, and f, and this happened" very quickly bores, particularly as few details are omitted, superfluous or not. The constant forced incorporation of the title into the narrative in early issues is another minus. Leanne Franson's self-produced minicomics run over the same territory with far more wit and elan.~FP

The POUND

Radio Comix: *One-shot 2000*

Kat and Caleb hijack an arms shipment, but when they're double-crossed and left unpaid, they decide to assault Danus' penthouse suite looking for recompense. Richard Moore's sexy, science fiction, anthropomorphic action adventure is drawn in his usual big-hair style, and, though slight, is a fun read. The characters have also appeared in more adult situations in *Genus*.~NF

POUNDED

Oni Press: *3 issue miniseries 2002**

Heavy Parker considers himself the king of Vancouver punks. In reality he's manipulative and shallow, but maintains a social standing via a significant inheritance. He deceives a high-school girl just before she goes to college in New York, but she returns with some real hardcore types in tow, vowing revenge on Parker. Brian Wood is very good at telling stories about small-time wannabes, but Parker is hardly likeable, so any feeling of identification is largely absent. Steve Rolston's art, very reminiscent of Paul Grist, but not quite of that standard, brings Parker's world to life.~WJ

POWDER BURN

Antarctic: *One shot 1999*

A futuristic cop story drawn in a manga/Image style, but a reliance on close-up detail and facials permits no sense of scale. The page design gives huge panels to simple contents at the expense of the well designed technology being established. Originally solicited as a colour comic, Antarctic went with disappointing mono due to low initial orders. At least they had their heads screwed on right.~SW

POWDERED TOAST MAN!

Marvel: *One-shot 1994, one-shot 1995*

Displaying no shame following the success of their *Ren and Stimpy* comics, Marvel issue comics starring the preposterous superhero from the cartoon, created to satirise mundane superheroes. The wackiness doesn't work on the printed page, and the idea of encompassing film pastiches is daft. The best sections are the 'ad' pages featuring Ren and Stimpy.~WJ

POWER Comics

Eclipse/Acme: *4 issues 1988*

Both Brian Bolland and Dave Gibbons cut their professional teeth on the Nigerian superhero strip collected herein. Each issue features a story from both artists, and it's surprisingly confident and competent work. The tales of Powerman (or Powerbolt as he was called for the US market), however, are aimed at a very young audience, so don't expect much in the way of intellectual stimulation.~FP

POWER & GLORY

Bravura: *4 issue miniseries 1994*

The American government creates their own superhero, A-Pex, The American Powerhouse, but make the mistake of choosing Allan Powell, whose phobia of being touched is simply magnified during the process. Assigning Michael Gorski to do all the real work seems like a good idea (as long as he doesn't find out that Powell is sleeping with his estranged wife). Howard Chaykin's irreverent satire on American morality has its moments, but both script and artwork seem rushed and half-hearted after *American Flagg*.~NF

THE POWER COMPANY

DC: *One-shot ('Bork') 2002, one-shot ('Josiah Power') 2002, one-shot ('Manhunter') 2002, one-shot ('Sapphire') 2002, one-shot ('Skyrocket') 2002, one-shot ('Striker Z') 2002, one-shot ('Witchfire') 2002, 9 issues + 2002 to date*

In San Francisco, Josiah Power creates a mercenary super team to act as a security, recovery and investigation service for individuals or organisations that need more protection than the regular police force can offer, set up like a law firm with partners and associates. The one-shots provide an introduction and background for the mostly new characters (Bork's a reformed villain from *The Brave and the Bold* 81, while Manhunter is the surviving clone of the Archie Goodwin and Walt Simonson version of Manhunter). Josiah Power himself was a lawyer given powers by the metagene bomb, Sapphire a girl living on the streets until she stole the Serpents Egg during a battle between Kobra and the JLA. Skyrocket is meant to be an experienced, if lone, superheroine, who uses the Argo Harness to give her powers. Striker Z is a Hong Kong stuntman, whose powers came from a vat of fuel plasma and Witchfire finds a book of spells and uses magic to become a celebrity (singer, stuntwoman, magician). Written by Kurt Busiek, while none are outstanding, all of these are well drawn by different artists, and most have guest stars from elsewhere in the DC Universe.

Co-Creators, Busiek and Tom Grummett begin the regular series with the recruitment of Skyrocket and conflict with Dr Cyber and the Strikeforce (1-4). Manhunter confronts some clone-hunters in 5, Green Arrow and Black Canary show up in a tale of chemical company, Biospheer, from Power's past in 6, which leads into a clash with Biomax in 8-9, after a Striker Z solo mission in 7. Busiek has put together a good mix of characters, who are still being developed, and provided a source of internal conflict in their different motives, from the heroic zeal of Skyrocket to the mercenary Manhunter, and celebrity-seeking Witchfire. Grummett's artwork is pleasingly detailed and dynamic without being fussy.~NF

POWER FACTOR

Wonder: *2 issues*

Innovation: *3 issue miniseries, 1 Annual 1990-1991*

A rather disjointed series, but with several good ideas among the chaos. It introduces a new world with plenty of superheroes, a place where the term 'organised crime' has a more literal meaning than usual, as the superheroes are murdered one by one in the first issue. The few survivors gather some time later, and begin swapping costumes to instil the idea that there are more of them around than anticipated. Carmine Infantino's art in 2 and 3 is a treat.~WJ

POWER GIRL

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1988*

Following *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, the former alternate Earth Supergirl needed a new identity, background and history. No longer Superman's cousin, she becomes instead Karen Starr, business woman and granddaughter of Arion, Lord of Atlantis, in one of DC's more ludicrous continuity rewrites. Four issues of battling fourth-rate villains are little more than pointless fight scenes to remind readers that she exists. It might have been kinder to let us forget.~JC

POWER MAN

Marvel: *33 issues (17-49), 1 Annual, 1 Giant-Size 1974-1978*

Changing the title from the presumably less commercial *Hero For Hire* didn't do much for the quality, with cliché and conflict the order of the day. To his credit, writer Don McGregor attempted to bring a more poetic and introspective quality to the title, but it only stands out

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* Available in a collected edition

because the remainder is so dire. His peak was in 28, 30 and 31, the best issues until the arrival of Chris Claremont and John Byrne with 48. In a story reprising and repeating the experiment that created Luke Cage, Power Man, and introducing Iron Fist to the title, they provide more tension and excitement than in the entirety of the run to that point. The editors recognising a good thing, Iron Fist stayed and the title was changed to *Power Man and Iron Fist* with 50.~FP
Recommended: 48, 49

POWER MAN AND IRON FIST

Marvel: *76 issues (50-125) 1978-1986*

With the cancellation of his own title Iron Fist and supporting cast moved in with Power Man as the two ran their own investigations agency. Having revitalised the title, Claremont and Byrne turn in a good story in 50 before a rapid exit, and after some floundering Jo Duffy and Kerry Gammill combined for serviceable material. Any issue between 59 and 85 is likely to be of a reasonable standard. Duffy's characterisation played off the awkward mixture of white, rich-kid martial artist Iron Fist and the black, ghetto-born Power Man, used to surviving on his wits, and Gammill's art is solid and consistent. After their departure, the title sank back into mediocrity, and although there's a spark of improvement over the final year of the run it's too little too late. 66 has an early appearance of Sabretooth, but a better sampler by far is 72's story of Oriental gang wars.~FP
Recommended: 60, 67, 72, 74, 75

POWER OF PRIME

Malibu: *4 issue miniseries 1995*

A tedious six-part origin of Prime (parts 2 and 3 are issues 25 and 26 of the regular *Prime* series), which sees lots of characters with Prime-like powers (i.e., god-like bodies of slime around a mortal frame) fighting on the planet that first created the Prime process. Gerard Jones and Len Strazewski must have written this in their sleep.~NF

POWER PACHYDERMS

Marvel: *One-shot 1989*

At the height of the fad for multi-adjectival anthropomorphic features, Marvel published their cash-in, attempting to make doubly sure of success by parodying their own superheroes. And, surprise, there are quite a few giggles to be had. If the thought of an elephant version of Cyclops who has to plug his trunk doesn't raise a smile, stay well away.~WJ

POWER PACK

Marvel: *62 issues, 1 Graphic Novel 1984-1991, 1 Special 1992, 4 issue miniseries 2000*

Behind *Power Pack* lies a very stupid idea, and possibly a rather dangerous one. The four Power children – yes, their father has a convenient surname – are given superpowers by a dying alien resembling a horse, in order to destroy the anti-matter device their father has created. The cute-looking aliens, Kymellians, are warring against a nasty lizardy race, who periodically attack the team. The kids bicker and have problems getting their homework done, and many of the stories come out of childish things like trying to rescue a kitten.

It requires a certain suspension of disbelief when the youngest (and most powerful) character has just started kindergarten. However, if you can activate your sense of wonder, the early issues are rewarding. Louise Simonson's scripting is fresh, with particularly strong interaction between the characters, although she does have a tendency towards sentimentality – witness 19, where Katie causes havoc by inviting their superhero friends over for Thanksgiving while their mother's in hospital. Yes, many superheroes know about them, but none of them seem concerned about five-year-olds fighting crime. There are frequent co-stars, and they often go adventuring with Franklin Richards of the Fantastic Four.

1-21, largely illustrated by June Brigman with occasional issues and art assists from Brent Anderson, are probably the only comics in which young children are drawn with the bodies of children, rather than as shrunken adults. Brigman is a delicate penciller, as adept at action sequences as she is at conversations. With the miniseries, Marvel had a go at reviving the junior quartet in a story full of sibling bitching, school problems and galaxy saving, as the Snark returned to threaten the known universe and their mum became very ill. The plot and characterisation are very simple with little to engage an adult, but the art by Colleen Doran with tight inks from Terry Austin to add polish, is very lush.~FJ

POWER RANGERS Zeo

Image: *1 issue 1996*

Tom and Mary Bierbaum, with competent artwork from Todd Nauck, attempt to breathe some life into a comic based on the popular television series. The Power Rangers travel to Gamma-Vile, under attack by King Mondo, who's unhappy about Rita and Zedd having the Power Rangers' power coins (they use Zeo crystals now, apparently). There's a big fight between Scrap Heap and the Rangers in Megazord, but, alas, the conclusion was never published.~NF

POWERLINE

Marvel/Epic: *8 issues 1988-1989*

Lenore and Victor share an energy field that allows them to fly, to project a force shield and, potentially, far more. They have an adult guardian in Vic's uncle Tyler Ripley who has a metallic hand and wears a jacket with Ripper emblazoned across its shoulders. There's a whole previous generation of supernatural beings referred to as Shadows that all three appear to be related to. Being young, beautiful and traumatised by the recent deaths of their parents, its unsurprising that Vic and Lenore are also gradually falling in love. Written by Dan Chichester and Margaret Clark in an engaging but not very helpfully structured style, this is part of the 'Shadowline' trilogy of titles along with *Doctor Zero* and *St George*. The initial artwork is by David Ross before Gray Morrow comes aboard with 4, giving the characters some human scale and actual expressions. Without the related titles to refer to, this series makes little sense.~SW

POWERLORDS

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1983-1984*

Another toy-based series, this time from Revell. Drawn by a young Mark Texeira, it's of no interest to comics buffs whatsoever, even if you do like his artwork.~NF

POWERPUFF GIRLS

DC: *31 issues +, 2 Specials ('Double Whammy', 'The Powerpuff Girls Movie') 2000 to date*

Vibrant, funny, action-packed tales for all ages that fully do justice to the cartoon show they're based on. Blossom, Bubbles and Buttercup are little girls who live in an ordinary little city that is plagued by a host of monsters, natural disasters and even supervillains! Good thing the girls are super-powered! The three artificial tots are the result of an experiment by All-American suburban genius Professor Utonium. When they're not doing little girl stuff they're saving the city of Townsville from their usual rogues gallery of foes like Mojo Jojo, Princess, Gang Green, Fluffy Lumpkins and the diabolically indeterminate Him as well as marauding monsters and devastating disasters. The stories blend a wry nostalgia for the bygone silliness of the 1960s superhero craze (such as 3 where a meteor gives everyone in Townsville superpowers, or the invasion of monsters in 25) with an obvious admiration for the excessively stylized violence of Japanese animation and comics (4, 24 or 27). Best of all, though, it never loses sight of the fact that young kids and bemused parents are the intended readership. Keen viewers will be happy readers and comic art fans should see the pin-up gallery in 25 with the likes of John Byrne, Mike Mignola, Jaime Hernandez, Michael Allred and Kyle Baker. The 'Double Whammy Special' reprints 1 and 2 with *Dexter's' Laboratory* 7, while the Movie Special is an extra-long adventure that recaps

their origin and first encounter with evil lab chimp Mojo Jojo and recounts how they came to be accepted as the guardians of Townsville. Splendid family entertainment. ~WW
Recommended: 2, 5, 8, 12, 13, 16, 19, 25, 26, 29, Movie Special

POWERS

Image: *25 issues +, 1 Annual 2000 to date*

Homicide detective Christian Walker lives in a dark city where superheroics have been outlawed, specialising in murder cases that are "powers related". The comic traces Walker and his new partner Deena Pilgrim's growing relationship, complicated only slightly by his super-girlfriend. 1-6* start with the murder of squeaky-clean superheroine Retro-Girl, and Walker and Pilgrim investigate, getting to know each other as they struggle to take care of an abandoned child. Walker's familiarity with Retro Girl's associates rouses Deena's suspicions and he's forced into a possibly not so surprising admission. 7 features a cartoon version of comic writer Warren Ellis sitting in on a far from routine patrol, while 8-11* see the corpses of youngsters dressed in outlawed superhero costumes littering the streets as Walker and Pilgrim pursue teleporting gang boss Johnny Royale. An investigation into the death of superhunk The Olympia in 12-14* reveals he has a thing for redheads ' lots of them, while the annual features a thirteen page interrogation of a prisoner followed by a twenty-six page transcript of the court proceedings. In 15-20 a manufactured super group literally self-destructs when one of them breaks his contract. Suspecting a cover-up Walker soon regrets meeting another former colleague who is now an FBI agent. In 21-24 Deena and her luckless new partner, Detective Argento, investigate more superhero deaths linked to 'Chaotic Chic' graphitti. Walker's resignation in 20 doesn't keep him out of the action for long. Walker and Deena are back together for 25's new story arc about another super-team: The Sell-Outs

Writer Brian Michael Bendis shows his mastery of expository dialogue strings and compelling emotional impetus in this series. Michael Avon Oeming takes some chances with the art style that really pay off, especially where visual pacing is concerned. The characters and the city are simplified down to icon level, but given dimension by the ever-present shadows providing as much depth as the writing does. They won a well-deserved Eisner Award for best new series in 2000.~SW
Recommended: 15-20

POWERS THAT BE

Broadway: *6 issues 1995-1996*

The cover star of the first issue is the big-bosomed, all-powerful Fatale, who has the interesting ability to drain the energy from anyone she touches to enhance her own capacities. Hmm... Certainly an interesting date. Fatale's introduction is a witty, fast-paced, action-packed adventure, reading like a *James Bond* script, with operatives appearing right, left and centre to apprehend her. Her story continued in *Shadow State*, then her own title. This title's lead feature, 'Star Seed', also had a great start. It's an excellently paced story of a young man who's trying to locate his alien father. He has impressive superpowers, but he's apparently not the only one. All the intrigue and an interesting supporting cast combine for a well-plotted and executed series, but you'd expect nothing less from guiding force Jim Shooter. The title changed to *Star Seed* with issue 7.~HY
Recommended: 1-6

PPV PAY PER VIEW

Antarctic: *3 issue miniseries 2002*

Jerzy Drozd turns in some decent manga style art for this generally entertaining series with a very good schlock science-fiction premise. Aliens seal off a high school and every two minutes thereafter give one of the students super powers. The resulting chaos is then beamed back to their planet as TV entertainment. The story plays out predictably from that point, with the smarmy four times class president standing in the way of sanity via four times electoral loser Evan, but this is fair low level enjoyment.~WJ

PRAIRIE MOON and other stories

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1992*

Rick Geary is one of the great eccentrics of the comics world. He uses simple but elaborately decorated images, which often make his strips feel more like illustrated stories than sequential comics. When he wants to, however, he can do marvellous things with simple images. This collection of three longer strips and a number of single-pagers is a good showcase for his odd sense of humour. 'Prairie Moon', for example, is about a travelling sheet-music salesman whose demonstrations of popular songs bring about various natural disasters, but who is welcomed wherever he goes. Another highlight is 'A Survey of the Twentieth Century', a single page of twelve panels, each one labelled with a year, each image suggesting that the years are entirely interchangeable.~NF

PREACHER

DC/Vertigo: *65 issues, 5 Specials 1995-2000**

The Reverend Jesse Custer is searching for God, in a literal rather than symbolic sense, since God has abrogated his responsibilities and gone walkabout. Complicating matters is that Custer has been united with the celestial offspring of angel and demon and is possessed of the ability to compel people to do what he says. At least that's the set-up. Don't expect quick solutions. Along for the ride, for the most part, are Custer's former girlfriend Tulip, and Cassidy, an Irish vampire whose early days are covered in 25-26.

Stunning Glenn Fabry covers welcome readers to each issue, while inside Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon combine to produce a mélange of sex, violence and horror that attracted frequent criticism, with most critics failing to notice the violence is generally used to very comic effect. What astonishes is the capability of Ennis and Dillon to shock and surprise from beginning to end. Throughout the run there are scenes that should have eyes popping out on stalks, and jaws dropping to the floor in almost cartoon fashion. Don't come to *Preacher* expecting a dense plot, though, as it's very much in road-movie style with detours. The wonder of the title is in the dialogue, the comedy, the bonding and the shocks. A testament to its strength was Custer's convenient talent being almost sidelined from about the halfway point, no longer required to provide the trappings of a fantasy title. Even in the early days, it was used more often than not for comic effect. Ennis also showed a fine instinct for when *Preacher* was starting to become formulaic, switching direction wholesale with 41 to concentrate on Custer almost exclusively, and freshening the title considerably.

There are few dud issues, although, having backed himself into a corner in 10, Ennis cops out in 11 in the certain knowledge he's presented his characters so well the readership wouldn't have it any other way. And mention must be made of a disappointing finale. Plots not being Ennis' strength, when it came to a conclusion he takes the easy route, while remaining true to the western ethos that's fueled the series. Most stories are multi-part, with only 18 and 50, both atypical Vietnam stories, being relatively complete in themselves. Those not wanting to start with expensive early issues or one of the collections are directed to issue 41. It's more or less a new beginning requiring little knowledge of previous events, and while restraining the violence imparts an otherwise full portion of *Preacher* charm.

Ennis also created an absorbing supporting cast, from adversaries to friends, and several graduated to one-shot specials extrapolating on their backgrounds. The most readable concerns an episode in Cassidy's past, in which vampire cults are treated with deserved contempt. Others feature Arseface (cover titled "The Story of You Know Who!"), a teenager who blew off half his face in an abortive suicide attempt, 'The Good Old Boys', unsavoury redneck members of Custer's family, and military/religious despot Starr in 'One Man's War'. There's also 'Tall in the Saddle', set in Custer's past. While only 'The Good Old Boys' is poor, all the specials fall beneath the high standards set by the regular series. By way of compensation, though, Vertigo had the good sense to issue a collection of Glenn Fabry's remarkable covers complete with witty commentary from Fabry and Ennis.~FP

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* Available in a collected edition

Recommended: 1-7, 13-17, 20-26, 34, 35, 38, 39, 41-46, 51-53, 55-57, 64

PREDATOR

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1989-1990*, 2 issue microseries (Predator 2) 1991, 4 issue miniseries ('Big Game') 1991*, 4 issue miniseries ('Cold War') 1991-1992*, 2 issue microseries ('The Bloody Sands of Time') 1992, 2 issue microseries ('Predator Vs Magnus') 1992-1993, 5 issue miniseries (0-4) ('Race War') 1993, 4 issue miniseries ('Bad Blood') 1993-1994, one-shot ('Invaders from the Fourth Dimension') 1994, one-shot ('Jungle Tales') 1995, 4 issue miniseries ('Dark River') 1996, one-shot ('Strange Roux') 1996, 4 issue miniseries ('Kindred') 1996-1997*, 3 issue miniseries ('Hell and Hot Water') 1997*, 2 issue microseries ('Primal') 1997, 3 issue miniseries ('Predator vs Judge Dredd') 1997*, 2 issue microseries ('Nemesis') 1997-1998, 2 issue microseries ('Hell Come A Walkin') 1998, one-shot ('Captive') 1998, 4 issue miniseries ('Homeworld') 1999, 4 issue miniseries ('Xenogenesis') 1999*

The Predators are deadly alien hunters who stalk humans for the challenge, and in the first film Arnold Schwarzenegger was on the menu. *Predator* is set after that movie, and plays safe by introducing Big Arnie's brother. Mark Verheiden's script is an engaging blend of hokey dialogue and over-the-top violence; very cinema action film in fact, and far superior as such to the eventual sequel adapted in two ordinary issues. He returns his cast and formula for 'Cold War', largely set in Siberia, for another action-packed romp. Ron Randall's not the penciller Chris Warner is, but he's adequate, as is the same team on 'Dark River'. Warner inking Dan Barry on 'The Bloody Sands of Time' provides better art, but the story of a Predator interfering in World War I's trench warfare is ordinary, as is 'Hell Come a-Walkin' with Frank and Jesse James during the Civil War. Set in Victorian England, 'Nemesis' features a strangely fallible Predator and strangely stiff Colin MacNeil art, leaving 'Strange Roux' as the best Predator story set in the past, with Louisiana swamp men coming across what they think is a local legend, the Gollywomp in 1931. Brian McDonald has a laugh with the script, and there are Mignolaesque touches to the art of Mitch Byrd and Jasen Rodriguez. The battle between Predator and Magnus has decent art from Lee Weeks. 'Big Game' is neither John Arcudi nor Evan Dorkin at their best as a Predator targets a desert military base, and Race War switches the action inside to a tinder-keg prison. Considering the scenario and that it's plotted by crime writer Andrew Vachss, tension is minimal. 'Bad Blood' is little other than a four issue massacre, and would have been better restricted to its preface in Dark Horse Comics 12-14. By 'Invaders from the Fourth Dimension' the basic hunters-and-killers plot has worn threadbare, and 'Jungle Tales' reprints stories from *Dark Horse Comics*. It's the best of the one-shots. 'Hell and Hot Water', though is both a surprise and artistic treat with Mark Schultz covers and interior art by Gene Colan reproduced directly from his pencils. Schulz also provides a claustrophobic locale and extra element of danger with an undersea setting for a decent thriller. *Predator Vs Judge Dredd* is more the latter than the former, with neither John Wagner nor Alcatena extending themselves beyond the familiar hunter and hunted scenario. While possibly commercially imprudent, the angular distorted pencils of Toby Cypress, effectively coloured by Dave Stewart, convey a dark otherworldly feel to 'Homeworld', and writers James Vance and Kate Worley take their cue from *X-Files*. It's the most satisfying *Predator* since the Verheiden-written stories, but is immediately followed by the very poor 'Xenogenesis', introducing a squad of unappealing Predator hunters. All miniseries are available as collections from Dark Horse.~WJ

Dave Cooper's PRESSED TONGUE

Fantagraphics: *3 issue miniseries 1994*

The title sounds like a cheap sandwich filling, and Cooper has a talent for depicting the disgusting elements of life. His art appears influenced primarily by John Pound's bubblegum cards, but there are also aspects of Rick Geary, and the whole almost oozes off the page. It's matched by the sordid goings on as we have a voyeuristic block super who believes baby shit can cure his eczema, a moralistic do-gooder, the entire cast inflicted with acne, and the very fabric of the block squishing about. Having set up several potentially interesting scenarios, though, Cooper cops out with the resolution. Very disappointing.~FP

PREZ

DC: *4 issues 1974*

DC/Vertigo: *One-shot 1994*

After the failure of *Brother Power, The Geek*, Joe Simon, a true visionary if there ever was one, returned to DC with artist Jerry Grandenetti, and created one of the most original series ever seen in comics, as the eighteen-year-old Prez Rickard becomes President of the USA. To an audience used primarily to superhero, war and mystery comics Prez was a bizarre departure. Naturally his term in office was fraught with danger, and those wanting him out off office included Boss Smiley (a man with a smiley badge head) and a crippled vampire. How weird and wonderful! The 1970s Prez made one other appearance in *Supergirl* 10.

His revival was in the more mystery-oriented *Sandman* 54. This led to a Vertigo special in 1994. This was a coming-of-age road movie in which three young men travel across the USA to locate the long-disappeared Prez, whom one of them firmly believes to be his father. This is a far cry from the Simon issues, with the whimsy replaced by a haunting and powerful plot from Ed Brubaker and excellent art from Eric Shanower. Don't come expecting anything like the wackiness of the original series, but as a homage to that and an exploration of 1960s and 1990s values it's very good.~HY

Recommended: 1-4, one-shot

PRICK COMIX

Fantagraphics: *1 issue 1995*

Despite its 'shocking' title (and shockingly awful cover illustration), the magazine-sized *Prick Comix* is an anodyne funny animal farce that owes a considerable debt to R. Crumb's early 'Fritz the Cat' strips. Creators Sean Brennan and Tom Giansante cast themselves as two cat-like bad boys who embark on a meandering quest to rescue their friend Pedersen from the clutches of a mad scientist. It's all a bit too 'wacky' and 'zany' (there's even an obligatory Elvis/Flying Saucers subplot), but it's an amiable enough read, with plenty of panel-packed pages that contain the odd nice drawing or faintly funny gag.~AL

PRIDE AND JOY

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1997*

Kavanagh thought he'd escaped from the things he'd done in his New York youth, but of course he was wrong, and he and his family have to go on the run. It's crude and unoriginal, but Garth Ennis and John Higgins supply a certain raw power that keeps you reading, and it's clever enough not to get really, really stupid until the very end.~FC

PRIEST

Maximum Press: *3 issue miniseries 1996*

Whether he read it or not, Rob Liefeld couldn't have been unaware of *Preacher*'s success. It therefore speaks volumes for his level of incompetence or integrity that he issues a comic with the ludicrous concept of a priest by day becoming a bloodthirsty armed vigilante by night. Liefeld's obviously working through some confused feelings about organised religion, with Mafia-style bishops and dying nuns. There is one redeeming factor in the pencils of Mark Pajarillo, who has the makings of a dynamic action style.~FP

PRIMAL

Dark Horse: *Graphic Novel, 2 issues 1992*

In the early 1990s it seemed as if comic companies were bidding to adapt anything written by Clive Barker. These half-baked stories about creatures embodying fear are a notch above his shopping list. It's meagre fare indeed, with cut-and-paste artist John Van Fleet trying his utmost to obfuscate the slim element of plot present.~FP

PRIMAL FORCE

DC: *15 issues (0-14) 1994-1995*

An uneasy blend of mysticism and superheroics uniting a deliberately tenth-rate collection of characters. Until the arrival of Black Condor, Red Tornado is the best known, in this incarnation oddly mute and battered. They're allied with a new Claw, a novice Jack O'Lantern, the Golem and a previously unseen character called Meridian. Tying in the team with old Earth beliefs and superstitions is an interesting idea that never quite gels in practice. Writer Steven Seagle seems as uncomfortable with the required superhero action as he is well-versed in supplying small characterisation slots.~WJ

PRIME

Malibu: *Series one 26 issues, 1 Annual 1993-1995, series two 15 issues 1995-1995*

Prime is a superhero whose adult, heavily over-muscled body is actually a mass of green slime encasing the thirteen-year-old Kevin Green. The body is very strong, but susceptible to breaking down after too much strain, and retains the mind of Kevin whose attempts at superheroics are subject to temper tantrums and inexperience. The major villains are the military and Doctor Gross, who wants to discover why Prime's body is 'perfect' when all his previous attempts have resulted in hideous monsters. A crossover with Mantra (8) established a rapport between them and attempted to give Kevin someone that he could call on for advice. Kevin persists with a spoiled-brat attitude until he and Hardcase defeat Doctor Gross together in the annual and Kevin begins to understand what it means to be a hero, rather than just someone with a lot of power who does whatever he pleases.

One of his old skins gains a life of its own, as Primevil and he discovers a couple of friends, Turbo Charge and Phade, who vie for his attentions before the final two issues see them all involved in a crossover with *Power of Prime*, which answers some questions about his true origin. Written by Len Strazewski and Gerard Jones, 1-12 are drawn by Norm Breyfogle, but after that it's practically a different artist on every issue. Prime and Kevin are both very unsympathetic as written and neither the supporting characters nor the artwork are good enough to overcome the scripts' faults. 'Prime Infinity' (1995) sets up the second series by having Prime so impressed by Spider-Man that he adopts a similar form and then takes on the Lizard. By 13 his secret identity as Kevin has been broadcast to the world after a long struggle with Aladdin. Frankly, not worth the paper it's printed on.~NF

PRIME CUTS

Fantagraphics: *10 issues 1987-1988*

A lacklustre anthology for intellectuals, which has its moments but lacks consistency. Editor Gary Groth used it to showcase various other Fantagraphic projects to great effect; thus in various issues you'd get some *Polly & Her Pals* reprints, or a story from the *Complete Crumb* series. Generally this material was among the most desirable in the collections. Gabriel and F. Solano Lopez's harrowing *Ana** is serialised in 6-9, and there are occasional appearances by then newcomers such as Susan Catherine and Chester Brown, but on the whole the anthology concentrates on a central rota of contributors like Drew Friedman, Richard Sala, Michael Dougan and Dori Seda (whose contributions are uncharacteristically poor). Groth takes a multi-media approach to magazine editing, reprinting Flaubert's chucklesome *Dictionary of Received Ideas*, illustrated by Rick Geary and including short stories. While contributions by the likes of Herman Hesse and Djuna Barnes shore up the mag's literary pretensions they can't help but show up the quality of most of the strips' scripts.~FJ

PRIME SLIME TALES

Mirage: *4 issues 1986*

In which a new genre is conceived: Mirage give you the unfunny animal comic.~FP

PRIME8 Creation

TwoMorrows: *One-shot 2001*

Bizarrely humourless ape superteam are pursued by evil scientists who kill their creator. What is it about apes and superhero comics? This is obviously an attempt to produce comics just the way they used to be, but there's a reason comics aren't the way they used to be.~DB

Comico PRIMER

Comico: *6 issues 1982-1984*

The first Comico title was essentially a fan publication. A very basic black and white anthology, it introduced Az, Skrog and Slaughterman, all of whom graduated to their own titles and disappeared quickly, and Mr Justice, who never got even that far. If the title is to be remembered it's for the first Grendel story in 2 and the first appearance of The Maxx in 5. Unless you've got more money than sense only Matt Wagner and Sam Kieth completists are advised to search out the issues in question. Both display early talent, but *Neutro* would sparkle amid some of the other material present.~FP

Leonard Nimoy's PRIMORTALS

Tekno: *16 issues, 2 issue miniseries ('Origins') 1995-1996*
Big Entertainment: *8 issues 1996-1997*

It transpires we are not alone, and our forebears were a group of mammals genetically mutated to increase intelligence and then removed from Earth. Now they've returned, bringing their conflicts with them. Despite his name being part of the title, Mr Spock has little to do with anything beyond the concept (although he did plot the 'Origins' spin-off). It's left to an ever-changing cast of artists and writer Christopher Manley (from 3) to tell this story of Earth's first contact. It's all competent enough, but only really comes to life with the final issues of the Tekno series. A company change of name serves as an excuse to re-start the series, and Doug Wheeler writes the first six issues. 1 and 2 tie-up loose ends from the previous story and 3-6 have an alien plague loose on Earth, with little involvement from the aliens. Poor sales render cancellation with no resolution.~WJ

PRIMUS

Charlton: *7 issues 1972*

The undersea adventures of Ivan Tors' TV hero Carter Primus, "the first man of the sea". Accompanied by his lovely assistant Toni, Primus deals with foreign intrigue and marine mysteries in his mini-submarine, The Orca. The paper-thin stories by Joe Gill boast some of Joe Staton's earliest comic art, and that's about as interesting as it gets. The appearance of a presidential stand-in named Richard N. Mixon in 7 has some curiosity value.~SW

PRINCE: Alter Ego

Piranha Press/Titan: *One-shot ('Alter Ego') 1991, one-shot ('Three Chains of Gold') 1994*

Beneath a Brian Bolland cover on 'Alter Ego', Dwayne McDuffie constructed an awful fantasy come morality play featuring The Artist Then Known As Prince. He wanders his city on his motorbike, recognised and respected by all, but his band has been seduced away by Gemini who uses the power of music to fuel his anger. Of course, Prince uses his music for love so it's all going to work out. Denys Cowan's pencils are innocent in this embarrassingly obvious, farrago of nonsense. 'Three Chains of Gold' is a more conventional action adventure from McDuffie as Prince helps a Princess regain her rightful throne. This time it takes three artists, David Williams, Steve Carr and Deryl Skelton, whose cleaner lines help make this at least an enjoyable romp.~NF

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* Available in a collected edition

PRINCE VALIANT

Pioneer: *17 issues, 1 Annual, 1 Giant-Size, 1 King-Size 1988-1989*

Fantagraphics: *45 volumes + 1984 to date*

These reprint the weekly newspaper strips begun by Hal Foster in 1937. The Pioneer efforts are horrible, removing the colour, resizing some art, and cutting and pasting other artwork to accommodate the format of traditional comics. We'll dwell no more on them. The altogether more alluring Fantagraphics colour volumes reprint every strip Hal Foster drew in 1-40, and continue from halfway through 40 with the strips laid out by Foster, but drawn by John Cullen Murphy. The intention is to produce fifty volumes in total, continuing until the last script Foster contributed on his 1982 retirement. In the strictest sense, *Prince Valiant* isn't a comic, being illustrations accompanied by blocks of text, but it's nevertheless stylish, an exceptional body of work and enormously influential on a generation of comic and newspaper strip artists. A skilful blend of imagination, legend and reality, Valiant is a 5th-century adventurer, travelling the known world, usually as part of a mission for either King Arthur or for his father, who rules the Northern kingdom of Thule. A rare instance of the passage of time being incorporated into a comic strip, over the years Val develops from a hotheaded youth into a respected knight and leader, and then a doting father. In later years his children are often the focus.

While already an accomplished artist before starting to work on *Tarzan* in 1929, Foster is still developing on *Prince Valiant*. His earliest work on the strip, while good, doesn't compare with what was to come, although there's a greater fluidity to his art, which becomes more static as the series continues. The first six months was prepared pre-publication, and the development from that point is noticeable, as Foster eschews cluttered small panels for a more expansive layout. His illustrative background is apparent from the start. Meticulous depictions of castles, battles, pageantry, scenery and sweeping panoramic views, the strong repertoire of postures and expressions, and the extraordinary detail characterising the feature are all in place by the end of his first year. During the second year there are more reflective moments to counterpoint the action, and by volume 5, 'The Sea King', reprinting stories from 1940, the art has begun to hit a peak from which Foster never falls. 9 and 10, otherwise good starting samplers as Valiant first meets his wife Aleta, see the lead strip reduced to two-thirds of a page by the introduction of a second feature, 'The Medieval Castle', depicting life as it was at the time.

Foster's artistic mastery reduces the attention given his writing. The collections over-emphasise the skeleton upon which Foster hung his stories, with Valiant forever embarking on a new quest or mission, a weakness that wouldn't have been apparent reading the strips weekly over a period of years. The plots are well-conceived, exotic travelogues, with Foster never condescending towards other nations in the manner typical of the time at which they were created. He sets up tough problems and provides ingenious solutions, whether researched or imagined, and while his depiction of 5th-century life may diverge from reality, particularly in the area of cleanliness, it falls well within the bounds of artistic licence. He convinces by the well-researched artefacts and weaponry and the engagingly portrayed day-to-day life: small details such as mosquitoes being attracted by the damp animal skins being used for canoe-building characterise the extraordinary thought behind *Prince Valiant*, although Foster's own adventurous youth provided depth. He's not above a chuckle at the superstitions of the past, and most mystical menaces introduced are revealed to have prosaic origins, unless Merlin is involved. The application of hindsight in those instances serves to authenticate the remainder of the strip.

There's week-to-week continuation of stories, although campaigns and missions are generally punctuated by less monumental activities. These ideal jumping-on points rarely coincide with the start and finish of individual collections, but events are easily picked up, meaning that one volume is as good a sample as another. Volumes relatively complete in themselves are 12, 'The New World', in which Valiant arrives in North America, 15's story of a youngster introduced to Camelot and a war with the Picts, or 33 as Arn returns to North America. 12 and 15 reprint pages from the late 1940s, whereas 33 dates from 1965, although you'd be hard pressed to distinguish.

Despite the astounding amount of work involved in each weekly page, it was fifteen years before Foster resorts to reprinting (for four pages in 18), and even then it's framed with some new material. Thereafter Foster used assistants on backgrounds and inking: his son Arthur for over ten years from the early 1950s, followed by Tex Blaisdell and Wayne Boring. Arthritis slowed him down, leading to pages drawn by others, and when it left him unsatisfied with the work he was creating in 1971, Foster stopped drawing the strip. The cover to 40 is the last panel of page 1788, the final *Prince Valiant* strip Foster drew. After trying others, Foster settled on John Cullen Murphy to illustrate his scripts from his layouts, at first occasionally, his debut page being 1760, then permanently from page 1789. Foster knew what he was doing, and Murphy, although at first working very much in Foster's style, is his equal. His early work in 41 shows him just as confident with a comedy sequence in which Val's daughters hide a fugitive bridegroom and full-out battle scenes. This is another self-contained volume making a good sample. Unfortunately, limited access to the original art or good-quality copies means there's the occasional lapse in reproduction standards in the early volumes, but Fantagraphics are to be commended for a high-quality reprint package befitting the material. *Prince Valiant* is rightly regarded among the top tier of American comic strips, and should be sampled by anyone interested in great art.~FP

Recommended: 5-45

Hal Foster's PRINCE VALIANT

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1994-1995*

As he dies, King Arthur asks that Excalibur be returned to the lake. Before he can do so, however, Gawain is set upon and the sword is taken by Morgause, who has also abducted Ingrid, Valiant's granddaughter and heir to the throne of Camelot. It's extremely faithful to the newspaper strip, to the extent of working with captioned illustrations: surely Foster couldn't have asked for better successors than Charles Vess, Elaine Lee and John Ridgway. There's a darker tone prevalent in this story, though, and the glory of battle is subsumed by its effects. Vess plots well enough to allow for plenty of diversions to interrupt the main quest, acknowledging the passage of time, and Ridgway's art is sumptuous.~FP

Recommended: 1-4

PRIORITY: WHITE HEAT

AC Comics: *2 issues 1986-1987*

White Heat's a female James Bond type, who gets mixed up with Nazis trying to revive the Third Reich. Competent but uninspired.~NF

THE PRISONER

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1989**

A familiarity with cult TV series *The Prisoner* is essential here, but you'll be disappointed if you're looking for adaptations of episodes, because, although the title is based on the series, there's a new prisoner. The action takes place twenty years after the conclusion of the TV story. The mysterious village is now abandoned except for the sole occupant, the former number six. It doesn't stay that way for long, though, as back in the hush-hush world of the secret service, a female agent resigns and arrives at the Village. She's joined by the midget butler and the former number two, just released from prison. Meanwhile, back in London, the new prisoner's husband, also a secret agent, has been researching the secrets of the Village, and plans to rescue her. Fans of *The Prisoner* may not appreciate new characters being added to the scenario, but the known cast are excellently portrayed by writers Dean

Motter and Mark Askwith, and Motter's imagery captures the mood of the series perfectly. The final issue reveals the real secret of the Village, but then is anything what it appears to be?~HY

PRIVATE BEACH

Antarctic: *3 issue miniseries ('Fun and Perils in the Trudyverse') 1995**

Slave Labor: *7 issues + 2001 to date*

The plot of the miniseries concerns a young woman's search for an extra-dimensional being who has forgotten who and what he is. Prodded by voices in her head, Trudy has always been regarded as a bit of a freak by her friends. In the second series, Trudy's still hanging out with Siobhan and Sharona, but she's also been approached on the street by two strange young men who offer her a job in a new nightclub. In 6, Trudy decides to crack open her Magic Eight Ball to see if the die inside really says "We are watching you". 7 begins a three issue story that puts Trudy, Sharona, and Siobhan on a cross country road trip. Creator, David Hahn's storytelling abilities have visibly improved by the second series, in which he devotes more time and space to character, including Trudy's friends while the nagging sense persists that there's something either very strange or very mundane going on here. The first miniseries may be too cute for some people's tastes, but the lightness of touch and stylish cartooning are endearing. Some of the Slave Labor issues include short stories as backups, including one by Alex Robinson in 4.~NF

Recommended: Slave Labor 1-6

The Double Life of PRIVATE STRONG

Archie: *2 issues 1959*

Jack Kirby and Joe Simon rework their *Captain America* concept of an army joe with a secret costumed identity to revamp 1940s hero The Shield. Kirby's gone by the second issue, and George Tuska is not an adequate replacement. Ordinary stuff from all concerned.~WJ

The PRO

Image: *One-shot 2002*

Dedicated to Jim Steranko, who was outraged just by its solicitation, the Pro is a foul-mouthed, single mother and prostitute, given superpowers as part of a wager between the Viewer and his robotic assistant. He then lets the League of Honor know, so that they can offer her a place in their team, (though it takes a stipend to make it worth her while, and even then she doesn't give up her night job, just does it faster). However, her abrasive manners and 'take no prisoners' fighting style soon offend the rest of the team. As the Knight says, "we do not urinate over a vanquished foe on the floor of the United Nations! In full view of the assembled Ambassadors!"

Amanda Conner's drawings are cartoony, but stylish and attractive, despite not flinching from the script, which Garth Ennis delivers as a satirical punch to the superhero genre and post September 11 America (not that he isn't really just having a bit of fun, of course). Hilarious.~NF

Recommended

PROBE

Imperial: *2 issues 1987*

Eternity: *1 issue (3) 1987*

Vise, Minal, Castor and Pollux are members of the Interstellar Security Division, whose job it is to prevent alien invasions throughout the galaxy. In this unfinished series, they are trying to identify a threat to Earth, but their enemies are always one step ahead of them, with fatal consequences. Frank Turner's artwork has some of the smoothness of John Byrne, though faces in particular can be inconsistently drawn. This is otherwise a somewhat complexly plotted superhero thriller with a science fiction setting.~NF

THE PROFESSIONAL Gogol 13

Viz: *4 issue miniseries 1991*

James Hudnall adapts a story from one of the earliest manga successes by Takao Saito, drawn in what now looks quite a primitive style which, nonetheless, allows the story to flow smoothly. The Professional is a master assassin, here called upon to execute a man who, we are told, is a Nazi war criminal, now in a sanatorium. Like all good thrillers, nothing is what it seems. Initially Saito concentrates on the procedure of assassination as his hero grows on you, so that when the dénouement comes it will mean something.~FJ

PROFESSOR OM

Innovation: *2 issue microseries 1990*

Repackaged reprints of a popular newspaper strip from the Australian *Sunday Mirror* with story and art by animator and storyboard artist Paul Power. Professor Om comes from the planet Agron and is the most perfect physical specimen in the universe. Whilst bodybuilding, he is kidnapped to become a gladiator on the despotic planet Ozz. Dated and tedious, although Rupert Murdoch claimed it to be a personal favourite during its initial run in the 1970s. Consider yourself warned.~WW

PROFESSOR X & The X-MEN

Marvel: *17 issues, 1996-1997*

Marvel cancelled the successful reprint series *X-Men: The Early Years* series to make way for this soulless MTVisation of the early *X-Men* stories, complete with broken-backed Image-style art and mindless posturing. Most annoying is the participation of Jan Duursema on the early issues. Judging from her work elsewhere, she's someone who can draw, but, judging by this, was ordered not to. Fortunately, the comics world failed to take this drivel to its collective bosom.~HS

PROGENY

Caliber: *One-shot 1989*

A gloomy, suicidal police officer tracks down demon spawn popping up in murder victims. The writing has a mood heightened by the sparse art, but as both fall short of professional standard and similar themes have been well-worked elsewhere there's little point to this now.~WJ

THE PROJECT

Paradox Press: *2 issue microseries 1996*

These two paperbacks are an ambitious work telling connected stories from a twenty-year period of an inner-city housing project, with characters seen at various stages of their lives. Surely writer John Figueroa kept charts, such is the complexity. The largely depressing stories are illustrated in appropriately gritty style by Kirk Albert, and while heartfelt, the first book doesn't move beyond similar material from countless TV shows. The only individual flavour is the narrative leaping back and forth through time. The best of the first volume concerns a woman deciding that the atrocities in her apartment block have gone on too long, and the time has come to take a stand, although the outcome is predictable. The second book is a vast improvement. Figueroa moves beyond examining crack dealers, junkies and gangsters and on to the system that lets them proliferate. There's less predictability, a greater emphasis on caring and a far more warmth and understanding from both characters and author.~FP

THE PROM FORMULA

Eternity: *2 issues 1991*

A first outing for the *Ninja High School* cast in colour, issued to tempt people towards their regular black and white series. For this purpose Ben Dunn concocts an information and flashback heavy plot that boils down to who'll accompany Jeremy to the Prom. If you enjoy *Ninja High School* you'll enjoy this, and if you don't, you won't.~WJ

PROMETHEA

ABC: *23 issues + 1999 to date*

The female incarnation of inspiration and her relationship with her newest host, schoolgirl Sophie Bangs is set in a divergent present-day New York protected by science heroes

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* Available in a collected edition

The Five Swell Guys. The ultra-modern city, generously sprinkled with neon signs and TEXTure screens with their constant public news broadcasts, has little room for magic. 1-3 form an introduction to the extended origins of Promethea, running to 7, which go back to 5th Century Egypt. Beyond reality, in the Immateria, we meet previous Prometheae: Barbara, Bill, Grace, Margie and Anna who give Sophie first-hand accounts of various legends. In 8-10 there's a dramatic showdown closing the first story arc. 11 is the only self-contained issue. Promethea and The Five Swell Guys battle a threat at the turn of the millennium. 12's interpretation of The Tarot is a contents page for the next story arc, which stretches to 23. Sophie decides to find the departed Barbara beyond The Immateria and sets out on a trip of self-discovery resulting in a new costume in 21. In Sophie's absence from reality Bill's barbarian version of Promethea has inhabited Sophie's best friend and causes havoc with science villains and heroes alike. Agents Lucille Ball (no relation) and Karen Breughel of the FBI are on the case.

Illustrator J. H. Williams III, alongside inker Mick Gray and colourist Jeromy Cox, creates exhaustively varied scenery for a complex set of stories from writer Alan Moore. The incredibly well-realised artwork often gives the impression of being an accompanying illustration upon which to float Moore's dense script, but when action is called for the team rallies forth. Changing colour schemes and linework are key parts of the journey during the second story arc. Risks are being taken here and an innovative approach abides. Not an easy read and very adult in places but any concerted effort is rewarded. Two collections gather 1-14.~SW

Recommended: 8-11

PROMETHEUS' GIFT

Cat-Head Comics: *One shot 1992*

An underground-style poke at pop philosophy from Steve Lafler. The freely-associated sermon includes snippets of a hand-typed personal account of an encounter with a UFO. Lafler's unhelpful artwork cannot even achieve consistent ugliness. There's an extra five pager called 'Radio Jill' where dreams about money are hijacked by the radio being left on.~SW

PROPELLER MAN

Dark Horse: *8 issue limited series 1993-1994*

Propeller Man has huge gaps in his memory, armour in place of skin, and he flies with the aid of the propeller on his back and his wing-shaped jet-board. When a heavily armed monster escapes from an Antarctic lab and rampages through the city, Propeller Man feels that he knows it, and the monster seems to know him too, and, as events develop, Propeller Man starts to reconstruct his past. This makes the series sound far too interesting. When Matthias Schultheiss tells the story, it's a lot of gratuitous violence, corporate conspiracies, endless scenes with Propellor Man's friends (smug gits, to a man), and preposterous dialogue along the lines of "Since she found that paper swallow with the poem on it, she's changed' and 'Eat my rotating blade". Damn, it sounds too interesting again. Avoid.~FC

PROPHET

Image/Extreme: *Series one 11 issues (0-10) 1993-1995, series two 8 issues, 1 Annual, 1 Special 1995-1996, 2 issue microseries ('Super Soldiers') 1996*

Awesome: *1 issue 2000*

Prophet is a supersoldier empowered by a satellite, created in 1940s Germany and then left in suspended animation until revived in *Youngblood* 4. Rob Liefeld acknowledges this theft of *Captain America* and *Omac* via a supporting character named Kirby, but that doesn't excuse it. The forced biblical allegories of series one wear thin, and Stephen Platt's art in 5-10 is distorted and gruesome. 1-7 are collected. Series two, written by Chuck Dixon, recasts Prophet and reveals him as more than originally conceived, and Platt's reined in to better effect. It's still no masterpiece, but much improved. Pompous and overbearing villain Drakmordrid is a hoot and a half, offering self-obsessed soliloquies without a hint of irony. Try 8 for a particularly spectacular session. The microseries teams Prophet with Chapel, as the pair of musclebound gun-heavy clods take down a Japanese warlord and his followers. Robert Loren Fleming refuses to take dialoguing this at all seriously, and delivers some hilarious lines at the characters' expense while playing up the contrast between Chapel's natural offensiveness and Prophet's presbytarian nature. Still no gem, it's far better than you might expect. The Awesome comic deals with two Prophets a century apart, but only in taster episodes, and the character hasn't been seen since. Cue tickertape parade.~WJ

PROPOSITION PLAYER

DC/Vertigo: *6 issue miniseries 1999*

Joey Martin plays poker for the house in Vegas: something he hates but must do to raise the stake he needs to play in a 'real' game. That's the plan, anyway, until he accidentally purchases the souls of some of his work buddies for the price of a beer each, when everything changes. God's agents arrive, followed by other deities, with varying offers for the souls he now owns. Bill Willingham tells a very readable story with wit and pace, dealing with issues such as religion, death and, most importantly, how to play your cards when the Big One comes along.~DB

Recommended: 1-6

PROTECTORS

Malibu: *20 issues 1992-1994*

A group of extremely obscure 1940s superheroes revived and banded as a team. 1-9 are moderately intriguing, with enough mystery to ensure readers return for more, and 5 has a tacky novelty bullet-hole drilled through the entire comic to commemorate the death of a team member in the best possible taste. Beyond that, the plethora of characters and an intrusive crossover ensure that little time is devoted to anything other than fighting. Full credit, though, for a final issue that runs contrary to all expectations.~WJ

PROTHEUS

Caliber: *2 issue microseries 1996*

In the days before Mike Deodato Jnr was elongating women's bodies for his current art style he was tracing photographs back home in Brazil for this story of seedy private eye Leo Protheus. It's brainless nonsense in which Sting features heavily as the lead. The covers have nothing to do with the contents, and the entire package is best left alone.~WJ

PROTOTYPE

Malibu: *19 issues (0-18), 1 Giant Size 1994-1995*

It's hard to believe it took two writers, Len Kaminski and Tom Mason, to conceive this lame knock-off of Marvel's Iron Man. Naïve teenager Jimmy Ruiz is Prototype, the 'corporate spokesman' for devious organisation Ultratech. Ruiz, a superpowered 'Ultra' with a fondness for steroids, replaced original Prototype Bob Campbell, a crippled ex-stunt man now bearing a healthy grudge against his former employers. The first four issues were drawn by the team of David Ammerman and James Pascoe, before Ammerman left to plot and draw the crappy *Wrath* (another Ultraverse hero who first appeared in *Prototype* 4). After that, slightly more pleasing penciller Roger Robinson hung on until almost the bitter end. The idea of superhero as media darling dates back at least as far as Grant Morrison's *Zenith* circa 1987, and Kaminski/Mason don't have anything very new to say on the subject. In other words, a modish gimmick is used to prop up more witless superhero fisticuffs.~AL

PROWLER

Eclipse: *4 issue miniseries 1987, 4 issue miniseries (Revenge of the Prowler) 1988*

Prowler is an ambitious attempt to create a new character that retains the mystery and adventure of the early pulps but that is capable of bearing some of the weight of 'modern' questioning of motives. Leo Kragg, the original Prowler, takes on a young apprentice, Scott, who's not at all ready for the violence and ruthlessness that being around the Prowler entails. Faced with an old adversary who commands an army of zombies and children, Scott does his best to avoid killing his enemies, nearly getting Leo killed in the process. Tim Truman's script is taut but occasionally obvious, while John K. Snyder III's artwork is mechanical and rather soulless. He obviously knows all the tricks of the trade and he captures expression well, but his figures never seem quite right. Tim Truman continues the adventures of his modern pulp hero in *Revenge of the Prowler*. Unfortunately, though working hard on characterisation, he includes too much daft technology to make the plot work. Snyder's artwork looks rushed. As an added bonus, issue 2 has a flexidisk soundtrack to accompany the story.~NF

The PROWLER

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1994-1995*

Long-time occasional Spider-Man ally is forced to ask some soul-searching questions as to his priorities in life. Complicated by a murderous doppelgänger using his technology and a familiar villain, the miniseries only rises slightly above its company contemporaries.~FP

PRUDENCE AND CAUTION

Defiant: *2 issues 1994*

Written by Chris Claremont and drawn by Jim Fern, this ties in with *Warriors of Plasm*, starring Rick Tietz from that series. Prudence is a strange creature, perhaps the deadliest in the Universe, and is accidentally freed by Tietz in *Warriors* 6. Starting on Earth she has an interest in Rick, but she's not the only one. It's professional, but not outstanding.~HY

PRYDE AND WISDOM

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 1997*

A spin-off from *Excalibur* starring Kitty Pryde and Pete Wisdom as Steed and Mrs.Peel in London, basically. No superhero costumes, powers featured discreetly. They're called in to investigate a disappearance and a series of bizarre murders. The victims appear to have been fossilised so mutant foul-play is suspected. Along the way we also get to meet Pete's family, notably his sister Romany and his dad who looks just like a white haired version of Wolverine. Startlingly innovative (not). Warren Ellis' script is entertaining and the closeness of the lovers really comes across, but the art by Terry Dodson relies almost entirely on portraits, pin-up shots and close-in detail. There are so few distinguishable backgrounds that the story could've happened anywhere (there's the clichéd drive off an opened Tower Bridge in 1 and a silhouette of Big Ben but that's about it). The tube train that's part of 3's climax is completely fudged.~SW

PSI-FORCE

Marvel: *32 issues, 1 Annual 1986-1989*

Marvel's 'back to basics' thrust in 1986 created the New Universe, the concept of which strove for even more realism than the mainstream Marvel Universe did in 1961. The New Universe is based on the real world until the White Event (see *Starbrand* 12) induced paranormal powers in two out of every million people. In *Psi-Force*, Emmett Proudhawk assembles five altered and unwilling teenagers. He dies at the end of issue 1, but collectively they are able to summon his spirit as a giant psionic hawk. Refreshing as it is to encounter characters without secret identities and code names, and who wear their underpants on the inside, crafting quality stories about superheroes without the trappings of a superhero universe is highly demanding, and the creators fail to rise to the challenge. There is plenty of characterisation, background and emotional angst in the first fifteen issues, mainly written by Danny Fingeroth, but dreary plots reiterate attempts by political and corporate entities to subvert the kids' abilities for their own goals. Furthermore, Wayne Tucker's mind-wiping powers mirror those of the *X-Men*'s Professor X, are used with far less restraint and are far too convenient.

Fabian Nicieza writes all issues from 16, initiating a new and downhill direction from 18 as the team is involuntarily disbanded for six issues and reformed with changed personnel. The kids' streetwise maturity with their powers dissolves any charm of the earlier issues, where tentative fumblings often produced unpredictable results. The title rolls on like a telephone book but without the plot, until cancellation strikes mercifully in 32.~APS

PSI JUDGE ANDERSON

Fleetway/Quality: *15 issues 1989-1990*
2000AD Books: *1 Graphic Novel ('Shamballa') 1991*
Mandarin: *2 Graphic Novels ('Childhood's End', 'Satan') 1993, 1995*

Judge Anderson was the first series spun-off from *Judge Dredd*. She's a free-thinking woman whose individuality is indulged by the repressive Judge system due to her prodigious mental abilities. Alan Grant has written (or co-written with John Wagner) all her solo stories way beyond what's reprinted here, and from the start advisedly adopts a completely different tone to *Dredd*. Anderson's stories are action adventure, and the few moments of humour are to contrast the dark mood. There's also no doubt that she's the focus of the stories.

Brett Ewins illustrates the earlier issues, but is uninspired by weak material, then one of Mega-City One's greatest foes returns in 6 and 7, illustrated by Barry Kitson, with Anderson having premonitions of a wolf. 'Helios' in 8 and 9 is the first really good Anderson story. Exquisitely drawn in neo-realist fashion by David Roach, it offers more of Anderson's character beyond the uniform amid a disturbing tale of revenge. 10 and 11's 'Triad', illustrated by Arthur Ranson, continues a fine run, touching on child abuse as childhood nightmares prove a very real threat to Anderson and the city as whole. Ranson's illustrative, almost photographic, art style is astoundingly detailed, yet fluid and emotional, and elevates the story, shaking loose any remaining tenuous associations with Dredd. 13-15 are actually a below-par *Judge Dredd* story in which Anderson plays a large part. 'City of the Damned' had already been reprinted as *Judge Dredd* 15-18. The entire series suffers from shoddy reproduction, blurring the artwork. Interested readers are directed instead to the better-quality Titan reprint volumes.

Only three collections of later stories are available. In them the spiritual side of Anderson's nature comes increasingly to the fore, and she becomes disenchanted with the system the Judges uphold. The Arthur Ranson-drawn 'Shamballa' proves him to be as masterful in colour as he is in pen and ink. Manifestations of strange phenomena allied with brutal deaths lead to a teaming of Anderson and a Soviet counterpart on a mission to a long-hidden subterranean city. In 'Childhood's End' Anderson investigates a pyramid on Mars in a story offering a solution to life on Earth. It's weak, and the substitution of Ranson's Anderson by Kev Walker's more muscly figure is initially jarring, although it's equally well drawn. 'Satan' has Anderson back on Earth, and Ranson back on the art, for a story involving an alien claiming to be Satan, an improvement on its predecessor, but not up to the best material.~FP

Recommended: 8-11, 'Shamballa'

PSI-LORDS

Valiant: *10 issues 1994-1995*

The Psi-Lords are ageless beings who've set themselves up as protectors of the universe. They're aloof, detached and feared. 1's introduction to the team (also known as Starwatchers) is very well handled, and despite 3 tying into 'The Chaos Effect' crossover, more information about the team is imparted, filling in most essential background detail. A fallen Starwatcher returns in 4, and 6 and 7 have an invasion by the frog-like Sirians, revealing an alternative agenda on the part of the Psi-Lords. This intriguing plot is dropped for 8-10, which are a great disappointment, as they're nothing more than standard action material. The success of the early issues is very much to do with writer Anthony Bedard choosing to have the reader see the Psi-Lords through the eyes of Earth ambassador Danae Del Sol.

Her narrative, experiences and interpretations give a unique viewpoint for the title, and artist Mike Leeke is excellent throughout 1-7. All of those are worth your time, but start at the beginning.~WJ

THE PSYBA-RATS

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1995*

The Psyba-Rats are criminal computer hackers led by Razor, who was given superpowers when bitten by an alien during DC's 'Bloodlines' saga. With Hackrat and Channelman (who is trapped in Cyberspace) Razor sets out to find the formula for Zesti-Cola. A guest appearance from Robin helps set the series firmly amongst DC's youth titles. The story's not without its pleasures and the artwork, by Michael Dutkiewicz and Andrew Kent, is a delightful mix of old and new influences.~NF

PSYCHO

Skywald: *24 issues, 1 Annual, 1 Yearbook 1971-1975*

A horror anthology set up in the mold of Warren's successful bi-monthlies *Eerie* and *Creepy*, Skywald brought out this title to alternate every other month with *Nightmare*. The contents are similar to Warren's although the freelance talent is not always top shelf, but this leaves room for newcomers to take their turn stirring the vatful of entrails. Comics' first marsh monster, The Heap (formerly of *Air Fighters/Airboy Comics* 1942-1953), returned in 2 drawn by Ross Andru and Mike Esposito. Tom Sutton (signing himself Sean Todd) added *Frankenstein Book* II to the line-up in 3-4 as a follow-up to Dan Adkins' feature in 2. Early issues feature work by many familiar names including Gray Morrow, Gardner Fox, Dennis Fujitake, Bill Everett, Marv Wolfman, Ernie Colon (as Jack Purcell), Rich Buckler, Bruce Jones, Ralph Reese and Doug Wildey. There was an eight month gap in Skywald's black and white output from late 1971 to the Summer of 1972 where 7 sees a new name in the editorial credits: Al Hewetson. He pretty much guided the title through its increasingly demonic and bloodthirsty subject matter over the next three years. The Heap is last seen in 8 by Hewetson and Pablo Marcos whilst the contents gradually become swamped by Spanish and Filipino artwork from the likes of Serg Moren, Domingo, Xirinius, Ramon Torrents, Villanova, Zesar, Borrell, José Gual and Suso. There are early stories by Dave Sim and Gene Day in the last issue. The two annuals ran reprints of choice strips from past issues. It continued to resemble a poorer quality Warren title to the end.~SW

THE PSYCHO

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1991*

James Hudnall spins a tale of what might have happened if a superpowered being had killed Hitler, shortening World War II and changing the political future of the West. Jack Riley is a non-powered spy sent to keep tabs on one country's stockpile of superbeings. When his cover is blown and his girl-friend, Sonya, captured he takes a drug that might or might not kill him and emerges as The Psycho, determined to rescue Sonya and clear his name. The story is uncompromising in its depiction of the lack of respect for life exhibited by both government and superbeings as they jostle for power in a world heading for a bloody war, where the country with the most superhero soldiers will win. Dan Brereton's painted artwork is stunning and his character designs are clearly precursors of his own *Nocturnals* series – he seems particularly taken by amphibian characters. These 'heroes' are the stuff of nightmare.~NF

PSYCHOANALYSIS

EC: *4 issues 1955**
Gemstone: *4 issues 1999**

Public pressure closed down EC's mainstay horror and crime titles, and this was the oddest of their replacements. Future author Daniel Keyes made use of his psychiatry degree with a fair proportion of the writing, but this wasn't the ideal choice of material for a comic, although the stories do become more involving as they continue. Three patients are psychoanalysed, each having one session per issue. Freddy Carter resents his parents' attitudes towards him, Ellen Lyman is plagued by nightmares, and Mark Stone, ostensibly a successful writer, fears he's a hack and is overly concerned with death. Jack Kamen makes a sterling attempt at injecting excitement and variety into a dry topic requiring plenty of talking-heads shots, but can only cope with so many of them no matter how good he is. The Gemstone issues reprint the originals, and are available as a bound collection that's a cheaper alternative to the sumptuous black and white hardbound volume.~WJ

PSYCHOBLAST

First: *9 issues 1987-1988*

Psychoblast can do almost anything with the power of his mind, making him a desirable item for plenty of folk. Unfortunately he only exists when his host body, Brian Burke, sleeps. There's blood and thunder galore, but it all amounts to little in the end.~WJ

PSYCHONAUT

Fantagraphics: *2 issues 1996*
MonsterPants Comics:*1 issue (3) 1997*

A strange, and not entirely successful marriage of fact and fiction from Serbian cartoonist Sasa Rakezic, who writes and draws in English under the name of Aleksander Zograf. The bulk of the first two issues is devoted to Zograf's 'Visual Report', a comic strip diary that moves between three different narrative strands: fairly straightforward reportage on the political upheaval in former Yugoslavia at the start of the 1990s, flashbacks to unusual incidents in the author's childhood, and a bizarre record of the hypnagogic visions and lucid dreams that Zograf has of animated Walt Disney characters. Perhaps the cartoonist is making a point about the surrealism of Bosnian conflict, or about the way that, in Wim Wender's phrase, "America has colonised our subconscious". Things might be a little clearer if the artwork wasn't so generally flat and inexpressive.~AL

PSYCHONAUTS

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1993-1994*

Motofumi Kobayashi, Alan Grant and Tony Luke cobble together a half-baked and derivative tale of superpowered agents sent from floating space cities to see whether the devastated planet Earth is suitable for rehabitation. Crammed full of mutants, dinosaurs, mad scientists, evil politicians and hoary old clichés. Even *Planet of the Apes* does it better than this.~WW

PSYENCE FICTION

Abaculus: *1 issue 1999*

A private agency employs a variety of supernatural entities to solve weird mysteries in this spirited take on the *X-Files* phenomenon.~WW

PSYLOCKE AND ANGEL: CRIMSON DAWN

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1997*

Ben Raab and Salvador Larocca churn out stock plot number three as Ninja/Telepath Psylocke must fight to salvage her soul from the demonic extra dimensional cabal, the Crimson Dawn. Helping her out is live-in lover and winged mutant the Angel, aided and abetted by a sawn-off wizard and the inevitable Wolverine. Decorative but mindless.~WW

PTERANO-MAN

Kitchen Sink: *One-shot 1990*

A superhero parody on a grand scale, Don Simpson's *Bizarre Heroes* include Pterano-Man, The Phantom Jungle Girl, Megaton Man and the See-Thru Girl. The one-shot prelude to the regular Bizarre Heroes series features three stories introducing the first two characters above. Pterano-

Man battles ecological disaster and a man-dinosaur while Phantom Jungle Girl gets her mind switched with the Cowboy Gorilla's. Good, mostly clean fun.~NF

PUKE & EXPLODE

Northstar: *2 issue microseries 1991*

Dave Cooper's unsophisticated, grotesque, gory satire on the American dream as represented by the rise and fall of a rock star. Drug-fuelled, audience mangling and obsessive, Tiffin eventually decides that prosthetic limbs are the best way forward, but finds no-one to follow his lead.~NF

PULP

Viz: *Vol one 1 issue 1997, vol two 12 issues 1998, vol three 12 issues 1999, vol four 12 issues 2000, vol five 12 issues 2001, vol six 8 issues 2002*

This anthology of adult-themed manga translations doesn't use 'adult' in the sense of 'wanky comics' – though fairly frank sexuality is often a major component – but in the sense of 'grown up', proving that manga can, after all, be more than big-eyed waifs and martial artists. Among the main features are *Strain*, the story of an ephebically beautiful assassin, the female street waif he befriends, and the consequences thereof, illustrated by Ryoichi Ikegami. In Naoki Yamamoto's *Dance Till Tomorrow*, in which college student Suekichi will inherit $4.5 million if he graduates, but keeps getting hindered and distracted in his academic goals by the mysterious beauty Aya. Akimi Yoshida's *Banana Fish* tells of a young gang leader, Ash, who is trying to solve the enigma of the eponymous new street drug, but keeps falling foul of his old boss, and lover, Papa Dino. *Black & White*, by Taiyo Matsumoto, is best described as *Ren & Stimpy* with human street urchins. Without the funny bits. Or the plots. Hideo Yamamoto's *Voyeur*, has Ko, under the tuition of an experienced voyeur, spying on his girlfriend Satomi, not knowing that the two of them are also under surveillance. Intended to be some sort of tense psychodrama, the substandard art and plodding storyline have failed to impress. All the above series have been continued in a series of paperback books, and are dealt with in greater depth as separate entries.

A regular filler feature is Masahiko Kikuni's *Heartbroken Angels*, a series of disconnected scatological nonsense strips, as frequently disgustingly hilarious as they are utterly incomprehensible. *Bakune Young*, by Toyokazu Matsunaga, is a savage, ultra-violent satire about a man who wants world domination, but has nothing to offer but his rage. Junko Mizuno's *Cinderalla* is a retelling of the classic fairy tale, but the stepsisters are zombies, and our heroine has to make a gory sacrifice to win the heart of Prince charming. This superficially cute, fluffy series is reminiscent of the *Powerpuff Girls*, but with nipples and self-mutilation. *Uzumaki*, by Junji Ito, details the story of a small town, Kuroazu, where the populace are apparently obsessed by spirals. Described by many as a 'horror manga', that's... rather too simplistic a description. It's suspenseful, tense, strange and disturbing, but not, generally, explicitly horrific.

Looking for a career change? Read *Even a Monkey Can Draw Manga!*, by Koji Aihara and Kentaro Takekuma, a mock-instructional series that will teach you how to become rich, famous, and sexually potent beyond your wildest dreams by drawing comics! After the frequently grim and nihilistic fare in the rest of the issue, *Even..* always comes as a hilarious change of pace.

Like most anthologies, *Pulp* is not going to appeal to everyone, and its uneasy pandering to the 'adult' comics market, with its 'sexy' pin-up covers and occasional posters, makes it look like a 'wanky comic', when it actually runs several mature series, and will reward any unprejudiced reader. The anthology format and diversity of features, plus the policy of gathering them into affordable paperback compilations, makes recommendation problematic, but any issue of *Pulp* will feature something that you'll want to see more of. Despite generally poor sales for anthologies, *Pulp* managed a respectable run, but eventually gave in to diminishing audiences and was cancelled. The paperback compilations of popular series such as *Banana Fish* will continue with newly-translated material, and the experiment has at least given Viz sufficient confidence in offbeat manga that they plan to 'pilot' similar series straight into the paperback format.~HS

PULP FANTASTIC

DC/Vertigo: *3 issue miniseries 1999**

When lecherous private eye Vector Pope is asked to locate a missing society girl he soon finds he's involved in more than a missing persons investigation. Generous helpings of sex, drugged androids, corrupt cops, more sex, transvestites, religion, even more sex, violence, betrayal and an ornamental bird are borne by the hero. Vector is helped by his frisky holographic secretary Ayesha, his partner Wulf, his altar-boy stoolie Jewd and his gorgeous old flame Kiko. Writers Howard Chaykin and David Tischman produced a futuristic make-over of *The Maltese Falcon* with numerous gender changes and modernisations of equipment and social morés. The artwork by Rick Burchett is spare, slick and well laid-out although the size of the heads often makes characters appear to be five feet tall. High geared and lascivious.~SW

PULP FICTION

A List: *7 issues 1997-1998*

Anthology reprinting a mix of out-of copyright adventure strips such as *Tugboat Tessie* with padded out with short text fiction taken from pulp magazines. Historically interesting and frustrating, as none of the material is attributed or credited.~WW

PULPATOON PILGRIMAGE

AdHouse Books: *One-shot 2002*

Bull, Delaware Thistle and Rowbot are animal, vegetable and mineral, wandering a mostly deserted landscape with interludes to explain, in part, who they are and how they met. Joel Priddy examines themes of friendship and the relationships between birth, life, death and nature, with simple, yet clear cartooning. The leisurely journey is agreeable, if ultimately inconclusive.~NF

PUMA BLUES

Aardvark One International: *17 issues 1986-1988*
Stephen Murphy & Michael Zulli: *3 issues (18-20) 1988*
Mirage: *3 issues (21-23) 1989*

In the year 2000, Gavia Immer is a soldier sent out into the wild to observe and sample nature. It's a world where racist fantasies have nuked the Bronx and the rivers need regular doses of alkalines in order to offset the effects of acid rain. A flying mantra ray has stirred political interest and Gavia is beset by memories of his father (whom he re-encounters through videos) and conversations with a trespassing cowboy, which are recorded by a wandering robotic chauffeur.

Puma Blues is a complex, increasingly abstract work, undoubtedly heartfelt. At times it seems there's no plot, just a series of observations on nature, human or otherwise. It's also an intense plea for the protection of the environment from future depredation. Michael Zulli's artwork is detailed, like Barry Windsor-Smith's, but he has also picked up the scratchiness of an Eddie Campbell. It's certainly very illustrative, particularly in 5, a wordless trip through the forest at night, with short vignettes about the creatures still abroad. 20 is a benefit issue (with contributions from Dave Sim, Steve Bissette, Chester Brown, Peter Laird, Tim Truman, Tom Sutton, Alan Moore, Kevin Eastman and Rick Veitch) to show solidarity in a dispute between publishers and distributors.~NF

Recommended: 5

PUMPKINHEAD

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

An ages-old entity is summoned by magic in the backwoods to take revenge for murder. Throw in a superstitious local community, some teenage hoods, a woman with arcane abilities, and a mysterious stranger with a secret and you have all the ingredients of a horror plot. The trouble is that it's a plot used to excess through the ages, and there's nothing new added here, although Shawn McManus, as ever, produces functional and decorative artwork. Despite the name, though, the head of the title creature only resembles a pumpkin in colour. Very disappointing.~FP

PUNCTURE

ComX: *3 issues 2001*

Meandering cybercafe psycho-thriller as secret societies and serial killers vie with a new kind of bloodsucker and good old fashioned gun toting thugs in a visually effective but narratively confused jumble.~WW

THE PUNISHER

Marvel: *5 issue miniseries 1985-1986*, series one 104 issues, 7 Annuals, 10 Specials 1987-1995, series two 18 issues 1995-1997, 4 issue miniseries 1998-1999, 12 issue limited series 2000-2001*, series three 17 issues + 2001 to date*

Introduced in *Amazing Spider-Man* 129, The Punisher spent over a decade as a supporting character, before the first miniseries transformed him into a headliner. He's composite lifted from popular 1970s paperback fiction: Vietnam vet becomes heavily armed hitman driven to kill criminals, having seen his family wiped out by gangsters. If you can accept the debatable ethics, until a recent resurgence, *The Punisher* usually provides base level entertainment without ever being outstanding.

For fifteen years the exception was the first issues of the miniseries. Steve Grant and Mike Zeck explain previous inconsistencies in the Punisher's behaviour, have him settle a few scores in jail, and escape with the complicity of the warden. Thereafter the story slipped, but reflected a trend towards more violent comic heroes. Its success seemed to catch Marvel on the hop, who waited over a year before publishing an ongoing title (although they made up for lost time, as the plethora of other *Punisher* titles testifies). Retaining Grant's first-person narrative as exposition, Mike Baron writes most issues to 62 of the first series. He provides action thrillers with the requisite high body count, initially liberally adapting contemporary news. The likes of the Reverend Jim Jones, blackmailers tampering with pharmaceutical products and insider traders all get theirs in suitably brutal fashion. Stories rarely stretch beyond two parts, and there's little continuity, making sampling relatively simple. The best of the earlier issues is the Whilce Portacio and Scott Williams-illustrated cat-and-mouse with the Kingpin in 15-18, but none match the power of the miniseries. At the height of the character's popularity Marvel issued *The Punisher Magazine*, a black and white title reprinting the miniseries and early issues of this and *Punisher War Zone*.

That Baron was running out of ideas after nearly five years can be seen by the conclusion to 59, in which The Punisher is transformed into a black guy, albeit only for three issues. New writers Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning (and penciller Dougie Braithwaite to 75) offer more multi-part stories, starting with the Punisher in Europe in 64-70, and while maintaining the body count their stories aren't so relentlessly grim. 'Fire Fight' in 82-84, well pencilled by Hugh Haynes, is their best effort, and it also features Vigil, the New York anti-vigilante squad who've been after Castle since 72. 86-88 are this title's chapters of 'Suicide Run', which crosses over with both other Punisher monthlies, and leaves an assortment of Punishers running around in the wake of Frank Castle's apparent death. He's not dead, of course, and after 'Suicide Run' there are different creative teams almost every issue to the end of the run, with Frank Teran's astoundingly distorted art in the brutal 94-95 worthy of note. Bullseye turns up in 102 to set in motion events that have far-reaching consequences for both the Punisher and S.H.I.E.L.D., and end the first ongoing series.

The second series by John Ostrander and Tom Lyle sees the Punisher take control of a crime family to fight the war from within, but business outstanding with S.H.I.E.L.D. comes to occupy the title. Surely low sales were the only reason for the anti-mutant hysteria of 'Total Xtinction' in 12-16, a plot traditionally the exclusive province of X-Men titles. That story apart, this abruptly curtailed series is consistently more interesting than any Punisher since the first miniseries, given the intrinsic limitations of the character. The second miniseries is a poor attempt to address those limitations by modifying the *Punisher* and involving him in a war between heaven and hell. It's tedious, misguided and a waste of Bernie Wrightson's talents.

The 12 issues by Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon provide Tarantino-style comics that play a cast of quirky losers off the Punisher's one-track personality for a winning formula. The instant success led to a reprinting of 1-2 in a collected edition, but Marvel cottoned on quick, sordidly charging extra for the advertising material bagged with 3. The only other downside is the lack of variety to Tim Bradstreet's covers. The running plot has the Punisher tracked by the most useless detective in New York while destroying a crime family, which inspires assorted other vigilantes. Within that frame there are numerous memorable sequences, such as the Punisher dealing with hired killers in 2, Daredevil's dilemma in 3, the appalling Ma Gnucci from 4 and her inevitable demise in 12, the off panel introduction of The Russian in 8, the beautifully set-up killing in 11 and many more. Be warned, though, the black humour means it's not for the soft of heart or those with refined tastes. Ennis and Dillon return for 1-6 and 13, 14 and 18 of the third series, but turn out largely plotless comics equivalents of the action movie. There's a novel use of Spider-Man in 2, but 18 is the standout, with the Punisher in Belfast finally providing a Marvel comic with an accurate representation of the situation there. A decent effort by Tom Peyer and Manuel Gutierrez occupies 9-12, falling apart at the end, and Ennis with Darick Robertson sees out 2002 with slightly better, albeit very silly, ideas.~WJ

Recommended: First miniseries 1, limited series 1-3, 5, 7-12, series three 18

PUNISHER Graphic Novels and one-shots

Whether Marvel believed that banging out Punisher stories in a more expensive format would introduce the character to a new audience or whether they just wanted more money from the already captured punters is debatable. They certainly maintained a hectic schedule from 1987 to 1991. The best of the bunch is the oversized 'Assassins Guild', a well-plotted story from Jo Duffy in which our man teams with the titular guild to eradicate a company protecting rich criminals. It's lifted to great heights by the excellent Jorge Zaffino artwork, and if another Punisher movie script is ever required Hollywood could do far worse than this. Zaffino returns in fine form in the company of Chuck Dixon for the less successful Kingdom Gone. 'Blood on the Moors' shows none of the creators at their best, and the idea of transporting the Punisher to the Scottish highlands is daft. That said, it's a rare story by John Wagner and Alan Grant that lacks any leavening humour, and Cam Kennedy is never less than professional, which ranks this near the top of the list. It's a shame, then, that Marvel only ever published the story in expensive hardback format. Dan Chichester, John Romita Jr and Klaus Janson turn in an acceptable exercise in compare-and-contrast in *Punisher/Batman*.

Jim Starlin's decent plot combats Tom Grindberg's shockingly distorted figurework in the two-part 'Ghosts of the Innocent' with an interesting twist on the school-bus-caught-in- gangster-shootout scenario, and The Punisher's creator, Gerry Conway, returns with Dave Cockrum and Jeff Albrecht for a somewhat predictable but nonetheless spirited 'Bloodlines'. The Grant/Zeck team that elevated the Punisher to star status provide 'Return to Big Nothing'. It's taut and well constructed from a string of clichés including (but not limited to) the guy who was always tougher than Frank Castle in Vietnam, the matchbook clue, the whore with the heart of gold, the Saigon withdrawal and the fixed casino. Divorced from the idea that it was originally intended to occupy three issues of Marvel's restrained and sober *The 'Nam*, Castle romping around the jungle in *The Punisher Invades The 'Nam* has its moments, although it's little more than a shoot-'em-up. Absolutely nothing more than a shoot-'em-up is *The Punisher Kills The Marvel Universe*. Not literally, you understand, but he does off almost every superhero and supervillain. Switch off your brain before entering Garth Ennis' first Punisher story. His second one-shot, the curiously unpunctuated *The Punisher Painkiller Jane*, is far better, with 11 pages of Joe Jusko art followed by eleven decent David Ross pages, all well inked by Joe Rubenstein. The daft plot concerns Jane falling for the Punisher. It's a decent bargain box cheapie.

Of the less memorable series and one-shots, 'Blood and Glory' might have worked in one issue, but drags over three, contrasting the Punisher with Captain America as they forge a mutual respect, and also featuring Terror. It's better, though, than the meeting with Cap's more gung-ho counterpart, the USAgent, in 'No Escape', in which Paladin has to assassinate our man. Strangely, he fails. 'The Origin of Microchip' tells in rather prosaic fashion how the Punisher's techy pal hooked up with him, in what would at any other time have been two issues of a regular title, as would 'G Force.' Slim plot sees off 'Die Hard in the Big Easy' and the team-up with Black Widow in 'Spinning Doomsday's Web', while there's a fine twist to 'The Prize', but getting to it through dull story and pedestrian art is hard work. The same applies to 'Intruder', with its strained religious symbolism and stupid plot, from Mike Baron and Bill Reinhold on autopilot. Their efforts on 'Empty Quarter', the Punisher in the desert, are only marginally better. Teaming the Punisher and Archie was an idea best left in the bar, while 'A Man Called Frank' is a pointless reworking of the Punisher's origin in 1910 to create a late Western version of the character.~FP

Recommended: The Assassins Guild

PUNISHER P.O.V.

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1991*

Jim Starlin and Berni Wrightson concoct a better-than-average Punisher story in which pragmatism allies him with the Kingpin's men. This is to deal with the son of an industrialist, hideously mutated by toxic waste, with a penchant for draining women's blood. Plot complications ensue with the involvement of a deranged vampire-hunter, prompting the interest of Nick Fury.~FP

PUNISHER 2099

Marvel: *34 issues 1993-1995*

You've got to have some sympathy with the guy who wipes out Jake Gallows' family. As caricatured by writers Pat Mills and Tony Skinner they're the most saccharine bunch this side of the Care Bears. Sadly, this shorthand characterisation extends to the entire cast. Despite some inventive wrinkles on the Punisher legend, like Gallows keeping a prison complete with molecular disintegrator chair in his basement, it's little more than line-them-up-and- blow-them-away in 1-27. With 28 Doom's takeover of the USA in *Doom 2099* has repercussions here, as the Punisher is appointed to head an anti-criminal squad called S.H.I.E.L.D. The final few issues, by Chuck Dixon and Rod Whigham, are a marginal improvement as Gallows has to fight his robotic alter ego and escape Doom.~WJ

PUNISHER WAR JOURNAL

Marvel: *80 issues 1988-1995*

Since his earliest appearances, a narrative format used for The Punisher is captions detailing his 'War Journal' entries, or 'Punisher's Diary', with the pretence stripped away. "Dear Diary, today I protected the innocent (apart from the ones killed in the crossfire), thwarted the guilty (apart from the ones who are smarter than me, which is most of them), and made the country safe (after everybody pulled themselves out of the smouldering wreckage)." Exaggeration perhaps, but certainly not by much. In what was touted before its début as the 'quality' *Punisher* title, Frank Castle goes around the world having adventures in picturesque foreign parts, reducing them to rubble in partly-successful attempts to right wrongs. Jim Lee drew most of 1-19, presumably the reason for the title's misapplied 'quality' tag. His presence, though, doesn't disguise the rushed, slipshod, second-rate nature of most of the stories. Once he leaves, the most notable issues artistically are the teaming of Andy Kubert with father Joe in 31-33. Most superheroes look out of place in Punisher's gritty urban milieu, but that doesn't stop the writers trying to sneak them in. There's the inevitable Wolverine (6, 7*), Daredevil (2, 3*, with Nomad in 45-47), Ghost Rider (29-30, 57-58), and Daredevil and Ghost Rider (57,58). 61 begins the 'Suicide Run' story, which crosses through numerous issues of both other ongoing *Punisher* titles before concluding here with 64. It begins with Castle's apparent death, and, adopting the similar idea from the Superman titles, four surrogate Punishers appear to take his place, a frightening equation. Thankfully the market for obsessive gun-toting murderers appeared to have declined by 1995, sweeping most of the Punisher's titles away.~HS

PUNISHER WAR ZONE

Marvel: *41 issues, 2 Annuals 1992-1995*

Punisher exploitation hit a peak with the launch of this third ongoing title. Its distinguishing aspects are a monopoly of multi-issue storylines and avoidance of superhero guest stars. Only Wolverine, in 19, breaks the rule, and even then stays out of longjohns. All the stories reflect Punisher's violent, obsessive vendetta against the criminal fraternity and many have some degree of merit, but the run suffers from repetition.

Chuck Dixon writes the majority (1-11, 26-37, 41, both annuals) and leads the field, mainly by endowing Frank Castle with curt, black humour. 1-6 set a standard that the book never subsequently regains. Punisher goes undercover, has a domestic with Microchip and confronts a chilling new nemesis, Thorn, whose major reappearance in Annual 2 sadly disappoints. Dixon's sequel in 7-11 is still reasonable, although lessened by John Romita Jr's departure from pencils. Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning break the formula in 12-16, but their narrative of Punisher's brain-washing does not quite hang. Writing *Punisher* requires a fine art in displaying his escapes from certain death cliffhangers – after all, the man has no superpowers – and Larry Hama's run (20-25) overstretches suspension of disbelief. His 'Suicide Run' (23-25) and 41's 'Countdown' are the only stories to directly crossover with *Punisher*'s other ongoing titles.~APS

Recommended: 1-6

THE PUNISHER YEAR ONE

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1994-1995*

Picking up with the murder of Frank Castle's family, this is really the first couple of weeks for the Punisher, and it's not until the final issue that he dons the skull shirt. Feeling betrayed by the law he resolves that those seemingly beyond judgement will be punished. Adequate, but Dale Eaglesham's covers apart, not spectacular.~WJ

PUNX

Valiant: *4 issues, 1 Special 1995*

Keith Giffen masterminded this parody comic, centred nonetheless firmly in the Valiant Universe. A bunch of the most futile and occasionally disgusting paranormals imaginable, (Ma'am Marie? The Crimson Pigeon? P.M.S. The Para-Military Shrew?) offshoots of the Harbinger programmes, thwart (mostly inadvertently) the plans of an evil collective creature, the Veil. Some cute touches, including sarcastic digs at Valiant's increasingly desperate 'relaunch' attempts, but largely muddy and incoherent. The *Manga Punx* special, printed back to front, followed, and subsequent one-shots were solicited, but never issued.~HS

PUPPET MASTER

Eternity/Full Moon Entertainment: *4 issue miniseries 1990-1991, 2 issue microseries ('Children of the Puppet Master') 1991*

David DeVries and Glenn Lumsden's first series provides an origin of sorts for the murderous puppets and their master dating back to Nazi Germany and ancient Egypt. Fans of the films should find plenty to enjoy here, as the 1930s portions of the original film are given a new context and many elements found their way into *Puppet Master III*. The microseries is a steamy story of lust and betrayal, but the storytelling sometimes confuses, flashing between recent past and present. By this time Lumsden's art has evolved, from a poor man's Paul Gulacy, incorporating elements from Gulacy's most obvious influence Jim Steranko. Again, Lumsden's not as good as Steranko, but his growth over six issues is remarkable.~FP

PUPPY ACTION

Northstar: *One-shot 1990*

Imagine a more frenzied *Dilbert*, but aided by dogs instead of people, and you have some idea of the unique charms of *Puppy Action*. Created by *Amy Papuda* maestro Michael Pearlstein, the comic features minimalist artwork and ancient jokes, but just about gets away with it by its sheer exuberance. As a bonus there is a back-up with yet more puppies wrecking a science fiction convention, a soft target but fun anyway.~DAR

PURGATORI

Chaos!: *One-shot ('Prelude') 1996*, 3 issue miniseries ('The Vampires Myth') 1996*, one-shot ('The Dracula Gambit') 1997*, one-shot ('The Dracula Gambit Sketchbook') 1997, 7 issues 1998-1999*, 4 issue miniseries ('Goddess Rising') 1999, 4 issue miniseries ('Collected Edition') 2000, One-shot ('Purgatori vs. Vampirella') 2000, 3 issue miniseries ('Empire') 2000, one-shot ('Purgatori vs. Chastity') 2000, one-shot ('Untold Tales of Purgatori') 2000, one-shot (½) 2000, one-shot ('Purgatori vs. Lady Death') 2001, one-shot ('0') 2001, one-shot ('Love Bites') 2001, 2 issue microseries ('The Hunted') 2001, 2 issue microseries ('Darkest Hour') 2001, one-shot ('Mischief Night') 2001, one-shot ('Heartbreaker') 2002, 2 issue microseries ('God Hunter') 2002, 2 issue microseries ('God Killer') 2002, one-shot ('Re-Imagined') 2002*

All that's bad about "Bad Girl" comics is prominently displayed in a bewildering series of outings from instigator Brian Pulido and a plethora of creators. Originally conceived as a foil to the surprise hit *Lady Death* it's the story of Sakkara, a harem-slave in ancient Egypt, who becomes a vampire, goes to hell, becomes a consort of Satan, sucks up some of his power and becomes a Vampire Goddess. That's basically all the sense there is, as an interminable parade of badly drawn, busty naked women and improbably proportioned monsters conquer and are defeated in turn by the batwinged bitch-queen. Especially bewildering is the ploy of turning her human and having her fight to regain her powers and status. A ghastly blur of titillation, male-fantasy lesbianism, cat-fights and blood-letting. How sad must you be to buy this?~WW

PURGATORY USA

Slave Labor: *1 issue 1989*

Début for Ed Brubaker, with vignettes about the fictional Maynardville, middle USA. Although it's well drawn, the enduring feeling is "so what?" The one story with the potential to avoid this, 'The Rain', begins with six pages of unnecessary exposition, and the chapter ending occurs as the story had taken off, never to be completed. Brubaker left this behind for the more successful *Lowlife*.~WJ

The Twisted Tantrums of THE PURPLE SNIT

Blackthorne: *2 issues 1986*

The purple snit is the rage-filled social observer in all of us, but whereas most of us just moan to our friends after an incident, the Snit is pro-active. This is a decent idea, but the results aren't really that funny.~FP

Q

QUACK

Star*Reach: *6 issues 1976-1977*

Mike Friedrich's Star*Reach Productions did much to pave the way for the independent boom of the early 1980s. Giving creators copyright and creative freedom, the aim was to try to reach a more mature audience but retain some of the sense of fun that brought them into the comics business in the first place. *Quack,* nominally a funny-animal anthology that features ducks, never bothered too much about keeping to the rules. Three strips stand out from the series. Michael T. Gilbert's 'The Wraith' began life as a Spirit parody/homage and quickly improved as Gilbert's art skills developed, and all Wraith stories from here and elsewhere are available in a collection. 'Newton the Wonder Rabbit' from 2 is a madcap space adventure written by Sergio Aragonés and drawn by Steve Leialoha, and 'The Beavers' is an early, very rough Dave Sim strip commenting on Canadian stereotypes and taking potshots at family life. No single issue has enough meat to make you feel it's a great title, but there are many interesting contributions from the likes of Frank Brunner, Mark Evanier, Scott Shaw and Dave Stevens.~NF

QUADRANT

Quadrant: *8 issues 1983-1986**

If you like sword-and-sorcery and naked women there's a chance you'll enjoy this half-arsed, sub-John Norman tale of warrior women, elven thieves, dire gods and dim (or undead) swordsmen. What separates *Quadrant* from most other strips in the genre is the scattershot attempt to make it sexy, with everything from open-crotch shots to bondage and lesbian encounters. Its utter triviality is demonstrated by the concept of hordes of women going into battle wearing nothing but high heels.~NF

Ninja High School's QUAGMIRE U.S.A.

Antarctic: *3 issue miniseries 1994*

Following characters from *Ninja High School,* the innocent Jeremy is targeted by a potential girlfriend who's not all she seems. Luckily the witch Mimi is on hand to look out for him. Slim of plot and content, only someone completely immersed in the world of *Ninja High School* should consider trying this.~WJ

QUANTUM & WOODY

Acclaim: *23 issues (0, 1-21, 32) 1996-1998 (1-17) 2000 (18-21)*

Eric Henderson (Quantum) and Woodrow Van Chelton (Woody) grew up together, nearly inseparable despite their vast temperamental differences, due to their fathers working in the same research facility. Fifteen years later the pair are reunited when their fathers' deaths in a seeming accident lead them to discover two gauntlets that grant them great power. The downside is that the gauntlets cannot be removed, and unless they're connected every twenty-four hours, the bodies of their wearers will dissipate into energy. Two fundamentally incompatible personalities, whose eccentricities and irritating traits have become honed over the years, are linked for life. Trying to unravel their accumulated emotional baggage while dealing with megalomaniac super-villains, death threats and a peripatetic teleporting goat (no, really), this oddest of couples (although they're not a couple, as they frequently protest) constitute the world's worst superhero team. The highlight of the careers of writer Christopher Priest and artist Mike Bright to date, *Quantum & Woody* is a sitcom with guts, placing the action third in line after comedy and the emotional shenanigans. The humour appears to be broadly slapstick, but is cleverly balanced, arising intrinsically from the characters and their shared experiences, illustrated by the liberal use of flashbacks. And for all the comedic thrust of the series, the creators don't shy away from poignancy, maturity or raw emotion when it's appropriate. Check out the 'Magnum Force' story in 14-17 for one of the better illustrations of this. The oddly numbered 32 is a "flashforward" to our heroes' possible future, a gimmick that can safely be ignored. Culling that gives you a top notch series. Of course, the ending is unsatisfying, but then it's hard to think of an ending that wouldn't be unsatisfactory. Four reprint volumes collect almost all issue.~HS

Recommended: 0-21

QUANTUM LEAP

Innovation: *12 issues, 1 Special 1991-1993*

This is the comics version of the TV series, telling additional stories of Sam Beckett as he leaps from life to life, inhabiting each person's body for long enough to "put right what once went wrong"'. The comic captures the characters and the feel of the series very well, and with each story limited to a single issue (or half-issue), even the weaker ideas don't make unreasonable demands on your patience, which is more than can be said for the series. Of the stronger ideas, some explore the rules of the format (6, where Sam becomes one of a pair of twins), whereas others tackle particular issues (9, on the gay rights movement, written by Andy Mangels). During the first flush of popularity the first issue was reprinted with some extra pages of text material.~FC

QUASAR

Marvel: *58 issues 1988-1994*

One of the many series which manages to be entertainingly average without rising far enough above that to receive any recognition, *Quasar* was written for most of its run by the reliable Mark Gruenwald, and is a bargain-box gem. The soap-opera plot, centring around the title character and his friends – including his girl-friend Kayla and the (never actually stated but obviously gay) Eternal, Makkari – always trotted along with an air of light-hearted fun. The plots were never as cosmic as they aspired to be but were nonetheless never dull, augmented by a plethora of jokes milked out of the fact that in his civilian identity of Wendell Vaughn, Quasar rented office space in the Fantastic Four's Baxter Building headquarters. It was the perfect cover: if a villain attacked at an inopportune moment, Vaughn would protect his identity by claiming they were after the FF instead. 17, featuring a race to determine the fastest character in the Universe, is full of great in-jokes for sad old fanboys.~JC

Recommended: 17

QUEEN & COUNTRY

Oni Press: *12 issues + 2001 to date, 3 issue miniseries ('Declassified') 2002-2003*

After performing the assassination in Kosovo of a Russian mafia member, British intelligence agent, Tara Chace is wounded, but manages to escape. However, friends of the deceased, put a bounty on her head and Tara must act as bait to capture her hunters (1-4*). The second storyline, 'Morningstar' (5-7*) begins with Tara on a psychiatrist's couch, coming to terms with the assassination, while her fellow agents look for missing information in Afghanistan. 'Crystal ball' (8-12) has Tara checking the story of an informant, who claims that there will soon be a terrorist attack on British citizens. Interrupting the regular series, 'Declassified' centres on the past of Director of Operations, Paul Crocker, Tara's boss, with a mission to bring a defector out of Prague. Writer, Greg Rucka, credits the British TV series T*he Sandbaggers* for many of the ideas here, as well as his love of espionage generally. Certainly, his scripts contain all of the intrigue and paranoia that one could want in a spy story. Artistically, the series fares less well, lacking detail, but Leandro Fernandez (8-12) has a more European style, uncluttered and stylish.~NF

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* Available in a collected edition

QUEST FOR DREAMS LOST

Literary Volunteers of Chicago: *One-shot 1987*

As the publisher suggests, this was intended to raise money to promote the importance of literacy, with many creator-owned properties occupying short chapters in which they must locate a well-known fictional object. The most prominent among them are the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, by Eastman and Laird, retrieving Arthur's legendary sword Excalibur, but of most interest is the early artwork from Mike Parobeck and Guy Davis and a *Silent Invasion* short.~WJ

THE QUESTION

DC: *Series one 36 issues, 2 Annuals 1987-1990, series two 5 issues 1990-1992, one-shot 1997*

An excellent and vastly underrated series. Continuing the premise of the Question's previous solo outing almost twenty years previously in *Mysterious Suspense*, the editorial aim was to present the real world. The only anomalies are the minor scientific gimmicks used to transform crusading TV journalist Vic Sage into the crimefighting Question. Astonishingly, *The Question* lived up to the promise, becoming a compulsive drama that can stand with the best TV output. Even bit-players are multi-faceted, with motivations consistent with their actions. Sage himself is exceptionally well drawn, a far from likeable individual who nonetheless cares deeply about the disintegrating industrial wasteland his city is becoming.

The first series can be broken down into four distinct phases, with 1-5* filling in Sage's background and giving him a philosophy about life, while remaining consistent with the 1960s Steve Ditko stories about the character. Issues up to 14 have the Question confronting a variety of unsavoury individuals as plots address social concerns such as pollution, military patriotism, TV evangelists and ubiquitous drugs, while Sage rekindles his relationship with old flame Myra Fermin, now married to Hub City's drunken and ineffective mayor.

The third phase of the series starts with 14, as Myra announces her candidacy for mayor of the city she runs in all but name anyway. The election is decided in 24, and from that point the ongoing and seemingly irrevocable decay and corruption in the pseudonymous Hub City (Detroit?) underscore the remainder of the title's first run to an unpredictable conclusion (although most stories occupy only one or two issues). That writer Denny O'Neil (all issues) and penciller Denys Cowan (most issues) stuck with the title throughout its run goes a large way to explaining why, after a no better than average introductory phase, almost every issue is worth a look. Worthwhile sample issues are the spotlight on a racist investigator in 15, or 32's story about someone trying to redeem a mistake made during the Vietnam war.

The gap between first and second series (titled *The Question Quarterly*) is bridged by an appearance in *Green Arrow Annual* 3. The first new issues see Sage in South America, and facing a new challenge. He returns to Hub City, but the undercurrent of political intrigue is underplayed, and the stories suffer as a result. The best is 3, in which a movie crew hits town. The Question is next seen in *Showcase '95* 3. The 1997 one-shot, titled *The Question Returns*, almost reaches the standard of the initial series, although purists may carp that the Question's distinctive featureless face-mask now has eye slits. Several years have passed since the conclusion of the previous series, and O'Neil pens a tale requiring Sage to return to Hub City, illustrated in fine, restrained fashion by Eduardo Barreto.~FP

Recommended: 7, 8, 12-16, 20-24, 26, 28-36

QUESTPROBE

Marvel: *One-shot 1983, 3 issues 1984-1985*

A bizarre attempt to promote computer games featuring Marvel characters. In each issue a superhero passes through a portal that probes, assesses and drains their power, at which point you're supposed to rush off and buy the computer game to discover what happens next. Infrequent publication tied into the release of the games and bog-standard comics ensured an early cancellation, although the planned fourth issue eventually turned up as *Marvel Fanfare* 33.~FP

Star Wars QUI-GON & OBI-WAN

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries ('Last Stand on Ord Mantell') 2000-2001, 2 issue microseries ('The Aurorient Express') 2002*

Taking place five years before *The Phantom Menace*, an assassination attempt on Baroness Omnino of Vena fails. The investigation by Jedi Knight, Qui-Gon Jinn and his padawan (apprentice), Obi-Wan Kenobi, leads to her son, who's found dead, and to Taxer Sundown, who, displaying Jedi-like powers, has established a harsh rule over the planet of Ord Mantell. Ryder Windham creates a good sense of adventure and mystery, while Ramon F. Bachs' artwork is quite pleasant, but facial expressions (attempting to capture the actors' likenesses) are a weakness. 'Aurorient Express', by Mike Kennedy and Lucas Marangon is very enjoyable. It takes place a year earlier on a luxury cruise liner that's sinking into a planet's atmosphere. This becomes the scene for a comedy thriller as various parties all have reason to be involved in the ship's sabotage and the race is on to find a bomb on board.~NF

QUICKEN FORBIDDEN

Cryptic Press: *11 issues † 2000 to date*

Quirky blend of *Alice in Wonderland, Tomb Raider* and *Sliders.* Jax Epoch is sixteen, a bookworm, a kleptomaniac and suddenly very out of her depth when she chases a rabbit into a wormhole, scores some mystical artifacts and returns to a world no longer hers. As weirdness breaks out all over she is kidnapped by a secret society of scientists who try her for crossing dimensions without a permit. After the first storyline concludes (1-5*) the style changes for shorter, though no less eccentric tales involving the Quicken, a worm that eats reality, loads of twins -evil and otherwise, and a fimbulwinter that threatens to destroy New York. Engaging fantasy from John Green and Dave Roman.~WW

QUICKSILVER

Marvel: 13 issues, 1 Annual 1997-1998

For a super speedster Quicksilver was lethargic in graduating into his own title. The thirty-three year gestation period between his 1964 debut in X-Men 4 and his ongoing title, all the while being a regular supporting player or team member, must be a record. So was it worth the wait? Not really, there's some florid writing from Tom Peyer, enough artists in 1-7 to invade Nicaragua, and Quicksilver's affiliation to a team of evolved humanoid animals in New York, perhaps a tacit admission he's not popular enough to carry his own title. Quicksilver's wife Crystal returns (don't ask) in 3, and Quicksilver being a Marvel mutant, there's just enough *X-Men* related material to drag in the readers of that title. John Ostrander writes from 7, turning in a rambling search for a medical cure that crosses over with *Heroes for Hire*, concluding in a shared annual.~WJ

QUIVERS

Caliber: *2 issues 1991*

The revelation of *Quivers* is Brian Michael Bendis' artwork. Far removed from the dark photographic style he would evolve, this is more reminiscent of Guy Davis, complete with letratone. This is Bendis' first published series, but it's risible stuff about the descendents of Amazons setting men to rights. Thank goodness he was given another chance.~FP

Q-UNIT

Harris: *1 issue 1993*

For the dangerous mission of retrieving a stolen computer chip, the Braxis form Q-Unit, a team of prisoners with psi powers offered the choice between Q-Unit and execution. The storytelling is cluttered, needlessly convoluted, and very hard to follow, and for 'characterisation' we have the male members of Q-Unit staring each other down, and the female members reminiscing about their lives as slaves. Had it run for a few more issues all would have become crystal-clear and endearing. Maybe.~FC

RACE OF SCORPIONS

Dark Horse: *2 issue microseries 1990, 4 issue miniseries 1991*

Race of Scorpions is a series of stories about characters in a far future where most animals no longer exist and water is the most precious commodity. Pirates, tales from the past and a mine manned by children are the major features of Leo Duranona's unsettling adventure. The artwork's like a loose Moebius in style, but not as compelling. The first series reprints the appearances from Dark Horse Presents 23-27 and 30-34.~NF

RACER X

Now: *Series one 11 issues, 1 Special 1988-1989, Series two 10 issues 1989-1990*

Launched with an oversize special before beginning a regular series, Racer X is the ridiculous combination of top racing-car driver and global peace agent. Complicating matters further, he's also Speed Racer's older brother, long believed dead, and can't reveal his real identity for fear of compromising his security. Whereas the *Speed Racer* companion title just about passes muster, *Racer X*'s first run insults the intelligence, even of the pre-pubescent readers it's aimed at. The second series is slightly more successful, with Chuck Dixon's scripts dispensing with the neither-fish-nor-fowl aspect of the title and concentrating on the action adventure aspects.~WJ

RACER X

WildStorm: *3 issue miniseries 2000*

Rex Racer is invited to race on Kapetapek, an Indo-Chinese island under political and military threat from the Khmer Noir. Tommy Yune's script does its best to include an adventure, some romance and as many car races as possible in only three issues, but the plot's nonsense, despite being attractively drawn, in manga-style, by Jo Chen.~NF

RACK AND PAIN

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1994*
Chaos!: *4 issue miniseries ('Killers') 1996-1997*

Lobo clone teams with Terminator clone as their exploits are beamed back for the viewing pleasure of millions. Except ratings are slipping, so Rack and Pain are set up against foes they can't beat. Maybe. Cartoon violence, so don't expect a lot of plot, but Leopoldo Jimenez's art is extraordinarily detailed in places. The Chaos! series is more mayhem and brutality, this time with the pair framed for the murder of the ruler's brother.~WJ

RADICAL AMERICA KOMIKS

Print Mint: *1 issue 1969*

Despite being a spin-off from *The Journal of U.S. Radicalism*, this is for the most part not particularly political. Apart from several minor strips from underground stalwarts like Rory Hayes and Jack Jackson, the bulk of the comics is given over to Gilbert Shelton, who thoroughly entertains with an early Freak Brothers strip and the unique 'Smiling Sergeant Death and his Merciless Mayhem Patrol'!~DAR

RADICAL DREAMER

Blackball Comics: *2 issues (0-1) 1995*
Mark's Giant Economy Size Comics: *7 issues 1995-1996*

Very good, rough artwork from Mark Wheatley combines with a dunderheaded plot, unfortunately also by Mark Wheatley, to produce a comic only worth looking at. In the 30th century the ultra-rich control everything and the underclass are very repressed indeed. They even have their dreams piped in, via DreamNet. Our hero (its inventor), full of ideas about uprisings and educating the masses, enters his own virtual-reality world in order to try to reach them through their dreams, but once there comes under attack from all sides. The script is by turns histrionic and didactic. Turn the sound down for this one.~FJ

RADIOACTIVE MAN

Bongo Comics: *6 issue miniseries 1993-1994, 1 Annual 1995, 5 issues + 2001 to date*

Playboy Claude Kane III gains his largely undefined powers (and a lightning bolt sticking out of the top of his head) in a nuclear accident. As Radioactive Man he jumps on any bandwagon going. Claude attempts to date Gloria Grand, a radio reporter for WZEN with very little interest in the jerk – she's in love with the superhero. In 2 (#88) we meet Fallout Boy, the kid sidekick who shares his powers, as well as RM's super team-mates in The Superior Squad. If this sounds at all clichéd bear in mind that the title is really a vehicle for satirising superhero comics over the years, and the series is presented as if genuine comics from years gone by, complete with issue numbers. Steve Vance scripts the miniseries and lays it out for artist Bill Morrison. Targeted comic trends are 1950s Superman and Batman in 1, 1960s Marvel in 2 (#88), the 'socially aware' Green Lantern/Green Arrow in 3 (#216), the 'Dark Phoenix' saga from *X-Men* in 4 (#412), an amalgam of *Watchmen, Dark Knight* and *Crisis on Infinite Earths* in 5 (#679) and finally Spawn and a few inspired pages of 1940s Captain Marvel in 6 (#1000). The Annual, resembling a DC 80 Page Giant, features numerous creative teams, but Morrison and inker Bob Smith dominate. The second series is solidly scripted by Batton Lash. The first issue features Hilary Barta artwork on a DC-style 'Gala 100th Issue' with Mike DeCarlo drawing the balance of the series which pokes fun at 1970s Marvel in 2 (#222), the 'high camp' Mighty Comics in 3 (#136), 1950s Atlas horror anthologies in 4, *American Flagg* in 5 (#575) and the Gold Key Turok in 6. Not only are these very entertaining but to any collector of comics there's an added dimension to the parodies, the in-jokes and even the mock adverts in later issues.~SW

RADISKULL & DEVIL DOLL

Devil's Due: *One-shot ('Super Summer Fun Special') 2002*
Image: *One-shot ('Hate Christmas Special') 2002*

If you like feeble jokes with a vaguely nihilistic flavour, boy have we found the comic for you!~WJ

RADIX

Image: *3 issues 2001-2002*

Valerie Fiores is a heavily-armoured future policewoman with a forgotten past, and plenty of people interested in either having her remember it, or ensuring it remains forgotten. Ray and Ben Lai created a fast-paced and impressively drawn action thriller. So impressively drawn, in fact, that images were appropriated to illustrate an application that resulted in a $50,000,000 government research grant. At this point the comic ground to a halt while legal action was pursued. What's been issued intrigues more than explains, but it looks as if something good was going to happen here.~WJ

RAGAMUFFINS

Eclipse: *One-shot 1985*

Don McGregor and Gene Colan look back on incidents from a 1950s childhood in stories originally published in Eclipse Magazine. What makes these more than nostalgia-fests is the ending to each, contrasting the childhood experience with an event in the lead character's adult life. The first two stories lack bite, but the third is excellent. In 1951 Bobby McIlroy weighs being forbidden to cross the road against the toy shop on the other side, while fifteen years later he has to visit his dying aunt. It's a story raising familial ethical dilemmas,

with no real correct answer, and all the more satisfying for doing so. Further Ragamuffins tales appeared in *Eclipse Monthly*, but none were as powerful as this.~FP
Recommended

RAGGEDY MAN

Brave New Worlds: *1 issue 1992*
Cult Press: *5 issues (2-6) 1992-1994*

Set in a world comprised of corporate super-rich and a ubiquitous underclass, this complex cyberpunk thriller involves the hunt for a missing secret agent who is also the lover of a major corporate big-wig. Mannheim, the executive "hires" the eccentric Rainger Salazar, a private eye known as the Raggedy man to find her, neither aware that an illegal cyborg named Kensuke is stalking them all in an effort to recover his missing hand and lost face. Set against a backdrop of business intrigue and espionage, the plot is further complicated by an escaped new silicon life-form and covert entities manipulating events from within cyberspace. Classy adventure with no padding, and worth a look.~WW

RAGMAN

DC: *Series one 5 issues 1976-1977, series two 8 issues 1991-1992, 6 issue miniseries ('Cry of the Dead') 1993-1994*

The Ragman was created as a hero for the common man, set in a ghetto where he protected the poor, hungry and homeless. His civilian life was spent as Rory Reagan, pawnshop owner, endowed with extra strength, agility and fighting ability through an origin explained in the first issue. Robert Kanigher writes human-interest stories about the harsh realities of living in the ghetto, with a sparse cast, and he weaves a fine mystery throughout the series concerning an abandoned mattress stuffed with $1,000,000. As assorted crooks attempt to retrieve it they're confronted by Ragman, who is unaware of the secret hoard. The final fate of the money is well considered and in keeping with the unusual tone of the series. The art is largely by the Redondo Studios, with co-creator Joe Kubert chipping in for the final two issues, and is excellent throughout.

The themes and cast of the original series are reworked entirely for the second series. This Ragman was rooted in Jewish folklore, with his abilities now in the suit, not the person, and the rags comprising the suit entities in themselves. Writers Keith Giffen and Robert Loren Fleming reveal Reagan wasn't the first Ragman, merely the latest in a succession. Besides the local Mob wanting to turn the pawn shop into a front for drugs, Ragman must also confront an old Jewish legend, the Golem. This was a well-constructed story, and decently drawn, although Pat Broderick's art over Giffen's breakdowns was stiff when it came to a fluid character like Ragman.

The third series has Rory Reagan established in New Orleans, a town with a mystique suited to Ragman. Of course, it's an unwritten rule that every comic set there has to introduce voodoo at some point, and writer Elaine Lee isn't slow off the mark. Despite the clichés, Gabriel Morrisette's art captures the eerie mysticism of New Orleans. The Golem returns, and numerous people and objects are possessed in an interesting, but convoluted, plot. All three series have their points of interest, but the original remains the best.~HY
Recommended: Series one 1-5

RAGMOP

Planet Lucy: *Series one 10 issues 1996-1997*
Image: *2 issues 1998*
Planet Lucy: *1 issue (3) 1998*

We open with the escape of a trio of dinosaurs from the ice age in a convenient spaceship, and swiftly segue into corporate manoeuvres, political intrigue, the search of Thrill Kitten, aka Alice Hawking, for a lucrative gig as a comic-book villain, and the imminent collision of an asteroid with the Earth. Only the 0-Ring, a Kirbyesque device conferring complete dominion over the laws of nature, can save humanity! Meanwhile, during a heated debate over who is the definitive Bugs Bunny director, an angel falls to Earth. Things don't get any less complex in the second issue.... With the addition of a rampant lobotomist, a millionaire pope and his teenage flagellant son, sundry Nazis, The Tetragammaton, Piltdown Man, and scores more characters, the resultant trans-universal chase is sly, snide, perceptive, exciting, gut-bustingly funny, and utterly indescribable. Artist/writer Rob Walton keeps all the balls in the air and still manages to include numerous sideswipes at comics personalities and clichés. The final issue can't tie-up everything, but knowing there would be no more, Walton provided a precis of how the story would have ended. Nevertheless, despite its unsatisfactory and only partial resolution, *Ragmop* is a work of frenetic brilliance.~HS
Recommended: Series one 1-9, series two 1-3

RAGNAROK

TokyoPop: *4 issue miniseries ('Into the Abyss') 2002, 5 volumes + 2002 to date*

Korean creator Myung-Jin Lee produces a compelling take on Norse mythology as the end of the Gods approaches and the doomed deities aren't prepared to quit yet. Desperate to forestall their fate for another thousand years, they dispatch the Valkyries to Midgard to destroy emerging humanity who hold the key to the gods' demise. Many heroes gather to fight the crisis, and Fenris Fenrir searches for the reincarnation of Balder. If she loses him to the Valkyries of Freya the Death Goddess, Ragnarok will not come and man will be forever doomed. Epic tale-telling, and very readable.~WW

RAI

Valiant: *34 issues (0-33) 1992-1995*

Introduced in the flip-book format *Magnus* 5-8, Rai was the hereditary protector of Japan in Valiant's 41st century, a samurai infused with nanite-rich blood empowering him. The first (or, to be precise, 42nd) Rai in 0-8 is extremely dull, and in recognition of this Valiant give him an early demise in suitably heroic fashion, although 0-4 were collected. The next Rai, Takao Konishi, is able to influence people through force of belief, and from 9 the title changes to *Rai and the Future Force* as Rai is joined by assorted other super-types battling to rid the planet of robot invaders. They face off against one lot of robots here and another bunch there, and when variety is required cyborgs are served up. It took Valiant a little longer to realise this Rai was also terminally dull, and he lasted until 22 before shuffling off the old mortal coil. The novice Rai in 23-33 encounters sibling rivalry, a harsh teacher and the X-O armour in the best of the run, but by that point the damage had been done.~FP

RAIJIN Comics

Coamix Inc: *5 issues (0-4) + 2002 to date*

This is a weekly, two hundred and forty page anthology produced in Japan in an attempt to offer the diversity of its progenitors. 0 is a preview of the regular series and 1 begins with just four strips. 'Slam Dunk' is a story about basketball players and the usual romantic entanglements. 'Fist of the Blue Sky' is a prequel to *Fist of the North Star*, playing on the political tensions between China and Japan in 1935, and full of martial arts violence. 'City Hunter', by Hojo Tsukasa, has an annoying lead, Saeba Ryo, who works as a professional gun for hire, part private detective, part assassin, but bears watching. 'Bomber Girl' is a comedy, with lots of guns, about a rogue hero, who extorts a reward from the victims of crime once she's rescued them.

2 adds the terrible, 'Baki the Grappler', which is all karate matches, and 'The First President of Japan', a political thriller by Tsugihara Ryuji and Hidaka Yoshiki. It posits an American-style leader of Japan facing the threat of U.S. intervention into a new conflict between North and South Korea, while the Chinese prepare to invade Taiwan. 'Guardian Angel Getten' joins in 3, as the magical, Shao Lin, appears out of an amulet to protect the young Shichiri Tasuke, who doesn't feel he needs protecting, except from Shao Lin's ignorance of real life. 'Revenge of Mouflon' is added in 4, a thriller that begins with a comedian being

forced to take the controls of a hijacked plane, while another new strip, about climbing, is promised for 5.

There's a lot of story for your money, mostly produced to a decent quality, and there should be something to interest most readers, although none of these series so far represents essential reading.~NF

RAIL

Image: *One-shot 2001*

An adventure strip set in an apocalyptic wasteland where steam trains are the main form of transportation. The nicely coloured artwork, from Dave Dorman, betrays the influence of such European comics artists as Moebius and Francois Schuiten, but an over-elaborate back-story and a lack of engaging characters makes for a ponderous read.~AL

RAIN

Tundra: *6 issues 1991-1993*

Rolf Stark's largely autobiographical *Rain* is a bleak and uncompromising look at unpalatable topics. If you can work through the apparently deliberately confused storytelling and cluttered, ugly art, there are some harrowing autobiographical glimpses of a German childhood towards the end of World War II and a mercenary career in Africa thereafter.~WJ

RAISIN PIE

Fantagraphics: *1 issue + 2002 to date*

Ariel Bordeaux and Rick Altergott co-produce this double feature. Altergott's 'Blessed Be' opens the story of a drug dealer who seeks revenge on the judge who incarcerated him. In a subplot, Altergott's previously established character Doofus searches for his old sidekick Henry Hotchkiss. The story's okay, though hardly enough to make a real judgement, and Altergott's artwork, a hybrid between Wally Wood and Ralph Reese, lends the narrative a weight it hasn't actually earned yet. Bordeaux's half of the title features two stories, 'Maple Valley Public Library', a censorship struggle that intrigues but barely has space to get off the ground, and 'Ladies' Line', a self-contained vignette about the joys of shallow friendship. Everything's fine, as far as it goes, and it does leave the reader wanting to see more, but two continuing sagas on a twice-yearly schedule is going to be frustrating for readers.~HS

RALPH SNART ADVENTURES

Now: *3 issue miniseries 1986, Series one 9 issues 1986-1987, series two 31 issues, 1 3-D Special 1988-1992, 3 issue miniseries 1992, 3 issue miniseries ('The Lost Issues') 1993, series three 12 issues, 1 Special 1993-1994, one-shot 1994*

Ralph Snart is short, stupid, ugly, socially inept and... no, that's about it. Somehow this slender premise has been stretched into sixty-four issues. Creator Marc Hansen's work certainly looks as if it ought to be funny; his bigfoot cartoony style is very appealing, but sitting stony-faced and bored witless throughout the run is easily achieved. If there is any appeal, and there must be given the number of issues, it's on a Three Stooges level. Imagine sitting through an entire series of the worst sitcom you've ever seen – *Bottle Boys* or *Comfort and Joy*, for example: that numbness, ennui and lack of desire to go on living. That's what reading *Ralph Snart* does. Masochists can search out two collections reprinting 1-7 of the second series.~HS

RAMBA

Eros: *14 issues 1992-1994**

These sexually explicit adventures of a female assassin offer far more than the usual Eros fare. Although the nature of the product demands several pages of detailed sex each issue, there are action-oriented plots, and Ramba herself has a nice sense of eye for an eye justice. Most issues are exceptionally well drawn by the presumably pseudonymous Marco Delizia, and even those he doesn't illustrate maintain a reasonable standard. If you like sexually oriented comics, they don't come better drawn than *Ramba*. Tying in with the questionable association of sex and violence, 14 features possibly the most bizarre and offensive execution seen in comics.~FP

Recommended: 9, 13, 14

RAMBLIN' DAWG

Edge: *One-shot 1994*

Sherm, a gag artist for porn mags such as *Hustler*, tells a mildly involving story of thwarted inter-species romance between a jaildog and a pussycat with disapproving parents. The art is a sharpish pastiche of Harvey Kurtzman.~GK

Mike Deodato's RAMTHAR

Caliber: *One-shot 1996*

Two short strips, originally published in the mid-1980s in Brazil and drawn by Mike Deodato Jr, with his Steranko influences showing. The first is written by Mike Deodato Sr and concerns a sword-wielding wanderer, Ramthar, in a post-apocalyptic landscape. The second 'Platoon', written by Julio E. Braz, features a killer retrained to be a super-soldier and shipped to Vietnam. Intended as a reference point before Caliber published Ramthar as one of a number of characters by Deodato, this could hardly have been seen as encouraging.~NF

RANA 7

NGNG Studios: *2 issue microseries ('Warriors of Vengeance') 1995-1996*

Utterly bizarre tale of an age-old rivalry for which Dyradom the Terrible created the Rana warriors to exterminate the Aura Masters and their descendants. Only seven (Zeus, Ares, Apollo, Artemis, Poseidon, Athena, Hermes) survived. In a confusing timeframe, they appear to have been dead before they lived, until found by Dimitriades, new born and free from Dyradom's control. Told as if it were an epic, but almost completely personality free and impersonal, while drawn in a sub-standard superhero style.~NF

RANDOM THOUGHTS

Caliber: *One-shot 1992*

Having come up with a potentially absorbing idea, for reasons best known to himself writer Steve Csutoras then wraps layers of obfuscation around it ensuring all but those i solitary confinement will never bother finishing the comic. The good idea is a society in which everyone is immortal, yet suicide is outlawed and near impossible. The only way around it is an annual lottery for death shortly to be discontinued. Sound good, eh? What a wasted opportunity.~WJ

RANGER BOB

Laszlo Press: *One-shot 1997*

A stripping away of the façade of glamour to glimpse into the sad and lonely life of kids TV presenter Ranger Bob. As success grows around him, all Bob wants is a relationship with the librarian he occasionally meets. This is a curiously stilted piece of whimsy from Tom Galambos, with a detached view of Ranger Bob. The idea is there, and it's not badly executed, but fails to gel as either black humour or slice of life.~FP

RANKLECHICK AND HIS THREE-LEGGED CAT

Amaze Ink: *2 issues 2000-2001*

Ranklechick is a svelte and stylish ghoul who lives on a space station in the future. The space station is alive, but Earth more or less isn't. It's a devastated ball of mud coated in a layer of nanites forming a slimy grey porridge. One night Ranklechick succumbs to his life long ambition and flies to Earth with his three legged cat, Pumpernick, to manifest the ghost of Charles Dickens and thereby obtain his autograph. Naturally things don't go quite according to plan... Studio Tavicat produces an above average venture into humour fiction that comes across as Oscar Wilde meets Chuck Jones meets *Astro Boy*. Worth a look.~WW

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* Available in a collected edition

RANMA½

Viz: *7 issue limited series (Part one) 1992-1993*, 11 issue limited series (Part two) 1993-1994*, 13 issue limited series (Part three) 1994-1995*, 11 issue limited series (Part four) 1995*, 10 issue limited series (Part five) 1996*, 13 issue limited series (Part six) 1997-1998*, 11 issue limited series (Part seven) 1998-1999*, 13 issue limited series (Part eight) 1999-2000*, 11 issue limited series (Part nine) 2000-2001*, 11 issue limited series (Part ten) 2001-2002, 11 issue limited series (Part eleven) 2002-2003*, 1 issue + 2003 to date*

Ranma½ is your basic martial arts transsexual romantic comedy. What? You want more? Oh, okay... Teenage studmuffin Ranma Saotome is a martial arts expert from China, affianced at birth, by agreement between the fathers, to one of the three Tendo daughters, heiresses to a martial arts dojo in Japan. When Ranma shows up to meet his putative brides, the girls get a shock. 'He' appears to be a girl. Furthermore, his father appears to be a panda. This is due to an accident at a group of legendary cursed springs. Ranma, and Saotome senior, can revert back to their normal forms, but, needless to say, circumstances always conspire to make Ranma 'girl up' at the least appropriate moment. This causes endless embarrassment not only for Ranma him/her self, but also for Akane, the tomboyish Tendo daughter who eventually, against the better judgement of both of them, becomes the reluctant object of his affections.

Before long the strip is awash with similarly afflicted characters, transforming willy nilly, as well as sundry non-transforming, but equally bizarre, friends, foes, relatives, rivals for Ranma's affections and so on. This is first-rate slapstick, elegantly executed by writer/artist Rumiko Takahashi, which never loses sight of the core of attraction and exasperation between Ranma and Akane Tendo that makes them, in the middle of all this chaos, solid and appealing characters. It does become repetitive, particularly when read in the graphic novels, of which there are twenty-one volumes to date, but it remains consistently entertaining. Yes, the same jokes are used again and again, but, bafflingly, they remain funny.~HS

Jurassic Park: RAPTOR

Topps: *4 issue miniseries 1993, 4 issue miniseries ('Raptors Attack') 1994, 4 issue miniseries ('Raptor's Hijack') 1994*

Steve Englehart continues the story where the film left off in the *Jurassic Park* miniseries, with Doctors Grant and Sattler trying to round up the missing raptors. In keeping with the 'horror' elements of the film, the good doctors end up stuck on a cargo plane with the beasties, having been captured themselves by a mercenary hired to smuggle out the dinosaurs. Michael Golden's covers promise more than the Armando Gil and Dell Barras artwork delivers. In 'Raptors Attack' Englehart continues the story, naming the three remaining Raptors (Alf, Betty and Celia) and having them chased through the jungle by. Englehart's anthropomorphism is irritating, while Chas Truog's artwork (from 2 onwards) is unimaginative. The third series is again written by Englehart, who introduces a talking raptor, stretching credibility even further. Neil Vokes provides more interesting visuals, but the whole thing is sketchy and unfocused.~NF

RAPTORS

NBM: *3 volumes + 1999 to date*

Vicky Lenore and Benito Spiaggi are assigned to investigate a series of bodies, completely drained of blood with a pin driven into a cyst behind the right ear. Two mysterious figures, brother and sister, are responsible for the deaths, but it's Vicky's investigation into the links between the victims that almost leads to her own death. Volume two introduces Aznar Akeba, summoned by the Council of Vampires to deal with the threat. Vicky, meanwhile, meets and is seduced by the Raptors, Drago and Camilla. They are the children of Don Molina, who opposed the Council when it chose to seek power rather than just nourishment from humans. In volume three, a man dressed as a priest helps Benito find the missing Vicky, who's drawn closer to Drago and Camilla, and Aznar also learns more about his true relationship to them. This is an occasionally lyrical, violent, erotic, richly illustrated series from writer, Jean Dufaux, and artist, Enrico Marini, offering a compelling narrative and complex characterisation. A new volume is expected from the original French publishers in 2003, but it's too early to predict a release date from NBM.~NF

Recommended: volumes 1-3

RARE CREATURE

Slave Labor: *4 issue miniseries 2000**

A story of a bleak and surreal quest for love as frail little Amelia Mire undertakes a physical, emotional and spiritual journey with a most unwholesome boy next door, in an allegory that borders on the bizarre. Chockful of peculiarity, this goes places that *Little Red Riding Hood* should have but didn't. Obscure, but readable, with persistance.~WW

Roarin' Rick's RAREBIT FIENDS

King Hell: *21 issues 1994-1997*

The comic is like a group workshop on dreams: Rick Veitch starts by recounting one of his, then in the letters page people write in with one or two of their own, and finally there are stories about dreams from other creators (e.g. Al Davison in 11, Lee Kennedy in 19). It's interesting, and done with a spirit of lively curiosity untainted by analysis or navel-gazing. Have a look at any that come your way, but you probably won't feel the need to hunt them all down. 1-14 are collected.~FC

RASCALS IN PARADISE

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1994**

On the frontier of the universe a duplicate Earth, circa 1932, has been created as a giant resort by the civilised planets of the 24th century. Unfortunately, due to a computer error the world has been covered with tropical jungles, sparsely populated by ancient civilisations. In the tradition of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Jim Silkie crafts a tale of lost treasure, tribes of apes and damsels in distress. Magazine-sized, it's a beautiful production with engaging characters – including one based on the director, Sam Peckinpah.~NF

Justin Hampton's RAT

Aeon/Back Bone Press: *1 issue 1997*

Now better known as an illustrator, Hampton employs two distinct and accomplished styles on this story of a man annoyed to breaking point by society around him. After getting drunk and reading the comic strip in his favourite biker magazine he decides to act on his anger. Planned to run for three issues, only the one appeared, but it's worth a look anyway.~WJ

RAT BASTARD

Crucial Comics: *6 issues 1997-1999*

A detailed and well conceived future where the human gene pool has been diluted, permitting the existence of Experimental Life Forms, hence the Rat Bastard of the title. He's a surly investigator living on his wits in an almost universally corrupt society. The comic is credited to the Huja Brothers, a picture of whom appears on the website, but presumably one of them is Cliff Galbraith to whom everything is copyrighted. Whoever they are, they've constructed fast moving, funny and imaginative stories, drawn in a style more commonly associated with European artists. 1-4 were promoted as a miniseries 'Fix for a King' as Rat Bastard investigates the deaths of several taxi drivers encountering many unsavoury types in discovering why. They include the annually appointed king, who adopts a variation of Elvis' persona, Elvis being largely worshipped as the one true God. The follow-up deals with the one day a year when vengeance without legal consequence is permitted in the city, and the Rat has plenty of enemies.~FP

Recommended: 1-6

RATMAN 2000

Slave Labor: *One-shot 1999*

Sunny Becker is a born loser on a one-way trip to nowhere until his life is changed forever when he adopts the identity of the reluctant Ratman in the world of professional wrestling. It's hard to believe, after reading this somewhat bizarre and crudely-drawn 'humour' title, that anyone at Slave Labor thought this idea was worth sixty-four pages. Even more amazing than the price of $7.95, this is the work of DC senior editor Mike Carlin, who should know good comics from bad.~DB

RATS!

Slave Labor: *One-shot 1992*

Fred, a rat, is fed up with the bad reputation of his species and, when he meets a rat who says that she's a dog, thinks he may have met a like-minded companion. However, he soon finds himself caught in the middle of a conflict between Chowder (a rat), George (a cat), and the evil Baron Molehang, the worst rat of all time. Scott Saavedra tells an amusing, witty story in his usual clean-lined style.~NF

RAVAGE 2099

Marvel: *33 issues 1992-1995*

Paul-Phillip Ravage is head of the eco police, which everyone seems to know is utterly corrupt. The exception is Ravage himself who, despite having been the force's top agent, has no idea. When he does start to question things, his boss immediately frames him, but he escapes to fight back as an eco-warrior, using rubbish as his weapons. The most amusing example of this is his adoption of a hub cap as a shield. This first incarnation of Ravage is written by Stan Lee, and is truly awful. The character is a composite of things Lee felt were 'hip' at the time: ecology and a gritty attitude, but the whole thing feels like your granddad trying to rap. When he leaves with 8, you think things must surely get better, with Pat Mills and Tony Skinner taking over the writing. But no, it's still just as bad, only in a different way. Now no longer an outlaw, Ravage becomes a were-beast/businessman. As it turns out, his dad owns a multi-national, something they neglected to mention in earlier issues. By 22, the writers decide that they too are bored with the corporate shenanigans, and Ravage mutates yet further, going on a road trip which culminates in a showdown with arch-nemesis Dethstryk (a Doc Doom knock-off we first meet in 3). Things are quickly wrapped up, and by 33, it's thankfully all over. The only highlight is Joe Bennett's pencils, which start in 22, but this comic is very much a dog.~DB

RAVE

TokyoPop: *2 volumes + 2002 to date*

Silly Garage music based manga from Hiro Mashima starring the young and hapless Haru who has to thwart the evil plans of the devilish Demon Card and Dark Bring. This can be achieved by gathering together the missing mystic Rave Stones. Haru is aided by the faithful Plue and the stacked Ellie. Its just what you expect, so act accordingly.~WW

RAVEN CHRONICLES

Caliber: *16 issues 1995-1997*

Aimed squarely and obviously at the *X-Files* fans, Raven Inc is a group of investigators looking into assorted Fortean topics. Spontaneous human combustion, vampires and pyrotechnics feature in the earlier issues, all of which are marred by clumsily inserted infodumps. 5 gives background information about the team, and ironically the best issue is 4, the most obviously similar to an *X-Files* episode. Only two of the team participate in the investigation of a ghostly hitch-hiker, elegantly drawn by Rick Taylor. Further commendable artwork is to be found from David Hill, David Boller, Galen Showman and Mark Bloodworth in 7, 8, 10 and 16 respectively, but the writing doesn't reach a similar standard. 1-3, 5 and 6 are collected in Myths and Methods, 15 doubles as *High Caliber* 4, and the team also feature in the superior *Red Diaries*.~FP

Recommended: 4

RAVENS AND RAINBOWS

Pacific: *One-shot 1983*

Showcase for the early work of Jeff Jones, containing a collection of short strips and some portfolio pages. A number of different styles are on show, but his predilection for single-page strips is already in evidence; his fantasy is more successful than his science fiction. The most fully realised piece is the washed-out, sombre 'Spirit of 76'.~NF

RAVER

Malibu: *3 issue miniseries 1993*

It's difficult to conceive that Malibu were so desperate for the minor celebrity cachet a comic written by *Star Trek* and *Babylon 5*'s Walter Koenig might bring that they unleashed this pitiful hotchpotch of seemingly stream-of-consciousness trash.~FP

RAW

Raw: *8 issues 1980-1986*

Penguin: *3 books 1989-1991*

Emerging from the ashes of *Arcade, Raw*, under editor Art Spiegelman, was a ground-breaking anthology magazine that brought to prominence a whole generation of cutting-edge cartoonists. Its lavish tabloid size and high production values engendered experimentation rather than narrative, and the first issue suffered from a certain preciousness that occasionally resurfaced throughout the run. By 3, however, Spiegelman had assembled a roster of exceptional talents that brought an intelligence and breadth of vision rarely previously seen in the field. The most prolific contributors included the neo-primitive Gary Panter (3-6, 8), savagely pointilliste Drew Friedman (1, 2, 6), the wistful chronicler of urban decay Ben Katchor (2, 3, 6) and the 1950s-influenced Charles Burns (3-8). Spiegelman, with co-editor Françoise Mouly, was also concerned to bring European artists to a larger English-speaking audience, most notably Jacques Tardi (1, 5), Joost Swarte (1-3, 5-7) and Muñoz and Sampayo (3, 6).

Almost inevitably in a magazine of predominantly short stories, the few lengthier pieces stand out, and it was Muñoz and Sampayo's epic 'Mister Wilcox, Mister Conrad' in 3 that was one of the comic's highpoints. Other notable extended works included Pascal Doury's frenzied and frankly indescribable 'Theodore Death Head' in 5, and Robert Crumb's biographical 'Jelly Roll Morton's Voodoo Curse' in 7. Above all else, though, *Raw* was home to Spiegelman's masterpiece, the harrowing Holocaust-based 'Maus'*, which ran in instalments from 2. The first chapters were collected by Pantheon/Penguin in 1987, causing an immediate sensation and eventually winning the Pulitzer Prize. Buoyed by its success, Penguin initiated the Raw Books line, the flagship title of which was a revived and expanded *Raw*. Under Penguin *Raw* was paperback-sized and 200 pages long, causing an immediate re-positioning towards extended narratives, which made the title more substantial than ever. All the previous incarnation's principal cartoonists returned, and were joined by new contributors Loustal (1), Baru (1) and Chris Ware (2, 3). Rounding out the package were judicious reprints (with Basil Wolverton in 1 and a lengthy Krazy Kat section in 3) and showcases for the bizarre, notably the obsessive and troubling art of Henry Darger. The comic is absolutely essential, and repays repeated viewings.~DAR

Recommended: Raw 3-8, Penguin 1-3

RAWHIDE KID

Marvel: *151 issues, 1 Annual 1955-1957 (1-16), 1960-1979 (17-151), 4 issue miniseries 1985*

Max: *1 issue + 2003 to date*

Oddly for a comic that spanned three decades, the first run of *Rawhide Kid* was a decided flop. And no wonder, with template stories and dull art. The revival in 1960 was a different story, as the combination of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby honed the style later so successfully applied to the early Marvel superheroes. By and large Rawhide Kid was indistinguishable from other Marvel sure-shots roaming the Wild West, but some sprightly dialogue and the occasional inventive plot from Lee and Kirby between 17 and 32 provided the best of the run. Thereafter it's mediocrity all the way, and don't be suckered in by inferior art from the likes of Jack Davis and Al Williamson. From 115 the first series is all reprint, and few are likely to have noticed. The 1985 miniseries jumps forward a few decades, when the appellation 'Kid' is more than a tad in error. It's plotting by numbers as our man acquires a sidekick towards the end of his life.

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* Available in a collected edition

The Max miniseries offers a strictly contemporary interpretation of the Rawhide Kid's continual awkwardness around women. It's not an invalid speculation, and there's a charm to John Severin's illustrations, but a calculated sniggering to Ron Zimmerman's script so far belies all plausible explanation of this being anything other than sensationalism. A prominent parental advisory banner at double the usual size adds to the feeling of exploitation.~WJ

THE RAY

DC: *6 issue miniseries 1992*, 29 issues (0-28), 1 Annual 1994-1996*

On the death of his father, teenage Ray Terrill discovers that he's been lied to all his life. Having been literally 'kept in the dark', told that exposure to bright light will kill him, he finds that the reverse is true, and that light empowers him, as he is the son of the light-wielding hero of the 1940s, the Ray. Visited by an apparition of his natural father, now an intangible being, young Ray has to cope with being patronised by a 'ghost', contend with a mysterious conspiracy, and learn the basics of super-heroics, all while trying not to burn his pants off with his new-found powers! Scripted with unexpected dexterity by Jack C. Harris and stylishly illustrated by then relative newcomer Joe Quesada, the miniseries was a sleeper hit, resulting in an ongoing berth shortly thereafter. The continuing title, with the new creative team of Christopher Priest and Howard Porter, began with an unpromisingly pedestrian two-parter, in which our hero teaming up with Superboy left no superhero cliché unturned. However, Priest rapidly developed several of his characteristic quirks on this series, including unusual narrative viewpoints, (many early issues are epistolary, Ray telling the events to the Black Canary) time-travel machinations, and so on. In fact, it could be said that he over-relies on them, as frequently clarity is sacrificed for the sake of showing-off. Nevertheless, there are moments of freshness and invention, an early example being 9-10, when young Ray inadvertently contributes to his own father's origin. But Priest, at least, is seen to be making an effort; the bafflingly-popular Porter remains as stunningly generic as ever.

Events take a dramatic upturn around the late teens. Jason Armstrong becomes regular penciller, and pays some attention to the storyline, providing attractive and dynamic work, while the increasingly confident Priest relies less on legerdemain and more on character-driven narrative. The story remains elaborate and multi-levelled, but the complexity is justified and rewarding, as Ray's relationships become more and more convoluted. Towards the end of the series, Ray has discovered several unsuspected branches on his family tree, has acquired troublesome knowledge about his father's past and his own future, and has deliberately entered the employment of one of DC's deadliest villains. Just as you're getting keenly interested in how all this mess is going to be disentangled – it isn't! Instead, the series is cancelled, and the character unjustly condemned first to cannon-fodder status in *Extreme Justice*, and then, in a really creepy move, the role of 'twenty-something who likes to hang around with underage teens' in *Young Justice*. The series is too narratively choppy for an unconditional recommendation, and Priest is a writer whose eccentricities have only become more honed with time, but it's brighter-than-average superheroics.~HS

RAY BRADBURY COMICS

Topps Comics: *5 issues 1993*

As the title suggests these are adaptations of Ray Bradbury's short stories, including in 1 and 2 reprints of EC stories by Al Williamson and Jack Davis ('A Sound of Thunder' and 'The Black Ferris' respectively). The first and third issues have dinosaurs as a theme. Highlights here include another version of 'A Sound of Thunder' by Richard Corben in 1 and an adaptation of the classic 'The Fog Horn' by Wayne Barlowe in 3. The second issue concentrates on horror and provides the highlight of the series, Harvey Kurtzman and Matt Wagner collaborating on 'It Burns Me Up'. 4 includes excellent work by Mike Mignola and Ron Wilber but 5 is a letdown, despite a frontispiece by Moebius and Ross MacDonald's imaginative attempt at adapting 'The Trapdoor'. There's also a one-shot titled *The Illustrated Man*.~NF

Recommended: 2

RAY-MONDE

Deep Sea Comics: *One-shot 1998*

Office worker Ray doubles as a superhero, although not a particularly proficient one. He has to explain his absences from the office, and after a misunderstanding finds himself hiding from the police. It's fun to see David Boswell's take on a superhero (of sorts), and he provides a few wry moments and a few good laughs along the way.~FP

RAYNE

Sheet Happies Press: *4 issues 1995-1997*

Anthropomorphic sword and sorcery with added technology is the background to this story of Rayne, searching for answers about her past, accompanied by Dohr, as they encounter a renegade wormlord after Dohr has been wounded by a rat creature. This is well-realised by creator Gary McCluskey, in a pleasing style that contains elements of both Mike Kaluta and Berni Wrightson.~NF

Everette Hartsoe's RAZOR

London Night: *Series one 52 issues (0-51), 2 Annuals 1992-1999, 3 issue miniseries ('The Suffering'), 1993-1994, 5 issue miniseries ('Burn'), 1994-1995, one-shot ('Cry No More'), 1995, 4 issue miniseries ('Torture') 1996, series two 7 issues 1996-1997, 3 issue miniseries ('Darque Razor') 1997-1998, one-shot ('Switchblade Symphony') 1998, 4 issue miniseries ('Gothic')1998, 3 issue miniseries ('Darkest Night') 1998; one-shot ('Embrace') 1999, one-shot ('Pictoral Lady')*

Avatar: *One-shot ('The Ravening') 1999, one-shot ('The Furies') 2000, one-shot ('Bleeding Heart'), 2 issue microseries ('Til I Bleed Daylight') 2000*

Beginning as a black and white violent-babe title, that it was marginally better drawn than many vanity efforts, although still not by any means well, and was regularly published ensured this title a following. Razor, named after the distinctive blades she wears on her arms, is Queen City's defender of the weak, preying on criminals in a particularly unpleasant fashion. Any inventiveness is in the way she tortures, maims or kills them. The first miniseries expands the horizons a little by restoring Razor from the dead and introducing ongoing supernatural elements. From 12 the main series was titled *Razor Uncut*. It ran concurrently with the many miniseries, and, confusingly, with the second ongoing series, which was a slightly tamer (although no better) series intended for more general consumption. Over the main series, various other scantily clad violent women were introduced and later published in their own titles, most notably Stryke, Tommi Gunn and Poison. Incredibly, if anything, the Avatar issues are even poorer than the original series. Including assorted team-ups (and not counting the myriad variants) there's a total of over a hundred *Razor* comics, and despite the intention, not one of them is worth a wank. Literally.~WJ

RAZOR/DARK ANGEL: THE FINAL NAIL

Boneyard: *One-shot 1994*

In the editorial, writer Hart Fisher mentions this was plotted in half an hour at a Wendy's restaurant. One can easily believe that was the most time and care given to any aspect of this. Two mercenaries with a past meet up, and, since one of them's a scantily-clad bimbo, one imagines there's supposed to be sexual tension between them, but the cripplingly inept art means this isn't even any good as a Bad Girl comic.~HS

RAZORGUTS

Monster: *4 issue miniseries 1992*

Set in a future where a Fourth Reich calling itself the Hierarchy has taken control of humanity while it waits out the effects of a plague in sealed five thousand storey buildings. The action follows a group of rebels as they fight their way up the tower to kill the cyborg Kommandant who has had his stomach replaced with rotating metal blades. Seemingly simplistic in approach, the story by Barreiro is full of twists and moments of real power, and the art by Solano Lopez is a joy to behold.~WW

Recommended: 1-4

RAZORJACK

Jack Publishing: *1 issue 1999*
Com.X: *2 issue microseries 2001*

Disappointing tale of hard-boiled cops drawn into a supernatural holocaust as an extra-dimensional demon queen called Razorjack tries to break into our reality. It's replete with blood and guns and bad language but despite being beautiful to look at, John Higgins' script simply fails to grip the attention. The Jack Publishing issue starts the story (reprinted in the first Com X issue), and also reprints the first two issues of Higgins' work on *World Without End*.~WW

RE-ANIMATOR

Adventure: *3 issue miniseries 1991-1992, one-shot ('Tales of Herbert West') 1991, 4 issue miniseries ('Dawn of the Re-Animator') 1992*

The first, colour, miniseries is a competent but pointless adaptation of Stuart Gordon's fantastic 1985 gutbucket B-Movie. Writer Steven Phillip Jones fails to capture the film's sleazy black humour, and artist Christopher Jones owes too large a stylistic debt to the mainstream work of David Mazzucchelli. Mind you, both creators look like Renaissance men compared to the jokers behind the meritless black and white prequel 'Dawn of the Re-Animator', one stiff that definitely doesn't deserve resurrection. The one-shot is a collection of musty Lovecraft stories accompanied by wretched full-page illustrations.~AL

REACTO MAN

B-Movie: *3 issues 1987*

A big fan of obscure 1940s superheroes, Ken Holewczynski created a new one, Reacto Man, who shoots gamma rays from his eyes. Back-up 'Man in the Moon', is written by Brian Augustyn in similar fashion, with nutty scientists and bizarre deformed crooks common to both. The 1940s feel is accurate, and these simple stories will probably be a guilty pleasure for some.~WJ

REACTOR GIRL

Tragedy Strikes Press: *6 issues 1991-1992*

Committed to exploring comics in a variety of forms (photo strips, mixed media, puzzles), around the central theme of urban life, this Canadian anthology continues from a run of minicomics published by editor Michel Vrána. It's key creators are Jason (Jay) Stephens (1-5) and Carol Swain (1-4), the former with schoolboy Sparkie McGee's ABCs of things not to eat or that make you bleed, the latter with noir tales in her distinctive style. In 3, the mother and son team of Sylvia Markle-Craine and Nick Craine offer a melancholy view of old age while Cinders McLeod asks why there are no women cartoonists in a simple, yet endearingly cartoony style. Better known for work elsewhere, Dylan Horrocks turns up in 4 and 6, Adrian Tomine in 5-6. The more avant-garde approaches are the least satisfying, but the quirkiness of a McLeod and the clear line of Laurent Cilluffo (6) offer a way past the more wilfully difficult selections.~NF

READ THIS BOOK AND DIE (LAUGHING)

Art & Soul: *One-shot 1995*

A sampler for Marc Hempel's *Tug and Buster* and for Mark Wheatley's *Radical Dreamer*. In *T&B*, Big Tug is the silent manly type, and little Buster idolises him and lives for their joint babe-quests. Nice comments on 'male bondage' (as Buster calls it). *Radical Dreamer* is probably about some conspiracy to exploit dreams, but it's unreadable, so who can be sure?~FC

REAGAN'S RAIDERS

Solson: *3 issues 1986*

Having President Ronnie and his cabinet dress up in superhero suits to personally kick ass where it's needed might have been as funny as it was obviously intended to be. The excessive patriotic dogma undermines any humour, though. That the assorted artists make little effort weakens the idea further, with Dick Ayers and Rich Buckler in 1 wearing out their lightboxes tracing Ronnie's face from photos leaving them no time to draw anything else competently. Funny in the manner of people who consider repeating "U.S.A." over and over is participation in political discussion.~FP

THE REAL GHOSTBUSTERS

Now: *3 issue miniseries 1989, series one 28 issues 1988-1990, series two 8 issues, two Specials 1990-1991*

The main series is an adaptation of the TV cartoon, written by James van Hise with art mostly by John Tobias and Brian Thomas. At the start the pacing was poor and the dialogue very disjointed, but things soon improved and from 3 most stories are quite readable if not remarkable, with 4 having some art Evan Dorkin would surely sooner forget. 6 stands out with some amusing spoofs when TV programmes are invaded by ghosts, though the fun's over about halfway through. Also of interest is 21, a special containing three stories by different writers and artists, including Phil Elliott. The variety is refreshing, and the stories seem much stronger when corseted into eight pages. The miniseries is an adaptation of *Ghostbusters II* by van Hise, Tobias and inker Rich Rankin. It's quite lively and amusing, with a much tighter story than most in the main series. Save it for a rainy day, though. The art on the second series is better, and there's the extra care taken in presenting puzzles and activities for the core pre-teen readers, but that being the case perhaps they shouldn't have stretched the first story over four issues.~FC

Recommended: 6, 21

REAL GIRL

Fantagraphics: *9 issues 1990-1995*

Advertising itself as "The Sex Comik for all genders and orientations... by cartoonists who are good in bed", this anthology has strips from a lot of interesting creators. There's Waller and Worley, Eddie Campbell, Diane Noomin, Mario Hernandez, Joan Hilty, and Roberta Gregory, but editor Angela Bocage doesn't seem to bring out the best in any of them, as the contributions tend to be perfunctory, rambling, or simply feeble. In the entire run to date, the two most interesting features have been the back cover to 3, by the late Cara Sherman-Tereno, depicting a scary-but-sweet post-coital moment, and the selection of *Dykes To Watch Out For* strips by Alison Bechdel reprinted in that same issue. The S & M issue, 9, tends, amusingly, to sell quickly whenever it surfaces due to the cover subject, despite not really being very well done.~HS

REAL LIFE

Fantagraphics: *1 issue 1990*

The work of Mark Zingarelli was a pleasing sight in late-1980s anthology titles, and this one-shot collects several strips, most dwelling on the morbid side of life. Good as his strips about killers are (with an excellent, and possibly apocryphal, tale about the King of Ethiopia and the electric chair), the highlight is the remorseful tale of Augie's Miracle Meats. It combines happy childhood memories with sad decline, and is told in memorable fashion. The writing and art are engaging throughout, and those looking for more intelligent comics could do far worse than sample *Real Life*.~WJ

REAL STUFF

Fantagraphics: *20 issues 1990-1994*
Starhead: *1 issue (Real Schmuck) 1993*
Eros: *6 issues (Real Smut) 1992-1993*

Dennis Eichhorn's work stands out from the introspective autobiographical crowd because he experienced more of life: the majority of his stories are anecdotal with no particular message, and he's far more in-your-face than many of his proselytising colleagues. At times he's an asshole, in fact. Notwithstanding, a veritable who's who of early 1990s 'alternative' artists contribute to *Real Stuff*, and interestingly enough, considering there's a minimum of five stories each issue, the material becomes stronger towards the end of the run, exemplified by the reminiscences about nutty 'musician' Wild Man Fischer. Expressively drawn by J.R. Williams, they're in 14 and 16-20. At his best Eichhorn's anecdotes are good comic material, at his worst vainglorious boasting, but there's something worthwhile in every issue. When Fantagraphics began their Eros line, Eichhorn's sexually based stories were cleaved off into six issues of a companion title, *Real Smut*. Isolated from the diversity of his other vignettes, the theme is strained, with 4's disturbing story of childhood vaccination an exception. There's also a single issue of *Real Schmuck*, featuring a tale relating to a story about a McDonalds heiress printed in *Real Stuff* 9, and allegedly turned down as an issue of *Real Stuff*. It's a good selection, worth looking out.~FP
Recommended: 1, 4-8, 12, 16, 18-20, *Real Schmuck* 1

REAL WAR STORIES

Eclipse: *2 issues 1987 & 1991*

The Department of Defense tried to stop the distribution of *Real War Stories* 1, published on behalf of the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors. The second issue highlighted the work of Citizen Soldier, an organisation dedicated to protecting the civil and human rights of its GI/veteran members. Neither volume is successful as a comic. Both have good writers and artists (Joyce Brabner, Brian Bolland, Steve Leialoha, Bill Sienkiewicz, Paul Mavrides) but only rarely do they attempt anything interesting as far as the form goes. In 1 Alan Moore effectively contrasts an ex-soldier's past and present life, while 2's highlight is Greg Baisden and Stephen DeStefano using *Alice in Wonderland* to satirise arguments about the use of military force. This is not to say that the title fails in its objective of expressing the tragedy of war, it's simply that the impulse to teach us this often outweighs artistic considerations.~NF

REALITY CHECK!

Tavicat: *2 issues 1995*
Sirius: *12 issues 1996-1998*

Sometimes charming set of stories about Collin, his mates, and Catreece, who's smarter than the average cat. Smart enough, in fact, to activate and plug into Collin's virtual reality scenarios via a game helmet. In the VR world she adopts the guise of a sexy catwoman, and complicates his life when he goes online with his friends. This could have been *I Dream of Jeannie* for the computer age, but settles instead for gang of pals plots, with Collin's dysfunctional family played down and incorporating more and more manga touches as it progresses. Creators Rosearik Rikki-Simons and Tavisha Wolfgarth-Simons are responsible for a well produced all-ages comic that sometimes sets the whimsy button too high, but should have a wide appeal. The first two Sirius issues reprint the Tavicat publications in colour, and 1-6 are available as a collection.~WJ

THE REALM

Arrow: *12 issues 1986-1988*
Weegee: *1 issue (13) 1989*
Caliber: *8 issues (14-21) 1989-1992, Series two 13 issues 1993-1995*

Four earth teenagers are transported to The Realm, populated by magic, demons, elves, dwarfs and orcs. There they discover they also have dormant mystical talents, which one parlays into a position of great power. Guy Davis draws the first twelve issues (not very well) of this complex saga featuring so many characters and locations it becomes difficult to keep track of them. It's likely only fantasy fans will enjoy the initial material, but anyone starting the second series from 5 can pick up what's going on without having to concern themselves about the meandering earlier stories (although there is *The Realm Handbook* for the curious). By that time new writer Brent Truax has whittled down the cast and set up intriguing political scenarios. 9 is a flip-book sharing space with *Deadworld* 12; it's in issue 4 of the first series that Deadworld premiered. 10 does the same with *Zone Continuum* 2. 1-15 were collected by Caliber.~FP

REALM OF THE DEAD

Caliber: *3 issue miniseries 1993**

The *Deadworld* characters invade The Realm. Only of interest to diehard fans of either series. Issue 1 comes with two alternative covers, each featuring characters from one series.~FP

REBEL SWORD

Dark Horse: *6 issue miniseries 1994-1995*

A loose drawing style, reminiscent of Gene Colan's later pencil-only artwork, enhances the odd story of a young Japanese teenager getting involved with Kurdish rebels in Turkey. Yoshikazu Yasuhiko's artwork is well worth a look but his script is rather overwrought and meandering. A curiosity.~NF

R.E.B.E.L.S.

DC: *17 issues 1994-1996*

Virtually impenetrable sequel to *L.E.G.I.O.N.*, featuring lots of pointless fight scenes, often involving the equally pointless Lobo. It's about a group of rebel superheroes taking on the sinister interplanetary security agency L.E.G.I.O.N. Seventeen issues of bickering nonentities and ugly artwork by artists named Arnie Jorgensen and Derec Aucoin – truly for hard-core *Legion of Super-Heroes* fans only.~AL

RED DIARIES

Caliber: *4 issue miniseries 1997**

Raven Chronicles very closely resembles *X-Files*. So much so that the kind of cases this freelance agency solves tend to be of the aliens/monster/demon variety. *Red Diaries* is a spin-off miniseries using the regular cast to try and solve a real world mystery, namely was Marilyn Monroe Murdered? Writer Gary Reed and pencil artists Laurence Campbell and Chris Jones go one step beyond your average conspiracy theory tale using the McGuffin of Monroe's diaries and as much real fact – whatever that means these days – to produce a superior drama package. It stands up with the best work of historians and moviemakers dealing with the JFK conspiracy theories. The characters wander through the corridors of power and the seedy backstreets of the mob trying to solve a thirty-year-old murder and survive. A skilful intermingling of comics narrative and text features, plus the understated and compelling black and white art and file photographs, results in a particularly satisfying exploration, if not explanation, of a mystery with no solution.~WW
Recommended: 1-4

Rudyard Kipling's RED DOG

Eclipse: *One-shot 1988*

Mowgli and the *Jungle Book* animals prepare for the arrival of a fearsome pack of Indian wild dogs. In attempting to remain faithful to the source material P. Craig Russell has produced a densely verbose comic. His art is beautiful, though, unmarred by the vivid colouring that often characterises Russell's work.~WJ

RED HEAT

Blackthorne: *One-shot 1988*

Enjoyable enough adaptation of the Walter Hill film. Axel Laxamana produces reasonable likenesses of Arnold

Schwarzenegger as a Russian police officer trying to extradite a member of the Russian Mafia, but not so good of James Belushi as the American cop who has to look after him. Also available in a 3-D edition.~NF

RED HERRING

Splash Comics: *1 issue 1997*

When young Sea Intelligence Corps Cadet Herring returns from a mission, he finds High Tide Base deserted, apart from a mutant fish-dog who attacks him. Hearing noises from inside the base, he finds Professor Lymph's surly-but-sultry assistant, Nurse Mackerel, in a compromising position; topless, and possessing an unusually hirsute chin and a set of furry boobies! Herring, Nurse Mackerel, and a strangely altered ally must rally round to defeat the tonsorial menace of "The Five O'Clock Shadow", before it's too late for the baldies of the world! What writer/artist William Potter was on when he did this, or where he hoped to take it if it ran more than one issue, is open to speculation, but if you drink enough fizzy supermarket lager it all makes perfect sense, and is fun in a check-your-brain-at-the-door way.~HS

RED MASK of the Rio Grande

AC: *3 issues 1990-1992*

1950s Western reprints from *Tim Holt*, a Magazine Enterprises comic based on the RKO Western star, which from 42 was retitled *Red Mask*, by Gardner Fox and Frank Bolle. 1 is in colour but 2 and 3 revert to black and white, including a peculiar simulated 3-D effect. Fox's clever mysteries and Bolle's rugged artwork make *Red Mask* one of the better Western series of the period.~NF

RED MEAT

Black Spring Books: *1 volume 1996*
St. Martin's Press: *1 volume ('More Red Meat') 1998*

These are collections of Max Cannon's newspaper strip, featuring such characters as Earl, Stiff Stacy (a Dick Tracy parody), Ted, his son and neighbour, Reuben and Milkman Dan. Cannon uses simple heavily outlined cartoons, normally three identical or nearly identical panels to a strip (slight differences are, or are part of, the punchline). The humour is very black and twisted, subverting the expectations of what is 'decent', and, occasionally, very funny indeed.~NF

RED MOON

Millennium: *2 issue microseries 1995*

As a way of padding out a licensed story drawn by then hot Brazilian artist Mike Deodato, it's split into two parts and given a framing sequence. The entirety makes for a bog standard werewolf comic, although John Bolton fans might want 1 for his cover illustration.~WJ

RED RAZORS

Fleetway/Quality: *2 issue microseries 1991*

Extrapolating on the world of *Judge Dredd*, Razors is a Sov Block Judge, transformed from criminal to the judiciary courtesy of some selective neurosurgery. Accompanied by his talking horse, inevitably named Ed, he's something of a maverick, and must retrieve the stolen remains of Elvis Presley and stop a Stalinist coup. All too self-consciously wacky writing from Mark Millar includes too many throwaway elements that just don't gel (simulacrums of the *Scooby Doo* cast for one), but artist Steve Yeowell more than holds his end up.~FP

RED ROCKET 7

Dark Horse: *7 issue miniseries 1997-1998**

Red Rocket 7 is one of six cloned copies of a man who escaped his alien abductors in 1948. Managing to return to Earth with a robot called The Org, his clones spend decades in hiding; all except 7 that is, who has become involved with rock music. All six clones are captured in the mid 1970s and when the survivors, in turn, manage to escape it takes them twenty years to return to Earth. The series protagonist is rock journalist Lynn Hayes who is writing a piece on Red 7 to accompany his 1990s comeback. When 7 disappears Lynn and clones 2 and 5 get caught up in a running fight with the aliens. She finds a box of postcards that chronicle Red 7's career from the 1950s to the 1970s including meetings with everyone from Little Richard, Elvis and John Lennon to Jimi Hendrix, Brian Jones and David Bowie. Red 5 fills in the gaps as his relationship with Lynn deepens.

Creator Mike Allred's blending of alien intervention and the real-life history of rock and roll is a unique and very successful one, with each issue LP size. His artstyle handles B-movie aliens and caricatures with equal gusto. Allred's obvious love of rock and roll makes this a very enjoyable series for pop enthusiasts – and with a story that connects to boot! Beware of the far-from-perfect binding of the collection.~SW

RED SONJA

Marvel: *Series one 15 issues, 1976-1979, 2 issue microseries 1983, series two 13 issues 1983-1986, one-shot ('Scavenger Hunt') 1995*

Sonja is a redheaded swordswoman created by Robert E. Howard, who also created Conan the Barbarian. Howard may or may not have dressed her in a chainmail bikini, but it suggests that European winters were a lot warmer in those days as that's what she wears throughout the Marvel Feature run preceding her first solo series. This can be divided roughly into two parts: 1-11, written by Roy Thomas and Clara Noto, with artwork by Frank Thorne, and 12-15, mostly written by Thomas, with artwork usually by John Buscema. In both parts the stories are sprawling and pointless, though the occasional scene shows genuine imagination, such as the giant imprisoned queen of the bee-creatures (6), the dream-like details of the enchanter's house (10), and Sonja's trip across the 'River of Death' (14). Thorne's artwork is the main reason for reading, and it's not enough reason to persist issue after issue. Don't bother with the 1983 microseries as the only point of interest is that Sonja has abandoned the bikini in favour of a gymslip. Don't bother with the second series either, for that matter. It's tedious, rambling stories by various writers, and a succession of artists who seem to have been given no directions to her appearance other than: "She's got long red hair. And she looks like a porn starlet". By the end you're wondering if Thorne's artwork was just a figment of your imagination. Could there really have been an artist who respected her enough to make her frightening? The 1995 one-shot is no better.~FC

RED SONJA

Cross Plains: *One-shot 1999*

Episode from the early days of Red Sonja as she hunts for the murderers of her parents and gains some useful experience as a thief. Scripted by Roy Thomas and Steve Lightle with artwork by Lightle, this is a high quality production. The story is an at least respectable example of the sword and sorcery genre; the fluid pencils are reminiscent of both Frank Thorne and Barry Windsor-Smith whilst retaining Lightle's own, sharply-defined line.~NF

RED STAR

Image: *10 issues (1-7, 7.5, 8- 9) 2001-2002*

Set in a war-torn dystopia where the United Republics of the Red Star have been locked in a brutal war of attrition with Alistaan for decades. The prologue in 1-4 features Maya Antares who casts spells, or protocols as they say, and is a warcaster in the URRS army. Convinced that her husband Marcus did not die nine years previously, Maya reminisces and we are shown Marcus' part in the battle of Kar Dathra's Gate. A god and a goddess, Troika and Pravda, battle for Marcus' life in 3. 5 is a stand-alone piece, while the second story arc in 6, 7 and 7.5 is set in Bahamut, capital of Alistaan. The Nogorka guerrillas resisting the URRS assault include fifteen year old Makita who has a letter written by Marcus. In 8 she delivers it to Maya. The goddess is duly pleased and in 9 she commissions Maya and her colleagues to go North to soulprison Archangel. Christian Gossett's sooty linework imparts an organic feel – as if the pictures were drawn in smudgy biro on blotting paper. The scripts are credited to Bradley Krayl who maintains the formal Russian feel well. The design values are stunning and the war machines with a future soviet world well-realised. The facial and figurework shows evidence of a John Byrne influence under the incredible colour rendering by Snakebite who is also Gossett's main designer. A graphic tour de force.~SW

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* Available in a collected edition

RED TORNADO

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1985*

An ill-advised series, featuring early Kurt Busiek scripting and lacklustre Carmine Infantino art, in which the android member of the Justice League of America thwarts a takeover of the world by an intelligence that unifies every machine on Earth. The Tornado's always been a stultifyingly boring character, and, sadly, this series does nothing to help.~HS

RED WOLF

Marvel: *9 issues 1972-1973*

Although he's the ancestor of the character in *Avengers* 80-81, to all intents and purposes it's the same guy: a Native American and his faithful wolf. The final three issues return to the modern-day character. Certainly not a bad comic, but certainly not a good one either.~FP

REDBLADE

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1993*

The demon Engetsu crosses over to the material world, and the undead samurai Redblade is sent back to life to thwart him. Fast-paced, action-packed and not without moments of interest, but let down by writer Vince Giarrano's mediocre art. The storytelling is so bad you have to check you're reading the series in the correct order and not missing an issue.~HS

REDEEMERS

Antarctic: *1 issue 1997*

Spun-off from *Warrior Nun Areala*, this is more traditional superhero fantasy, which is not to say it's any good. Of the five lead characters, only three are named (including Shotgun Mary, for those interested) and the story is confusingly about the team being introduced in a dream by a captive magician in order to prepare them for a real battle against the villain, Azarette. For the continuation of the lead story, the reader must seek out *Warrior Nun: Black and White*.~NF

REDFOX

Harrier: *10 issues 1986-1987*
Valkyrie: *10 issues (11-20) 1987-1989*

Redfox began life as a strip in a role-playing magazine and to the end remained a comic in the *Elfquest* mode, squarely aimed at fantasy fans. There are wizards and wicked sorceresses, quests, a cute anthropomorphic companion and a basque-clad heroine with a big sword. However, it was a million miles away from 'babe' titles like *Shi*, and later issues were written with a lightness of touch that sometimes makes up for the pedestrian story-lines and wooden artwork.~FJ

REDMOON

Comics One: *6 volumes + 2001 to date*

The amount of volumes available to the American market suggest a great faith in this on the part of the publishers, and it's difficult to see why. Not that it's bad, mind, but it's hardly outstanding. The surprise comes in the first volume, when it's revealed that this isn't just another high school story, but a science fiction fantasy. You'd hardly know it from the art, though, which tells the story almost entirely through figures with few settings or backgrounds. Volume 1 comes with a free CD enabling you to play a *Redmoon* game online.~WJ

REED RICHARDS

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 2000*

A look at Mr Fantastic in the days before the Fantastic Four. As the life of a dedicated research scientist might not be compelling, he's unimaginatively recast as Indiana Jones by writer Peter David in an early encounter with Victor Von Doom. Even art by Duncan Fegredo can't raise this above ordinary.~FP

REESE'S PIECES

Eclipse: *2 issues 1985*

A collection of short horror stories with art by Ralph Reese, and with various writers. It's standard stuff: carnivorous plants, cannibals in the sewers, yetis and curses – and with consistently weak endings. The artwork's quite versatile, but it doesn't make enough of a difference.~FC

RE-GEX

Awesome/Hyperwerks: *2 issues (0-1) 1998*

Rob Liefeld rehashes his own plundering of other people's work in another truly appalling team comic as yet more semi-clad semi-literate superfolk team up to point, pout and pontificate. Read 'em twice and you still won't know what's going on. Total rubbish.~WW

REGULATORS

Image: *3 issues 1995*

The first series about the day-to-day life of a group of supervillains, spotlighting one team member each issue. Well written and drawn by Kurt Busiek, Ron Randall and Dan Davis, the best issue is 3, looking into Arson's head and extrapolating the difficulties of life while constantly on fire. Advertised as six issues, only three were published.~WJ

REID FLEMING, World's Toughest Milkman

Last Gasp: *One-shot 1980*
Eclipse: *5 issues 1986-1990*
Deep Sea: *9 issues 1996-1998*

Reid Fleming is a great comic creation, bridging the gap between the underground and slacker generations. David Boswell's pugnacious anti-hero, a confrontational, hard-drinking every(milk)man, treats his employers and customers with equal contempt, and has a long history, first appearing as a weekly page in an underground newspaper in 1977. The Last Gasp magazine includes a number of these early adventures, as well as extended stories. The lead, 'A Day Like Any Other', contains all the key elements of a good Reid yarn: he terrorises passers-by who make fun of him, threatens customers – "78 cents or I piss on your flowers" – tangles with his obsessive, square-headed supervisor and goofs off with his narcoleptic best mate, whose manhood he constantly demeans. Boswell manages to keep up a high standard of humour throughout the extended five-issue storyline in the Eclipse issues, simultaneously developing his considerable drawing abilities. Two-fisted humour at its best. Reid also appears in the one-shot Heartbreak Comics, and the Deep Sea series reprints all the previous issues before beginning new material with 7. By this point Boswell's cartooning has loosened up and become more frenetic during the fights and chases. In 8 there's a wonderful sequence where two skater boys shoot past and flick bogeys at him, only to find they're being chased down the street by Reid skating on top of his milk truck. However, despite updating the setting a little, the jokes remain the same – his passion for a TV show in which the main character has been in a coma for years, his unrequited sourness, and the sheer ridiculousness of taking two-fisted milk delivering as a subject for a comic.~FJ

Recommended: One-shot, 1-5, 8

RELATIVE HEROES

DC: *6 issue miniseries 2000*

Five super-powered children make a cross-country trip to Metropolis after the death of their parents. Along the way they have to face a god, the D.E.O. and some aliens. The eldest's plan is to enlist Superman's aid and become a superhero, the youngest wants Superman to bring her parents back to life. As written by Devin Grayson, this is not so much about superheroes as about growing up and dealing with problems outside normal experience, without adult guidance. There's a charm to the series and Grayson's dialogue captures the youth of the characters. Yvel Guichet's manga-influenced artwork is adequate, but not striking.~NF

RELENTLESS PURSUIT

Slave Labor: *4 issue miniseries 1989-1990*

One of many injustices against the 19th century Native American population was the forced removal of the Nez Percé tribe from their Oregon homelands. The resulting conflict spread through four states as the tribe attempted to flee. In telling this tragic story Jeff Kear's enthusiasm and research more than compensate for art that could be improved.~FP

The REMARKABLE WORLDS of Professor Phineas B. Fuddle

Paradox Press: *4 issue miniseries 2000**

A knowing Hollywood style homage to late 19th/early 20th century fantastic fiction by the likes of Verne and Wells. Two scientists, cheekily named after the comic's excellent colourist Angus McKie, leave Edwardian London, swarming with strange creatures, by time machine to search for the missing Professor Fuddle and to untangle the timeline knot which is causing all the havoc. They inadvertently land in technologically enhanced versions of Ancient Egypt and India. Boaz Yakin's English dialogue and habits don't always convince (too much talk of "pints" for men of this class) but Erez Yakin's detailed and imaginative art makes this a substantial good-quality read.~GK

REN & STIMPY

Marvel: *43 issues, 8 Specials 1992-1996*

Developed in association with Nickelodeon, the cable station that produced the madcap serial, the comic version lacks the violent edge that the cartoon has. The relationship between the two characters (a snarling chihuahua and his big, dumb, rather disgusting cat friend) is nowhere near as acidic as in the show and a lot of the jokes are rather hoary. One gets the impression that it's being written for a slightly younger audience. Certainly it's a corporate product, with numerous hands writing, pencilling and inking in each issue, although the success of *The Simpsons* suggests that this doesn't have to be a drawback. The art is heavily stylised, but again not as eccentric as the cartoon, and lacks the energy of the original, possibly because that is so fast-moving any paper representation would be a little 'flat'. Pretty good if you really like *Ren & Stimpy*, but unable to stand up on its own without a knowledge (and enjoyment) of the show. 1-20 are available in book form.~FJ

RENEGADE ROMANCE

Renegade: *2 issues 1987-1988*

Charming covers from Gilbert (1) and Jaime Hernandez introduce a delightful anthology. With the traditional romance comics formula redundant by the 1980s, the contributors were people with individual visions. The art throughout is excellent, but there are far more decent plots to match it in 2. The exceptions in 1 are editor Trina Robbins' adaptation of a novel concerning love during the Russian revolution, continued in 2, and the charming Bob Rozakis and Stephen DeStefano strip in which a woman waiting on a park bench sees her life parade before her. That team also contributes to the second issue, with DeStefano completely changing style for a humorous recitation of marriage vows. Other highlights of the second issue include David Hine's story of an old romance comic passed around current-day Brixton, Deni Loubert and Steve Leialoha's spotlighting a man torn between two loves and the woman he leaves, Colleen Doran's Beardsleyesque stylings, and the tearful 'Dreams' from Jackie Estrada and Barb Rausch.~WJ

Recommended: 2

RENFIELD

Caliber: *3 issues 1994**

Writer Kyle Garrett conceived the novel idea of relating the story of Dracula via his first victim, Renfield. While attempting to be literary, it's all rather ponderous and portentous as a captive Renfield raves in an asylum while the kindly Dr Seward attempts to understand and cure him. The art of Galen Showman impresses, and would improve, but as with many Caliber titles, the series was never completed, although Caliber produced a collection of these issues.~WJ

Jim Chadwick's RENNIN Comics

Reckless Muse: *1 issue 1997*

Tom Rennin, oddly beaked inhabitant of Goose Creek, is chased around town by his wife, who's been turned into a giant after eating some home-grown apples. Accompanied by his neighbour, they seek refuge in the town's secret underground bomb shelter/anti-communist arsenal. This appears to be a parody of 1950s paranoia and small-town values with its somewhat simple-minded characters, but the joke's stretched very thin, though Chadwick's artwork is sharp.~NF

REPLACEMENT GOD

Amaze Ink: *8 issues 1995-1996**

Image: *5 issues 1997*

Engaging and unhurried comedy fantasy featuring Knute, a vagabond street performer with an unsuspected destiny, just trying to get by and get the girl against a backdrop of mayhem, and political intrigue in a world where magic and a clunky kind of technology exist side by side. Engrossing and easy on the eye, the mystery of just who is the eponymous deity takes second place to lots of sight gags and plain old charm from creator Zander Cannon. Great fun for those with a whimsical bent, but short on developments for the impatient.~WW

REPORTER

Aeon: *One-shot 1997*

A pontification on the honesty, necessity and integrity of writing, encompassing a story within the discussion. It's a ponderous comic, given to the introduction of incongruous and superfluous characters, presumably to fill the vast spaces between the two protagonists. Likewise the centrepiece diversion occupies fourteen pages to relate a very slim story. Ironically, given the premise, the saving grace is Dylan Williams' cartooning.~FP

REPTISAURUS

Charlton: *6 issues (3-8), 1 Special 1961-1963*

Continuing from two issues of *Reptilicus*, the first of which adapted a B-movie in which a giant dinosaur is grown from a frozen preserved limb. Most of Charlton's giant monster comics at least had the saving grace of some Steve Ditko art somewhere along the way, but *Reptisaurus* goes for all out mediocrity.~WJ

Artemis REQUIEM

DC: *6 issue miniseries 1996*

Artemis is a more headstrong and callous version of Wonder Woman who appeared in issues leading up to 100 of *Wonder Woman*'s second series. Clawing herself from the grave in 1, she adopts the new identity of Requiem and joins a group called the Hellbinders, who combat assorted mystical creatures. It's uninspired stuff from writer Bill Messner-Loebs, and the distorted figurework of pencil artist Ed Benes moves beyond styling into hilarity. Still, at least *Requiem* provides the answer as to why superheroines wear such preposterous costumes. They obviously can't find real clothes to fit those peculiar bodies.~FP

RESIDENT EVIL

Image/WildStorm: *5 issues 1998-1999**

WildStorm: *4 issue miniseries ('Fire and Ice') 2000-2001*

Based on the video game of the same name, the magazine-sized publication has great packaging, but the story and art are woefully derivative, as the team of hand-picked generic action types execute rescue missions and assaults, pitted against mutant Zombies and traitorous humans. Yawn. 'Fire and Ice' sees the zombie stompers divide into two teams to seek out the origins of the virus that creates monsters, but of course there's trouble in store from within the group. It's slick, glossy, vapid, and awful.~WW

The RESISTANCE

WildStorm: *2 issues + 2002 to date*

In the future birth is proscribed, food is scarce and freedom only exists for the right people. Those outside society are called Strayz and are fair game for anybody with a gun. Brian is a computer genius, raised by his grandfather whose talents have kept them out of the authorities' sight until the old man falls ill and Brian must take him to hospital. Once there Brian is made as a Stray, only to be rescued by Surge, a leader in the armed resistance movement. He is then hopelessly caught up in a deadly struggle that seems destined to lead only to death. This is a flashy, but woefully derivative, tale of young rebels fighting oppressive governments and corporations. Seen it, done it, me mum threw away the t-shirt.~WW

RESTAURANT at the END of the UNIVERSE

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1994-1995*

Continues from *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Adapts the book of the same name (inaccurately) or the last eight radio episodes (extremely inaccurately). Reassuringly, however, where the comic book version is inaccurate, it is at least definitively inaccurate. Sequel: *Life, the Universe and Everything*.~APS

Warlock Silver Surfer RESURRECTION

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

Continuing from the Silver Surfer graphic novel 'The Homecoming', the Surfer is offered the chance to resurrect his recently deceased love Shalla Bal. The price? A favour to be called in at a later date by Warlock. The Infinity Watch, Death and Mephisto all appear in a rather padded script by Jim Starlin, who also pencils. If you're already a fan you'll probably have bought this, otherwise it's not the place to start.~WJ

RESURRECTION MAN

DC: *28 issues (1-27, 1,000,000) 1997-1999*

Mitch Shelley wakes up from being dead with no memory of his past, but with a strange super-power. As the series progresses, Mitch finds out who he was and how he came to be dead and why, now, after a trip to The Lab, he's incapable of staying dead (1-12). Along the way he picks up some friends and some chilling enemies, his wife and best friend included, and every time Mitch is killed he revives with a different super-power. There's a gruesome guest appearance from Hitman in 10, who keeps killing Mitch until he awakes with a useful ability. The uncertainty of this last aspect of the strip is what keeps it fresh. Female assassins, the Body Doubles appear throughout the series, amusingly in 6 and as part of a sequence that leads to some answers about The Lab and its mysterious benefactor (14-20). Offered membership of the JLA in 21, the final storyline brings Mitch into contact with the Forgotten Heroes and Vandal Savage (22-27).

As written by Andy Lanning and Dan Abnett, Mitch is not wholly original (there's a similar character in the *Wild Cards* novels), but the stories are well scripted with a healthy mixture of mystery, superheroics and horror, and better than average storylines. The scratchy, noirish artwork by Butch Guice creates an atmosphere that well suits the writing. There were some guest appearances of note, including the JLA in 2 and 21, Batman in 7, Hitman in 9-10, and Supergirl in 16-17 (crossing into Supergirl 24). *Resurrection Man* 1,000,000 was published in 1998 as part of the *DC One Million* crossover event.~NF

Recommended: 1-12

THE RETALIATOR

Eclipse: *4 issue miniseries 1992*

Morality play about the validity of vigilante justice and the evils of child abuse. Not a bad comic, but the worthiness and research are hammered home and the often amateur artwork is a distraction.~FP

Keith Laumer's RETIEF

Mad Dog: *6 issues 1987-1988*, One-shot ('Retief of the C.D.T.')1988*

Adventure: *6 issue miniseries 1989-1990, 4 issue miniseries ('Retief and the Warlords') 1991, One-shot ('Grime and Punishment') 1991*

Earth diplomat Retief is oddly fair-minded for his chosen calling, and adept at outflanking both his superiors and alien races in interplanetary dealings. A fine satire on administrative prevarication and procrastination, there's little to fault the Mad Dog adaptations of Laumer's short stories. They're working with very witty material, but Jan Strnad's writing is faithful and Dennis Fujitake's Moebius-influenced art is ideally suited to the mix of human and alien in the stories. Well-considered and never dull, it's a testament to Fujitake's style, considering the number of talking-heads shots required each issue. The switch of artists to Steve Vance with the Mad Dog one-shot is jarring. At Advenure Bruce Balfour adapts the material well as the art continues to deteriorate, although the series never becomes unreadable. Their best is the final issue of the first miniseries with an exaggerated swipe at organised religion.~WJ

Recommended: Mad Dog 1-6

Xanth Graphic Novel Vol. I RETURN TO CENTAUR

Father Tree Press: *1 volume 1990*

Casting leaves no fantasy cliché unrepresented populating a world "where everyone and everything has some magical power". In practice this consists largely of literalisms such as horses controlling bad dreams and exploding cherries. The over-riding irony is that Richard Pini, adapting the largely plot-free Piers Anthony novel *Isle of View*, has crafted far better fantasy with his own *Elfquest*. The one charm is Dennis Fujitake and Gary Kato's art, predominantly influenced by Steve Ditko, but overcoming Ditko's often claustrophobic layouts. Children may enjoy this, but should be warned it only adapts half the novel.~FP

RETURN TO THE EVE

Monolith Graphix: *6 issues 1994-1995*

Due to a strange virus, the Kazites are a society of blood-drinkers, who use mushrooms to visit alternate realities and have developed magickal technologies. They are destroyed from within during a dispute between the Emperor and his son, Kehar. In Russia, 1921, Kehar allies himself with a descendant, Galya, who steals the Worm Tome (a book of spells) and the Emperor's bones (1-3). In the second storyline, 'Illuminations' (4-6), Galya's grandmother, Yelena, in an arranged marriage, travels to meet her new husband in Ireland (based on the Brothers Grimm story, 'The Robber Bridegroom'). Originally planning an eighteen issue series, Holden and Shelley Morris aim for grand scale actions rather than emotions, leaving the narration at some distance from the characters, but the intricacy of the artwork and its illustrated borders is captivating, with similarities to Philippe Druillet or Moebius.~NF

REVEAL

Dark Horse: *1 issue + 2002 to date*

Reveal is a pretentious anthology that attempts to mix Spyboy, Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Lone Wolf and Cub 2100 with art (Pablo Picasso's 'The Dream and the Lie of Franco'), alternative comics (by R. Sikoryak and the Fillbäch Brothers) and autobiography (Joe Casey's most honest work). There's little of interest here in the writing, but the artwork by Francisco Ruiz Velasco, Jeff Matsuda and Craig Thompson offers at least some enjoyment.~NF

Solar, Man of the Atom: REVELATIONS

Acclaim: *One-shot 1997*

Following *Man of the Atom*, the Acclaim heroes become aware of the impending catastrophe and undertake various plans to thwart or survive the end of the world. The Seleski twins reunite and begin the search for God/Solar. When he finds them, he reveals the true origin of the Acclaim

Universe and with a God-like whim sheds his skin and his power and disappears. The Seleskis, believing their universe to be saved, succumb to temptation and take on his power, thereby reactivating all the doom prophecies. To be continued... Although a little heavy, and low on action, this one-shot from Jim Krueger and Patrick Zircher is an intriguingly different spin on power and corruption. This was re-packaged as a book along with the *Man of the Atom*.~WW
Recommended

REVENGERS
Continuity: *6 issues 1985-1989*

The confused consumer should be warned that the first four issues of this title have *Revengers* in very small lettering above a large *Megalith* logo, and, indeed, the first issue is a Megalith solo comic. Not that this matters overly, though, as the writing rarely rises to the level of competency and the sole appeal is the art. For 1-5 that was provided by Neal Adams and is probably his best of the 1980s, and even Larry Stroman's work on 6 is quite presentable. The first two issues also contain back-ups, Crazyman in 1, his first appearance, and Shadow Hunter in 2, strangely reprinted from Marvel's *Bizarre Adventures*.~DAR

The REVIVAL
Bare Bones: *One-shot 1996*

An account of the early days of Christianity in the USA. A large crowd gathering to hear a preacher in East Kentucky witnesses a number of extraordinary events, and the clever pun and full horror of the title aren't apparent until the end. Either ingenuously faked or taken from contemporary accounts, *Revival* falls short of being compelling, largely due to the limitations of James Sturm's art. Neither does it have anything original to say about religion, but it's nonetheless a unique story worth a glance.~FP

REVOLUTIONARY GIRL UTENA
Viz: *2 volumes + 2002 to date*

When Utena was a little girl her parents went away. When she realises that they are dead she throws herself into a raging river. A dashing stranger saves her, giving her a ring with a mysterious crest. Her Prince tells her to grow into a strong, noble woman before disappearing. From that moment on Utena's life is changed. She resolves not merely to become a Princess for her dream saviour, but rather a Prince just like him! As the years roll by, she tracks tiny clues that lead her closer to her Prince, and eventually teenage Utena enters the ultra-exclusive Ohtori Academy where she knows he is waiting for her. Her extraordinary character marks her out and after a few trials, capably handled, she is invited to join the elite society of the Student Council called the Rose Seal, quickly rising to high rank. But is the Rose Seal merely a spoiled rich brat club or does it have a more sinister purpose? And how is her mysterious Prince involved? Written and drawn by Chiho Saito (from a story by Be-Papas), this was originally introduced to English speaking readers in the Manga anthology *America Extra*. Despite trappings of gothic romance and shojo (girl's story) sensibilities, it's a markedly Japanese piece with a quirky, not to say unbelievable, central premise and its bewildering concentration on social positioning, Identity and the power and role of an individual within a group. An acquired taste.~WW

Robin Snyder's REVOLVER
Renegade: *6 issues, 1 Annual 1985-1986*

Starting out as a science-fiction anthology (1-3) and then switching to 'Fantastic Fables', *Revolver* perhaps failed by trying to reach too many readers. Certainly, the main attraction of the title has to be Steve Ditko's sharp, detailed strips, whether the Jack C. Harris-written space adventure of Star Guider that harks back to the 1950s (1, 2) or Ditko's own, EC-style 'The Hand of Ages' (4). Nothing else really stands out, though early work by graduates of the Kubert School (Mandrake, Bissette) can be found alongside the work of old pros like Henry Boltinoff (1, 2 ,4, 5), Vicatan (1), Adolpho Buylla (4, 6) and Irwin Hasen (2). The annual, with a wonderful Alex Toth cover, contains a mixture of old and new material under the banner 'Frisky Frolics'. Ditko's very literal Killjoy rubs shoulders with Doug Moench and Ernie Colón, Robert Kanigher and Irwin Hasen, and several one-pagers from the regular series. *Ditko's World*, featuring Static numbers 1-3 and *Murder* 1-3, is also known as *Revolver* 7-9 and 10-12 respectively, while the annual is 13.~NF

REVOLVING DOORS
Blackthorne: *3 issues 1986-1987*

Steppen wanders a strange fantasy world where there are no straight answers. He unwittingly unleashes a beast that chases him into the arms of an old man, who tells him that he is the outsider predestined to alter the ancient balance (whatever that might be). This has its moments visually in a sub-Bernie Wrightson style, but the drawings are also often misshapen and as it's unfinished (a fourth issue was planned), it's difficult to tell whether it's meant to be a dream or a joke.~NF

The Adventures of REX the Wonder Dog
DC: *46 issues 1956-1959*

Originally a fighting (K-9) dog, Rex soon progressed to wholly civilian adventures with his owner, Danny Dennis. Ever ready to fight crime or rescue someone from distress, Rex found himself travelling all over the world (and sometimes off it in later, sci-fi-driven episodes), usually fêted as his reputation preceded him and generally behaving like a comic version of Lassie. Each issue contained two Rex stories, usually drawn by Gil Kane, often heavily but not unattractively inked. The third story, however, was Detective Chimp. Bobo, deputy to a Florida sheriff, always seemed more capable of solving local crimes and capturing crooks than his owner. Over the series, the developing artwork of Carmine Infantino is a delight until his command of movement (for example in 41's skiing adventure) clearly foreshadows his upcoming work on *Flash*.~NF
Recommended: 40-46

REX HELLWIG
Black Cat Productions: *1 issue 2000*

Sadly the only issue of a funny comic starring the eponymous Rex, whose business card reads "Anything. Anywhere. Anytime." Just after dealing with a costumed villain at a funeral, Rex is approached by the government to take on The Global Dominator League. You know they're serious because they have a recruitment video. And that's all there is. Perhaps full colour and low orders were a deadly combination, but anyone who enjoys a laugh should try this.~WJ

REX MUNDI
Image: *2 issues (0-1) + 2002 to date*

Paris, 1933, in a world where magic exists in the form of religious occultism and the Guild of Sorcerers is allied to the Catholic Inquisition. Dr Sauniere is approached by a priest, who's secretly been custodian of a hidden medieval manuscript, to investigate its disappearance. The theft has the smell of magic (sandalwood and sulphur apparently) and evidence points to a prostitute, who Sauniere then finds murdered. The adventures of Brother Matthew, a backup in 0, are continued online. Arvid Nelson promises to surprise readers already familiar with the lore of Rennes-le-Chateau and has made a promising start. Eric Johnson's detailed artwork, however, is often lost in the flat, digital colours.~NF

RHAPSODY
Redlight Manga: *1 volume 2001*

A collection of stories featuring the dubious proposition of incest, more disturbingly often coupled with non-consensual sex, and in the manner of most such fiction, once the sex starts the victim's attitude changes. The casual attitude to an appalling crime is distressing, but Yuuki Ryoh's art is excellent.~FP

RHEINTOCHTER

Antarctic: *2 Issue microseries 1998*

In a mythical, medieval Europe Pope Clement dispatches one of his Warrior Nuns to a village where good Christian folk are being murdered by a river mermaid. On arrival she discovers a more sinister threat to the church than the now captive Rhine Maiden, and must choose between total obedience and her own conscience. An impressive and entertaining spin-off from the *Warrior Nun Areala Universe*.~WW

Andrew M. Ford's RIB

Caliber: *5 issues 1997-1998*

Just when you think you've got this pegged as a thinly disguised polemic about racism transplanting giant worms for black people it moves in a different direction. The tone is largely upbeat as orphaned worm Rib makes his way to Metro City hoping to find a job and learn his parentage. There's a large anti-human community among the worms, and the less confrontational Rib has to tread a careful path. *Rib* is a very upbeat title, at times almost suffocatingly so, investigating potentially interesting territory in a very laboured manner. This is obviously a project close to Andrew Ford's heart, but pages of discussion and the very loose art of Michael Kelleher constitute a selective appeal.~WJ

RIBIT

Comico: *4 issue miniseries 1989*

Magic is being driven out by science, and Sahtee, the last remaining sorceress, decides to fight back by creating a warrior woman. The recipe is nearly finished when Ribit, a lizard-like familiar of Sahtee's, jumps into the cauldron. Ribit does indeed turn into a warrior woman, but she's only three feet tall, and she's bright green. Not that this stops her fighting – it just stops people taking her seriously. Frank Thorne's story has its self-indulgent moments, but is generally quirky fun, and the ending is a true surprise.~FC

Recommended: 1, 4

The New Adventures of RICK O'SHAY AND HIPSHOT

Cottonwood Graphics: *2 issue microseries 1992-1993*

There can't be too many artists who draw their first comics at 62, but then Stan Lynde did have decades of experience drawing Rick as a newspaper strip. Although the execution is faultless, Lynde's art style betrays his age, but there's a timeless charm to this gentle western, where lines like "I can't think of anybody who wouldn't like your pies" are served up without a hint of irony. It's Hipshot who's the target here, as the exaggerations of a dime novel prompts the visit of assorted gunslingers determined to kill him. Don't expect any surprises, though.~WJ

RIMA The Jungle Girl

DC: *7 issues 1974-1975*

1-6 have Nestor Redondo's finest work in this Amazonian jungle-girl story, based on W.H. Hudson's turn of the century novel *Green Mansions*. Considered rather fast in its time, the story of a young freedom fighter who escapes into the jungle after a rebel defeat and is rescued by a mysterious white-haired woman has great charm and poignancy. Robert Kanigher recounts Rima's origin faithfully and only throws in one or two sub-*Tarzan* storylines to extend the plot, which is mostly concerned with the blossoming but guarded relationship between Rima and the narrator. Redondo is the star, however. His version of the South American jungles is a terra incognita full of sinuous big cats and snakes, his Rima a ghostly figure who is both majestic and innocent. Top all this off with covers by Joe Kubert and you have one of DC's great, overlooked masterpieces. Various Kanigher-scripted science-fiction tales, usually illustrated by Alex Niño, fill the back-up slot.~FJ

Recommended: 1-7

RIMSHOT

Rip-Off: *3 issues 1990-1991*

A truly puzzling mishmash of lame hippie humour and seemingly serious psychodrama, drawn in a crude, highly variable broadbrush style that only occasionally verges on the competent. Cartoonist Chris Harmon lobs references to the Vietnam War, Bilbo Baggins and the Jefferson Airplane into his psychedelic melting pot, but somehow forgets to include any of the sex and drugs that might just have enlivened this very dull piece of late underground whimsy.~AL

THE RING of the Nibelungen

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1989-1990*

Roy Thomas has always been fond of adapting the works of others, whether they be by R.E. Howard, E.R. Burroughs or Michael Moorcock. This is probably his most daring and, in some respects, his most successful. Few would have attempted Richard Wagner's Ring cycle – it's four operas, sixteen hours of theatre and music. Yet Thomas manages to retain a sense of the poetry behind the plot, and Gil Kane's dynamic artwork brings the fantastic elements to life in ways that the stage couldn't emulate. Welcomed by opera critics as a faithful vision, Kane's artwork is perhaps too overwrought in places, but Jim Woodring's subtle colouring helps to create an appropriately heroic but tragic atmosphere. It can't really compare to hearing or watching Wagner's original operas but it's a worthy attempt to create a comic for a different audience.~NF

RING OF ROSES

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1992-1993*

In an alternative Britain where monarchy was not restored with Charles II, by 1991 the country is still in dispute with the Vatican. Lawyer Samuel Waterhouse is asked by the Catholic church to investigate the disappearance of ten priests from a boat on the Thames. Das Petrou's complex setting includes a plague of rats, radio technology which is brand new, and the secret Brotherhood of the Rosie Cross. John Watkiss' artwork is full of shadows and heavy blacks, but it's completely appropriate to this moral thriller. Unusual and well worth a look.~NF

Recommended: 1-4

THE RING OF THE NIBELUNG

Dark Horse Maverick: *4 issues miniseries (The Rheingold) 2000*, 3 issue miniseries (The Valkyrie) 2000*, 3 issue miniseries (Siegfried) 2000-2001*, 4 issue miniseries (Gotterdamerung) 2001**

In Fitzcarraldo like fashion P. Craig Russell has devoted much of his career kicking against the pricks with the peculiar idea of adapting opera to comics. While settings are limited only by his fertile imagination, with so much of the appreciation dependent on the music, obviously absent here, one wonders why. Until one looks at the work. Additionally in this instance Roy Thomas and Gil Kane had already adapted Wagner's four operas to critical acclaim. This represents six years of work, though, and is the realisation of a long-held ambition. Over the decades Russell has produced many illustrations based on the operas, a sampling of which are included in the well designed comics, along with preparatory sketches and other editorial material.

Russell's delicate linework, character designs and storytelling are spectacular. While remaining true to his pre-Raphaelite influences, his old tendency to over-elaborate has passed. Fortunately, unlike some opera, the Ring Cycle provides a strong plot to accompany the superb art. It spreads its net wide, but all roads lead back to the God Voton and events set in motion by his ultimately catastrophic attempt to provide a home for the Gods (Norse pantheon). Their involvement and that of other mythical figures places the story squarely in territory familiar to most comic readers. As much as anything, though, this is a spectacle to match any operatic production.

While Russell is the guiding light, it should be noted that Lovern Kindzierski's colouring is stunning, very sympathetic to mood, and to Russell's own distinctive palette. Without it this would have been a far poorer production.~WJ

Recommended: Everything

The RINGO KID

Marvel: *30 issues 1970-1973 (1-23), 1975-1976 (24-30)*

What distinguished The Ringo Kid from other Marvel Western characters was that he was half Native American and half white. Unfortunately, this intriguing springboard for stories was used for little more than the occasional epithet prefacing a fight, and, while they're never bad, there's nothing to make these an essential purchase. Reprinted from the 1950s *Ringo Kid Western*, there's plenty of John Severin art throughout, but he seems to have knocked it out over breakfast before starting work on his EC assignments. Joe Maneely's art is far more impressive.~FP

RIO

Comico: *Graphic Novel 1987*
Marvel: *Graphic Novel (Rio Rides Again) 1990*
Dark Horse: *2 issue microseries (Rio at Bay) 1992**

Former outlaw Rio now wanders around late-19th-century USA seemingly unable to avoid adventure wherever he arrives. Doug Wildey's 'realistic' art is glorious, whether pencilled and inked for the first novel, or richly painted for the others. A master at work, he's able to convey emotion through expression like few others. All the stories are good, but the first is best, a story of abusing the power granted to the railroad pioneers, encompassing war with Native Americans and Mexican bandits. Rio becomes sheriff of a town hiding a celebrity in *Rio Rides Again*, and *Rio at Bay* finds him in San Francisco.~FP

Recommended: *Rio, Rio Rides Again, Rio at Bay*

RIOT

Viz: *6 issue miniseries 1995-1996*, 7 issue limited series ('Act Two') 1996**

Riot is an ancient book that possesses many secrets and the magical key to a vast treasure. Billy the Kid, trying to steal the book, is mortally wounded by the book's guardian, Axel, but the book offers him knowledge and a second chance if he will protect Axel for the rest of his life. The first series introduces a rivalry between the Eastern and Western churches and explains that Axel has a brother, Abel, whom Cain (a high priest of the Eastern Church) is hoping to revive by combining the power of Riot with another magical tome, Phantom. The second story sees Billy The Kid facing off against the Lion King while Cain tries to use the witch Cyphone to bring the Moon crashing down on the Western Church.

An updated spaghetti Western set in a ruined world, Satoshi Shiki's *Riot* is a classic love story as well as a violent adventure, pitting against each other a group of characters whose relationships seem sometimes overly complex. It's not an easy read but rewards patience. Shiki's detailed artwork is firmly within Manga traditions, yet its decorative nature and design set it apart. On hiatus in Japan, Viz promise to continue the series as soon as it's available.~NF

R.I.P.

TSR: *4 issue miniseries 1990, 4 issue miniseries ('Brasher Avenger of the Dead') 1990-1991*

Based on a role-playing game, both series deal with someone returned to Earth to find their killers and avenge their deaths. 'Brasher' broadens the scenario by having an ex-policeman avenging other people's deaths, but the first series by Marv Wolfman and Pat Olliffe is more focussed. Wolfman turns out decent horror stories, marred only by vivid colouring. Almost as good as the lead strips, though, are the Nat Gertler written back-up stories, and the best material overall (still suffering from shoddy colours) is his '11 Stories' in the first issue of 'Brasher'. A man's appalling life is recounted in short segments as he tumbles from the top of a building.~WJ

RIP HUNTER TIME MASTER

DC: *29 issues 1961-1965*

Débuting in traditional DC fashion in their anthology title *Showcase* (20, 21, 25, 26), Rip Hunter and his time-travelling exploits sold well enough to ensure promotion into his own title. Rip and associates drop back (rarely forward) through time to moments of historical importance, and encounter any number of renowned figures from the past, only to reduce them all to trivialities. We're firmly in the hangover period from 1950s DC titles, where there was an internal logic and consistency that bore little reality to the outside world, writers assuming that if there was an anomalous element, in this case time travel, then any further need to conform to logic could be thrown out. A typical example is 21, which has Helen of Troy, Scheherezade and Cleopatra among those gathered for a beauty contest to promote a movie. That said, there's an enjoyable daft consistency to the stories, most drawn by Bill Ely, and any issue at random will provide a chucklesome five minutes.~WJ

RIP IN TIME

Fantagor: *5 issues 1986-1987**

This is written by Bruce Jones and drawn by Richard Corben. A killer and his girlfriend are pursued through the past by a hard-headed detective and his own, upper-class girl-friend. Due to a temporal mix-up each girl ends up with the wrong man in a world of dinosaurs and prehistoric dangers. Then a government killer from the present is sent back to hunt the detective, who thinks he's still the hunter, in order to protect the secret of time travel and make sure that no one survives. Unusually for Corben the art's in black and white.~NF

Recommended: 1-4

RIP-OFF COMIX

Rip-Off: *29 issues (1-12, 14-30) 1977-1983 (1-12), 1987-1991 (14-30)*

In its long and convoluted history *Rip-Off Comix* went from being a collection of underground syndicated strips to an international showcase to a scattershot presentation of new talent. For 1-7 its material consisted of consistently amazing Freak Brothers, Fat Freddy's Cat and Wonder Warthog strips by Gilbert Shelton, the self-explanatory Dealer McDope by Dave Sheridan, and 'The 40 Year Old Hippie' by Ted Richards. Most importantly, it also featured Bill Griffith's superbly acerbic 'Griffith's Observatory', a career highlight from one of comics' premier talents and later collected as a one-shot.

Between 8 and 12 the title was split 50/50 between Shelton's work and the best of European humour strips, such as *El Vibora* and *Fluide Glacial*, with each issue spotlighting a separate country's work. 11 and 12 are large-format, lavish magazines with a colour section and the initial instalments of Shelton's 'Idiots Abroad', later featured in the *Freak Brothers* comic.

Following a gap of four years *Rip-Off* returned minus the colour and the foreign artists, reinventing itself as a more contemporary anthology, combining new and established cartoonists with the inevitable Shelton. Early issues rejoiced in the fine, predominantly autobiographical work of Dori Seda (14, 16, 17), The Fizz (17, 26) and Dennis Worden (17, 19), as well as better-known artists like Spain Rodriguez, who had a particularly fine war strip in 14. Spain also appeared in the anniversary issue 20, which also has strips by Shelton, Jaxon and Trina Robbins and a text feature on the chaotic history of Rip-Off Press. Sadly, the magazine lost edge after this, and later issues are very patchy indeed, despite the occasional new discovery like Mack White in 26.~DAR

Recommended: 1-7, 20

RIPCLAW

Image: *4 issue miniseries 1995, One-shot 1995, 6 issue miniseries 1995-1996*

Spin-off from Marc Silvestri's *Cyberforce*. Ripclaw is a Native American, Robert Bearclaw, whose cybernetic claws coupled with the mystical overtones of his origin mean that the character works equally well in supernatural thrillers and more straightforward superhero tales. The special was meant as a prelude to the regular series, and introduced Ripclaw's brother Michael who, though he could summon trans-dimensional creatures, was invariably possessed by them. Ripclaw repulses one creature but loses Michael in the process. The regular series established some sort of civilian life for Ripclaw and introduced Kildare (a sort of Madame Xanadu figure). Kildare aids Ripclaw in a battle between sinister cults for the Ptiorrsh Mirror (1-3), and then Ripclaw becomes the target for a number of assassins (4-6), leading to the return of Misery and continued in the Cyberforce series. David Wohl and Christina Z make a promising start at defining Ripclaw as more than just a Wolverine clone, and Anthony Winn's artwork, with occasional hints at a manga influence, avoids most of the confusing story-telling mannerisms that sometimes seem to define Image titles.~NF

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* Available in a collected edition

R.I.P.D.

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1999-2000**

Your classic cop partnership, except they're dead and work dispatching demons back to Hell. It's a workable idea, decently executed, and could well transfer to film, but it never shakes the smell of being produced to a template for licensing purposes.~FP

RIPFIRE

Malibu: *One-shot (0) 1995*

Created, written and drawn by Darick Robertson, *Ripfire* is the story of a youth possessed by an alien and granted superhuman powers who, after fighting another alien in the desert, sets out on a road trip, roughing up some rednecks along the way. Robertson's artwork is greatly enhanced by Dennis Jensen's inks on the final chapter of the issue, but overall there's really nothing to inspire the desire to see more of the character. Reprinted from the *Ultraverse Premiere* series, published as a flip-book with the various Ultraverse titles.~NF

RIPLEY'S BELIEVE IT OR NOT

Gold Key: *94 issues 1965 (1-3), 1967-1980 (4-94)*

Believe it or not, the first two issues were subtitled 'True Ghost Stories' and the third 'True War Stories'. The first half of the run is quite readable, but uninspiring as anthology titles go, with some durable uncredited scripting, and art by the likes of Crandall, Evans, McWilliams, Orlando, Williamson and Wood. Once into the 1970s, though, the title becomes pure dreck.~SW

RIPLEY'S BELIEVE IT OR NOT

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 2002-2003*

For almost eighty years Ripley's daily newspaper dose of oddities, eccentricities and the inexplicable has been a source of amusement on the way to work, eventually prompting a museum of curiosities. Each of these issues is themed, awkwardly using a narrative voice of one of the (dead) people under discussion. Disappearances, the hard to kill, what were once called Freaks, and aliens are spotlighted in a miserly sixteen pages per issue filled with references and reprints of the newspaper strip. Anyone with an interest knows the material and publishing for the few kids that don't seems a money-losing proposition. Believe it or not, Cary Nord draws the world's smallest passenger train in 3.~FP

RIPPER

Aircel: *6 issue miniseries 1989-1990*

Extremely offensive, ultra-violent racist nonsense from Barry Blair, who left a trail of controversy behind practically every comic he ever worked on. Blair's twisted worldview leaves no room for enjoyment for anyone who doesn't share his opinion that all black men are rapists, muggers and/or thugs.~JC

The RIPPER LEGACY

Caliber: *3 issue miniseries 1999-2000*

Raven, Inc., a privately funded organisation investigating the paranormal, is consulted over a series of murders that follow the pattern of Jack the Ripper's. The investigation draws in Russian psychic, Yuri Marchuk and 129-year-old, Joseph Lewin, who remembers what happened to Jack in 1888. This has sharp, clean artwork from Mark Bloodworth (though most of men appear to be asleep throughout), but in attempting to maintain a sense of mystery, writer, Jim Alexander, fails to create any interest in the characters.~NF

RIPTIDE

Image/Extreme: *2 issues 1995*

Youngblood's resident aqua-bint faces the consequences of having posed for a nude centrefold. Jeez. GET a LIFE, already! This would qualify as soft porn, if it weren't so execrably drawn.~HS

J. Michael Straczynski's RISING STARS

Image/Top Cow/Joe's Comics: *21 issues +, one-shot ('Visitations') 1999 to date*

Widespread anticipation ensued when respected TV writer J. Michael Straczynski announced a story about superheroes in a real world. Pre-publication comparisons with *Watchmen* were inevitable, but whereas *Watchmen* considered how the presence of superheroes might have subtly changed Earth over a period of decades, the cast of *Rising Stars* work in a largely familiar environment. For reasons so far unrevealed, a flash of light affects every unborn child in a small American town, creating 113 super-powered beings. Some become obvious superheroic archetypes, while other possess apparently redundant abilities such as affecting only very small objects by force of will, well explored in 16.

The series begins some twenty-five or so years after the flash, and is intended to cover a period of sixty years. Straczynski's handling of a large cast with conflicting motivations is impressive. While they grew up together, there is no broad consensus among the Specials, as they're known. Some shun society altogether, some serve in other guises, some consider their abilities a licence to abuse, one believes his powers bestowed by God and one of the most powerful acts as a corporate shill before choosing a different path. The series splits into distinct story arcs. Someone is killing the lesser-powered individuals and the remainder notice a corresponding increase in the level of their abilities in 1-8, including a gimmick concluding 5 so obvious once attempted that it's astounding no-one previously used it. There's a ten year leap to 9 and a battle for Chicago, under the control of amoral specials that concludes in 13, and thereafter some Specials with the best interests of the world at large in mind become global vigilantes. 17 picks up a world essentially overseen by superheroes for the betterment of mankind, although not everyone considers this in humanity's interest, and a method of dealing with Specials is developed.

Being a drama writer of note, Straczynski's characters are solid, and his moments of moral imperative and uncertainty are deftly handled. While the writing is never less than absorbing, the art is a serious flaw in the early issues. It started well with Ken Cha pencilling 1-2, but between 3 and 13 penciller Christian Zanier, working from Ken Lashley layouts provides appalling figurework with minimal backgrounds. The whole is sloppy, ugly, well below the professional standards one might have imagined Straczynski required, and possibly the worst art seen on a supposedly major project. This is rectified with Brent Anderson's arrival to pencil the remaining issues to date.

In addition to the regular numbering, there are several slimmer promotional issues initially only given a limited circulation. Two preface the story (titled prelude and ½), and an issue 0 is set early in the chronology. None are essential, but all add small pieces of background for the committed, and they're most easily found gathered in the one-shot 'Visitations'. 1-16 are also available as two collections.~WJ

Recommended: 1, 2, 14-21

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* Available in a collected edition

ROACHMILL

Blackthorne: *6 issues 1986-1987**
Dark Horse: *10 issues 1988-1990*

Rich Hedden and Tom McWeeney create a believable seedy, grimy world where gang bosses are bloated monsters, robots and mutates go about their business, and humans and a veritable platoon of assorted aliens mix freely. At the centre of this lunacy is Roachmill, an investigator possessed of an extra pair of insectoid arms, part of the joke being that while all around him is madcap Roachmill himself is forever grim-visaged. The plots are sometimes thin, but masked by Hedden and McWeeney's rich repertoire of visual gags and general inventiveness. If you like one issue you'll enjoy them all. Roachmill returned in *Dark Horse Presents* 139.~FP

THE ROAD TO PERDITION

Paradox Press: *Graphic Novel 1998*

Despite the multiple Oscar nominations, and for all the plaudits the film version has gathered there has been little acknowledgement of the comic from which it originated. That's an egregious oversight as the movie is an extremely faithful adaptation of what writer Max Allen Collins and artist Richard Piers Rayner created. 1930s mob enforcer Michael O'Sullivan is not a tragic hero in the classic sense, having earned his bad karma manyfold, but is forced into the position of waging a one man war against his former employers. He's accompanied by his pre-pubescent son, and as father and son learn about each other a new respect develops. It's an often brutal coming of age story with a decent ending, and anyone who enjoys crimes stories will like this paperback book.~FP
Recommended

ROADWAYS

Comic Zone: *1 issue 1992*
Cult Press: *4 issues 1994*

When Physics professor John Neville's assistant Emily Ash disappears, he visits her home. Reluctantly entering a portal to another reality at the bottom of her garden, Neville finds himself in the sorcerer Solon's land. He meets Twist, a friend of Emily's and they set out to challenge Solon, as Neville's credentials come to the fore. Brilliantly written by Jeffrey Lang, the art is only functional from a Steve Ditko influenced Ted Slampyak rendered adequately by inkers Steve Lieber and John Drury. Neville is an underpowered protagonist whose motivations are cleverly underplayed right to the last scene. All the characters have entertaining degrees of dimension. An excellent read.~SW

ROB HANES Adventures

WCG: *4 issues + 2000 to date*

Continuing the storylines from *Adventure Strip Digest*, this series finds Justice International bought by Drakorp Oil, threatening the independence of its investigators. Rob Hanes sees action in Russia, Hong Kong and the Balkans whilst beginning to search in earnest for his missing father, who may be the soviet mole nicknamed, Glowworm. Randy Reynaldo extends his themes of high adventure and moral decision making by drawing on real-life headlines (even directly linking his stories to characters from *Terry and the Pirates*) and his steadily improving artwork has developed a more naturalistic feel, making for a very enjoyable package.~NF

ROBIN

DC: *5 issue miniseries 1991*, 4 issue miniseries ('II: The Joker's Wild') 1991, 6 issue miniseries ('III: Cry of the Huntress') 1992-1993, 108 issues + (0-107), 6 Annuals, 2 Specials, 1 80pg Giant to date, 4 issue miniseries ('Year One') 2000-2001*

The third Robin, Tim Drake, was the first to receive his own series, after DC tested the market with the miniseries. These explain how Robin came to meet Lady Shiva and make an enemy of King Snake, beat the Joker and face a re-match with King Snake whilst rescuing a new girlfriend, Ariana Dzerchenko, from the KGBeast. The series proper began during the period when Azrael was Batman, establishes Tim in school with Ariana, and introduces would-be superhero, the Spoiler, who is actually the daughter of 1960s villain, the Cluemaster, Stephanie. This sets up a romantic triangle that's not resolved until 56. A bone of contention among readers is the series being interrupted on a regular basis by tie-ins with the main Batman titles, including 'Knightfall' (7-9), 'Prodigal' (11-13), 'Contagion' (27-28), 'Legacy' (32-33), 'Cataclysm' (52-53), 'No Mans Land' (66-73), 'Officer Down' (86) and 'Batman: Murderer' (98-99). This seemed especially difficult when there were also the wider DC Universe crossovers to contend with such as 'Zero Hour' (10), 'Underworld Unleashed' (23-24), 'Final Night' (35), 'Genesis' (45), 'Joker: Last Laugh' (95) and 'World Without Grown-Ups' (101). However, for some readers this was a positive sign that Robin was operating in the same world as Batman.

Early villains included The General and Maxie Zeus, but Robin's major enemy remains King Snake. Developments in Tim's personal life drove most of the subplots, from issues at school (guns and drugs) to teenage pregnancy (Stephanie), and his father's courtship and re-marriage. When his father decides that he's had enough of Tim's mysterious disappearances, Tim is packed off to a private school (74), where his new friends all seem to have secrets, he meets Man-Bat's family and still winds up in battle with King Snake and King Kobra (88-92). At the same time, Batman has decided to take on the training of Spoiler leading to him telling her Robin's identity (87), putting further strain on Tim's relationship with both of them. All of this changes though, when Tim's father is made bankrupt after some bad investments, and Tim is forced to return to Gotham (100). With only occasional exceptions (during crossovers), the series has been written by Chuck Dixon until 100, when Jon Lewis became the new scripter. Dixon's no-nonsense adventures contrast markedly with Lewis' wordier and more cerebral issues, but it remains to be seen how much Lewis can add to the character without taking the series too far from its basic premise. After undistinguished artwork by Tom Lyle on the miniseries, Tom Grummett was semi-regular penciller until 16, followed by a stiff Mike Wieringo. The series suffered from the lack of a regular artist until Staz Johnson (between 35 and 69) and then the smooth, Adam Hughes-like, Pete Woods (from 74) brought some stability, despite many interruptions.

All annuals followed that year's theme, Eclipso, Bloodlines, Elseworlds, Year One, Legends of Dead Earth and Pulp Heroes, but only the last was really successful, being a fun modern western teaming Robin with the Huntress by Dixon and Eduardo Barreto. Greg Land makes 'Robin/Argent' a good-looking proposition, but the story's hardly compelling. Much the same can be said of the writing on the Specials and 'Eighty-Page Giant', the latter being a single story rather than the usual collection of shorts. 'Year One', by Dixon with Scott Beatty, artwork by Javier Pulido, is a reasonable, if unexciting, re-telling of the origin of the Dick Grayson Robin, adding to the existing facts with issues over James Gordon's acceptance of a child working with Batman.~NF

ROBIN HOOD

Eternity: *4 issues 1989-1990*

As far as the writing goes, this is a fair enough cobbling together of the assorted Robin Hood stories by Martin Powell, but Stan Timmons' layouts and poor figurework don't bring the comic to life.~WJ

ROBIN HOOD

Eclipse: *3 issue miniseries 1991*

Gloppy, pale and insipid retelling of the *Robin Hood* legend, which only serves to illustrate the dangers of the craze for fully painted comics.~HS

ROBIN 3000

DC: *2 issue microseries 1992*

At the end of the 30th Century the alien Sculp rule Earth's galactic empire in return for providing the cure for a mysterious plague. The epidemic is blamed on the Wayne family's experiments resulting in Batman the 20th being hunted down and killed. He leaves his crimefighting legacy in the hands of Robin, his nephew Tom Wayne. Together with underground fighter Aki Wong and kid telepath Moon Bailey, Tom works at exposing the evil aliens and restoring the Wayne name. Along the way the team encounter Genra Carson, an agent of Sculp mastermind Dregon quickly putting her loyalties to the test. The story is episodic and shows evidence of having been originally prepared in eight page instalments with some last minute additions: the artwork is dated 1986-1992. Byron Preiss' writing is plot-heavy and poorly paced, but while artist P. Craig Russell clearly had some fun drawing it this nondescript material hardly deserves its squarebound deluxe format.~SW

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* Available in a collected edition

ROBO-HUNTER

Eagle: *5 issue miniseries 1984-1985**

A light-hearted hard-boiled Private Eye strip transported into a future setting where robots have become part of the culture and the landscape. Sam Slade is asked to investigate the disappearance of the human colonists on the planet Verdus, and has to discover how Verdus became a world of deranged robots. The strip is all wild action and manic humour, where everything in sight is robotic and has an attitude, from the boots worn, to the chairs and the cigars 'smoked'. Written by John Wagner, the strip first appeared in the UK's *2000AD* and features art by Ian Gibson. Those who like the concept should note Slade returns in the Quality series *Sam Slade.* 1-4 also reprint 'Harlem Heroes' by Tom Tully and Dave Gibbons, a sports strip derived from the film *Rollerball* but with jet-packs replacing the rollerskates.~WW

ROBOCOP

Marvel: *23 issues 1990-1992*

Considering that *Robocop* was only ever, at best, a watered-down version of *Judge Dredd,* Alan Grant seems a particularly apt choice to write Marvel's attempt at stories beyond the movies. Pedestrian (though competent) art from Lee Sullivan gives the series a consistency, but the stories are well below Grant at his best – hacking it out with the minimum of effort. Despite himself, the fact that Grant is much better than this can't help but come through, mostly in the TV news interludes and the dark, sarcastic humour of the in-jokes which pepper the main plots. For all Grant's apparent lack of interest in the character, he does a better job than his successors. After an unremarkable fill-in by writers Evan Skolnick and Stephen Ripinski, illustrated by Herb Trimpe (over Alex Trimpe layouts), Simon Furman takes over the series from 12 until the end. This makes it all too obvious that Grant's humour was the only thing the series had going for it, and Furman's attempts to continue the inter-panel banter fall way short of the mark. If the film left you thinking that there were likely to be any good stories to be had in giving Murphy some characterisation, you were wrong. He's a lump of metal with a heart because he's a Hollywood lump of metal and not even the most vicious Hollywood killing-machine is allowed to be totally schmaltz-free. Do yourself a favour and go read some *Judge Dredd* comics instead.~JC

ROBOCOP

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries ('Robocop vs Terminator') 1992*, 4 issue miniseries ('Prime Suspect') 1992-1993*, 3 issue miniseries (Robocop 3) 1993, 4 issue miniseries ('Mortal Coils') 1993, 4 issue miniseries ('Roulette') 1994*

Dark Horse carried on the adventures of Alex Murphy, the cyborg future cop, long after the movies left off. The adventures are presented in self-contained miniseries, with the first, *Robocop vs Terminator,* the best of the bunch, written by Frank Miller, who also wrote *Robocop* movies, and drawn by Walt Simonson. Miller plays on the time paradoxes of the *Terminator* films and the themes of humanity from *Robocop* to craft a clever tale of time travel and big explosions which will no doubt please those who like more of the same on the big screen. 'Prime Suspect', in which a framed Murphy tries to clear his name, is also of a decent standard. In general, give the miniseries a try and avoid the film adaptation. Somewhere buried in at least the first *Robocop* films was a half-decent story, and Dark Horse do a good job of tapping into it to produce some half-decent comics.~JC

ROBODOJO

WildStorm: *6 issue miniseries 2002*

Set in a science academy for exceptionally gifted children, new students are split into competing groups to stimulate their development of robotic devices. There is, however, a sinister presence lurking in the background. It's a good, lightweight piece of American manga written by Marv Wolfman with excellent art from Greg Lane. The back-up strip about sort of miniature robotic Power Rangers doesn't match the lead, but isn't bad either.~FP

ROBOT BATTALION 2050

Eclipse: *One-shot 1988*

One of the numerous black and white parody comics that proliferated at the end of the 1980s, this series was hastily cut down to a one-shot prior to release. When 139 year old President Reagan, serving his 19th consecutive term, commissions the creation of giant robots he starts another cold war arms race and the world trembles as 68,000 ton US Thunderwalkers combat the Red Fluffy Menace of the Chair(man)bears. Total drivel.~WW

ROBOT COMICS

Renegade: *One-shot 1987*

Described by creator Bob Burden as "experimental literature guised as a leaking barrelful of rip-snorting, foot-stomping belly laffs" *Robot Comics* is as surreal as he gets. Barely the story of one night at a bar populated by the weirdest of the weird (robots, a man carrying his own tombstone, the Banjo Mummy, Uncle Billy with a pie crust on his head), it's really a series of one- or two-page vignettes, exercises in character. Bizarre but recommended.~NF

Recommended

ROBOT LOVE

Adhesive Comics: *1 issue 2001*

Shannon Wheeler produces an above-average science fiction offering with the tale of a robot bartender who falls too much in love with a glamourous but wanton woman who drinks in his bar. How much can even an artificial heart take before murder becomes a logical solution? Simple and effective treatment of an age-old tale from the creator of *Too Much Coffee Man.*~WW

ROBOTECH

Antarctic: *10 issues, 1 Annual 1997-1998**

Choosing to ignore previous comics continuity, writer and artist Ted Nomura's plots are action led, with the characters never progressing beyond two-dimensional. Ben Dunn draws 1-3, but Nomura has a better feel for the hardware. It's all very ordinary, but may appeal to those with an undying fondness for the cast. *Megastorm* collects 1-3.~WJ

ROBOTECH: INVID WAR

Eternity: *18 issues 1992-1994*

When the rapacious Invid, led by the genetics-obsessed Regiss, establish a beachhead on an Earth already devastated by two prior invasions and a civil war between humans and the stranded Zentraedi survivors, the only hope seems to be the military outpost on the Moon. Can Captain Nobutu overcome the base's internal divisions and the Invid blockade before humanity is eradicated? Originally intended as a 12 issue limited series detailing the Invid invasion of Earth, extra stories set during the *Robotech New Generation* adaptations of the TV show were tacked on at the conclusion, which only serve to dilute a solid, well paced thriller.~WW

ROBOTECH The MACROSS Saga

Comico: *36 issues, 1 Special, Graphic Novel 1984-1989, one-shot (Robotech 3-D) 1987*

Adaptation of a highly popular US animated series, itself a combination of three Japanese animé, *Space Fortress Macross, Southern Cross* and *Mospeda*. When a huge alien fortress crashes on Earth during World War III it causes a cease-fire and eventually comes under the control of a benign faction that creates a World Government. When the giant humanoid Zentraedi arrive, eager to retrieve their weapon and the mysterious 'Protoculture' that makes Robotechnology possible, they become foes and eventually allies in an intergalactic conflict. It's all told through the experiences of three young people locked in a romantic triangle; reluctant fighter-pilot Rick Hunter, career soldier Lisa Hayes and Lynn Minmei, a cute and fluffy popstar whose singing causes emotional breakdowns in the aliens. The scripts adapt and embellish the TV episodes and the art, sadly, does likewise. Whereas scripter Markālan Joplin manages to work beyond the Saturday Morning blandness of the teleplays when he replaces Jack Herman in issue 17, creating a depth absent from the source material, the illustration, slavishly following the production style is unpleasantly fuzzy and lacks edge or drama. The remaining episodes of the TV show are adapted in *Robotech Masters* (Southern Cross) and *Robotech The New Generation* (Mospeda).

The graphic novel is subtitled 'Genesis: Robotech', and relates the events leading up to and immediately following the crash of the Super Defence Fortress 1. Carl Macek, Mike Baron, Neil Vokes and Ken Steacy create a readable tale that can be enjoyed without a degree in Robotech History. The 1988 special adapts the transitional episode of the *Robotech* TV show as the *Macross Saga* gives way to *Robotech Masters/Southern Cross*, and can also be read independently of the many other *Robotech* titles. Dana Sterling, born during the first Robotech War of a Terran father and Zentraedi mother, graduates military academy just as the Robotech Masters invade in another attempt to wrest the secrets of Protoculture from humanity. It's solid storytelling from Joplin, Tom Tenney and Mike Chen.~WW

ROBOTECH Miniseries and one-shots

Antarctic: *4 issue miniseries ('Vermillion') 1998, One-shot ('Escape') 1998, two issue microseries ('The Sentinels: Rubicon') 1998, 2 issue microseries ('Covert Ops') 1998, 2 issue microseries ('Wings Of Gibraltar') 1998, one-shot ('Class Reunion') 1998, one-shot ('Final Fire') 1998*

Separate from the ongoing title, these gave assorted Antarctic creators the chance to play with the *Robotech* cast. The best are Greg Lane's 'Class Reunion' and Lee Duhig's 'Wings of Gibraltar', which are at least decently pencilled and aspire to the level of a childrens cartoon show. Those who can coo all day over meticulously drawn robots and spaceships are directed to Duhig's 'Final Fire', but it's a plot free zone. All but hardcore Robotech fans should leave the remainder well alone.~FP

ROBOTECH II:THE SENTINELS

Eternity: *16 issues 1988-1990*, 2 issue microseries ('The Wedding Special) 1989, 12 issue limited series ('The Malcontent Uprisings') 1989-1990, 4 issue miniseries ('Cyberpirates') 1991, 3 issue miniseries ('The Illustrated Handbook') 1991, one-shot ('Swimsuit Spectacular') 1992*

The ongoing series is a slow-paced, but engaging tale featuring the cast of *Robotech:The Macross Saga*, set ten years after the original adventure and ten years prior to the events of *Robotech Masters*. Earth Government prepares a diplomatic mission to the Zentraedi unaware that they have been conquered by the marauding Invid. The expeditionary force defeats an Invid fleet, but at the cost of being stranded light-years from Earth. They ally themselves with the remaining Robotech Masters, powerless to halt a Zentraedi faction intent on invading Earth, let alone the seemingly unstoppable Invid. The Wedding Special, set between 6 and 7 sees veterans Lisa Hayes and Rick Hunter spliced whilst preparing for a diplomatic mission. Intrigue is provided by the sinister Colonel Edwards, intent on scuppering the marriage for his dark purposes. He's a Terran officer with his own devious agenda. His machinations also complicate the regular title. Adapted from the scripts of the unproduced second TV series, this is a surprisingly accessible read from writers Tom Mason and Chris Ulm and artists Jason and John Waltrip.

'The Malcontent Uprisings' precedes Comico's *Robotech Masters* series. Defeated Zentraedi warriors are resettled in camps, but when a food riot results in a massacre, Zentraedi Malcontents begin a guerrilla war. Saboteurs who develop a weapon capable of overriding the pilot controls of Robotechnology provide the plot for 'Cyberpirates'. Discredited Mecha pilot Terry Weston, with the assistance of schoolgirl Dana Sterling must find the culprits and destroy the device before civilisation is plunged into chaos. It's a rushed and inadequate fluff piece. The Illustrated Handbook has facts, figures, sketches and diagrams to help you keep the cast and hardware straight. You could just read the comic, of course. For the 'Swimsuit Spectacular' cast members take a few moments for a quick dip and little posing. Sad but true.~WW

ROBOTIX

Marvel: *1 issue 1986*

Yet another sub-standard *Transformers* style toy in another sub-standard Marvel comic.~FP

ROBYN OF SHERWOOD

Caliber: *4 issues 1998-1999*

Years after Robin Hood's death, King John is still smarting from his defeats and appoints a new Sheriff of Nottingham to gain some measure of revenge against Robin's surviving associates. When Little John is threatened, however, Robin's daughter appears to rally the men and take her place as leader of the outlaws. 2 and 3 are effectively an origin story, explaining the deaths of Robin and Marian and where Robyn was raised. Though adding little more than a feminist twist to the original tales, this isn't badly written, but it's let down by stiff and unimpressive artwork from three different artists.~NF

THE ROCK

Chaos!: *One-shot 2001*

Ludicrous tale of WWF champion the Rock forced to fight a veritable horde of over-muscled thugs to thwart the machinations of evil masterminds. Steven Grant and Fabiano Neves know what wrestling fans want in their comics – and its not story, plot or characterisation. Awful stuff.~WW

ROCKERS

Rip-Off: *8 issues 1988-1990*

This is the brainchild of writer/penciller R.L. Crabb, who on the evidence of this turgid rock group soap opera has to be a true child of the 1960s. The comic's treatment of female fans (v. sexist), its belief in the eternal values of guitar-orientated adult rock (v. antiquated), and its sniggering coke-and-dope gags (v. juvenile) all suggest that *Rockers* might have made a bit more sense if it had been set in (and published in) 1968, not 1988. The nadir comes with 5, when wasted lead longhair Rocky Rockford is transported to Disgraceland, a weird cosmic realm ruled by the shade of Elvis Presley. It has to be said that the recording studio/fellatio scene in 8, complete with giant psychedelic floating eyeballs, is very nearly as naff. All in all, it's like Techno never happened.~AL

ROCKET RACCOON

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1985*

It's a funny-animal comic in a science-fiction setting, with space battles and killer robot clowns and deadly struggles for control of two rival toy producers for the hand of the beautiful otter princess. The setting shows above-average imagination, and this makes the series readable despite a weak storyline. Readable, but no classic.~FC

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* Available in a collected edition

ROCKET RANGER

Adventure: *2 issues 1992*

Based on a video game, Rocket Ranger fights wartime Nazis and rescues scientists and their beautiful daughters. Khato, only credited with one name, for some reason, produces nice artwork and obviously takes his cue from Moebius in his use of line and shade.~DB

THE ROCKETEER

Pacific: *2 issues (Pacific Presents) 1983-1984*
Eclipse: *One-shot 1984*
Comico: *2 issues 1988*
Disney: *2 issues 1991*
Dark Horse: *1 issue (3) 1995*

Dave Stevens' Rocketeer is a labour of love, indulged by fans because it's the best chance we're ever likely to have of seeing more than covers and posters from this meticulous and beautiful artist. The character first appeared in the back of the otherwise forgettable *Starslayer* (2 and 3), and The Rocketeer of the title is Cliff Secord, a young pilot who lives in a world Stevens has crafted from 1930s pulp fiction and 1940s whimsy. It's a world of rocket jetpacks, gangsters, high adventure and model girlfriends who look exactly like 1950s pin-up Betty Page. The period feel is pure nostalgia, the plots light but perfectly weighted, and the art is a dream. Sadly, the production schedule is less so. Even though there's almost always a back-up (by Steve Ditko in the Pacific issues, Mike Kaluta in the Comico ones), Stevens still has trouble turning out an issue more than once every couple of years. One interesting feature of this is that you can almost follow the history of colouring technology improvements from one issue to the next, and by the Dark Horse issue (the most recent to surface, though more are promised), you wish all the issues had had such slick production. For completists, there's also the Disney-published *Rocketeer 3-D Comic* by Neal Adams and a graphic novel adaptation of the (surprisingly faithful) movie by Russ Heath. Plus more posters and merchandising than has ever before been lavished on a comic yet to reach double figures. But then, the *Rocketeer*'s worth it. The entire series is collected in two albums.~JC

Recommended: Pacific 1-2, Eclipse one-shot, Comico 1-2, Dark Horse 3

ROCKETMAN King of the Rocket Men

Innovation: *4 issue miniseries 1991**

Adapting the movie serial King of the Rocket Men, this romps along encompassing action, suspense, red herrings and a fine selection of serial nasties. The Rocketman of the title is security officer Jeff King, who wears a flying suit developed in secret by one member of a group of scientists he's investigating. Another of them is the mysterious Vulcan, supplying information to the Nazis. Christopher Moeller's shades-of-brown painted art, intended to evoke the period, occasionally turns to mud, but it's largely effective. Tune in, turn off, and enjoy.~WJ

ROCKIN' BONES

NEC: *3 issues, 1 Special 1992*

The first issue is patchy, but otherwise this is an unjustly unknown gem. Darren Merinuk takes the pop culture of the 1950s and 1960s, chucks it into a pot and stirs. The result is gag a panel stories in which giant lobsters attack Earth, dead rock bands are revived Frankenstein fashion, and apes are crime fighters. The early *Mad* is a large influence, but in a righteous world all humour comics would be this funny.~WJ

Recommended: 2-3

ROCK'N'ROLL Comics

Revolutionary: *71 issues 1989-1994*

It's hard to conceive that even the most devoted of fans will want these rock-star and band biographies. Art is largely hackwork and sometimes appalling (although Chas Gillen makes a brave effort), and while issues written by Jay Allen Sanford from 22 are an improvement on Todd Loren's scripts they're still pedestrian. For British readers the Rolling Stones issue 6 is a hilarious must, with its shorthand presentation, wonderfully bad imagined dialogue and misuse of English terms. The back-up one-pagers in early issues, featuring gags about rock star Stan Back, are actually better than the feeble title pun would suggest.~FP

ROCK'N'ROLL HIGH SCHOOL

Cosmic Comics: *2 issues 1995*

Put together as a music biz promo for Kurt Cobain favourites The Melvins, Bob Fingerman scripts the misadventures of Arnie Zimmer and Pants Velcro at Vince Lombardi High School #8. The stories are a modern take on the *Archie*-style farce, but the art of Shane Oakley, congenially inked by Jason Lutes, is like some unholy splicing of Leo Baxendale with Mitch O'Connell. Scripted by Bob Fingerman with art from Shane Oakley, congenially inked by Jason Lutes. This is one of those rare instances where the artwork on the covers is noticeably less accomplished than the interiors. An obvious lapse in taste and common sense all round.~SW

ROCKY LANE WESTERN

AC: *1 issue 1989, 1 Annual 1991*

Reprint strips and features about Rocky Lane, a now-forgotten TV Western star. Only interesting for the Dick Giordano and Vince Alascia artwork.~NF

ROEL

Sirius: *One-shot 1997*

Good drawing, confusing storytelling, and a slim story about an armoured warrior on a flying dragon terrorising cavemen when a scantily attired female archer comes to their aid. Most peculiarly for a comic labeled "One of one" on the cover, the story ends "to be continued". The title is the alias adopted by the artist, and love of his fantasy stylings would be the only reason to buy this.~FP

ROGER RABBIT

Disney: *18 issues 1990-1991, one-shot (...In 3D) 1992*

Following the success of the movie *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* and two Marvel Graphic Novels (an adaptation and the all new 'The Resurrection of Doom') in 1989 the fledgling Disney Comics launched the loony Toon performer into his own title, but the tales are forgettable nonsense with none of the flair of the movie, despite having the likes of Kate Worley, Rick Hoberg, Dave Simons, Doug Rice and Bill Langley handling the creative chores.~WW

ROGER RABBIT'S TOON TOWN

Disney: *5 issues 1991*

Last gasp tie-in to the mega-successful movie centering on Roger and Rick's dealings with the wacky Technicolor ghetto where the weird things live. Painful and derivative.~WW

ROGUE

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1995*, 4 issue miniseries 2001*

In the 1995 series, the X-Men's power-draining southern belle is separated from her comrades by the abduction of her childhood sweetheart, and forced to confront some remarkably tangible ghosts from her past. Although the Howard Mackie/Mike Weiringo team create an affable romantic adventure, the hackles are erected by the fact that Rogue's lover Gambit occupies nearly half of the series, despite an earlier miniseries of his own in which Rogue didn't get a look in. It appears the Merry Marvel Misogynists didn't have faith in Rogue's pulling power without the clichéd Cajun shoring her up.

The 2001 series flashes back to Rogue's earliest days with the X-Men and details her problems adjusting to the group. It has a lachrymose chickflick plot, as our heroine Learns Lessons about Life&Trust&Loss&Friendship, but it at least shows her taking positive action and making her own decisions. Writer Fiona Avery turns in a decent portrayal of Rogue as confused teen runaway, though Aaron Lopresti's art seldom rises above adequacy.~HS

ROGUE SATELLITE COMICS

Slave Labor: *3 issues 1995*
Modern Comics: *1 Special 1999*

The star appears to be Zack Golem: a creature of clay dressed as a rodeo rider with a single horn jutting through his stetson. His object of affection is the (literally) stunning Betty Edison who dallies with a chicken-raising vampire named Caleb Steele. The evil, time-bending machinations of Kingfish and his World Crime Syndicate lead to Zack and Betty finding themselves in the 1940s where the Oz Squad, a group of eccentric superheroes, have joined forces. Included are Dorothy Gale, Water-Lou, Roof Rat and Zack himself! A very odd comic from artist Kevin Atkinson and writer Chris Reilly.~SW

ROGUE TROOPER

Quality: *49 issues 1985-1990*
Heavy Metal: *Graphic Novel 1993*

Created when readers of *2000AD* selected future war as their preferred topic for a new series, there's a decent concept to Rogue Trooper. He's a Genetic Infantryman impervious to many of the dangers threatening regular human soldiers. If they're killed, the accrued experience and personalities of the G.I.'s can be saved on datachips for eventual restoration, and Rogue is accompanied by three deceased comrades in this fashion. Sadly, despite the potential, Rogue has always been the runt of the *2000AD* litter. Perpetually dull scripts only ever inspired functional artwork, even from the likes of Dave Gibbons, Cam Kennedy and Steve Dillon, as Rogue staggers from one conflict to the next, although Colin Wilson makes a brave stab at rendering the stories in entertaining fashion in early issues, particularly 4. The enticing combination of Dave Gibbons (script) and Will Simpson (art) for the graphic novel also fails to deliver, and one must wonder if all creators are rendered brain-dead upon starting work on the character. Six Titan collections reprint 1-24.~WJ

Tyrone Ford's ROJA FUSION

Antarctic: *One-shot 1995*

Big-eyed manga American style, with a teenage cast who have to repel an inter-dimensional invasion. If you consider similar stuff charming, pick this out of the back issues, but those who find these types of character perennially retarded and irritating should stay well clear.~FP

ROLLERCOASTER

Fantagraphics: *2 issues 1996-1997*

Elsewhere Rich Tommaso combines the detached observation of Daniel Clowes with a more optimistic worldview. That isn't immediately apparent, however, from 1's extended narrative about the final night of a four-day pizza delivery shift. There are plenty of wordless illustrations of scenery and expressions in the nine-panel grid used to tell the story, which might not make for a long read, but works in conveying the sheer exhaustion of the nameless deliverywoman. The odd back-up is a muddied musing on the old ways, and altogether less satisfactory. It's not nearly as disappointing, though, as the wordless and worthless CD sized 2, which is meandering allegory in the form of sketchbook illustrations.~FP

ROM

Marvel: *75 issues, 4 Annuals 1979-1986*

Rom was conceived to promote a toy launch but proved far more successful than its parent product, outliving it by years. Full credit to Bill Mantlo for reworking an old science-fiction concept with new wrinkles. Armoured space-knight Rom arrives on Earth already infiltrated at all levels by evil beings known as Dire Wraiths, who seem human in every respect except to Rom's analyser. When he starts blowing away bastions of the community in a small West Virginia town it understandably raises eyebrows. His neutraliser actually banishes Dire Wraiths to limbo rather than killing them (wouldn't want to upset the younger readers, after all), but the effect is the same and Rom finds himself trying to save people who're after his head.

Mantlo writes the series from start to finish. Beyond the surface his plots often fail the logic test. Why would a Dire Wraith want to marry Rom's friend Brandy Clark disguised as her boyfriend (14)? Why would a prisoner containment van able to fly be driving along snowbound roads (31)? The strength, though, is that there's enough going on, if not to disguise the flaws, certainly to negate them. The always reliable Sal Buscema pencils 1-58 (best inked by Ian Akin and Brian Garvey in 36-50), and Steve Ditko, most often inked by P. Craig Russell in an interesting combination, handles the remainder. There's no single classic issue of *Rom*, but they're almost all okay, if undemanding, with plenty of guest stars along the way. Stories rarely continue beyond two issues, so sampling is simple.~FP

Caliber Presents ROMANTIC TALES

Caliber: *One-shot 1995*

Jason Thompson tells the story of his obsession with Leah, a woman he's initially drawn to due to their shared love of *Star Wars*. A poignant, funny, moving exploration of unrequited love, with a very neat homage to Steve Ditko's *Spider-Man* as back-up.~HS

RONIN

DC: *6 issue miniseries 1983-1984**

Many people were disappointed by *Ronin*, Frank Miller's first major work after a revolutionising stint on *Daredevil*. Others dismissed its artistic mixing of rounded, Moebius-esque forms and manga influences as a necessary evil in the development of Miller's more acceptable, angular style for *Dark Knight Returns*. They are all wrong. *Ronin* has a straightforward plot. A young samurai whose master is murdered by a demon has to kill himself in order to also kill the demon, as his magic sword can only be activated by spilling innocent blood, and he is unwilling to kill a bystander. With its dying breath the demon curses them to meet and fight again down the centuries. Fast forward to a near-future New York in the grip of riots and public unrest. The Ronin – masterless warrior – possesses the deformed body of an adolescent to continue the fight.

Ronin's story is often overshadowed by the richness of its artwork, and Miller undoubtedly wears his influences on his sleeve, particularly in the Koike-inspired Japanese sequences. He uses a very rough line but rounded forms for the 'present', suggesting a perfect plastic future gone bad, and concentrates on building his main characters as the story ploughs towards the inevitable showdown and a tremendously touching climax. He also employs numerous experimental drawing and inking techniques that would provide him with an armoury of expressiveness for the next ten years.~FJ

Recommended: 1-6

ROOK

Warren: *14 issues 1979-1982*

Bill Dubay's time-travelling hero proved popular enough in *Eerie* to warrant his own title, where the emphasis was very much on rollicking adventure rather than Warren's staple horror fare. The Rook strip itself was generally entertaining, with nice art from Lee Elias for 1-6, but it was the back-up strips that provided the comic's real highpoints. Chief among these was Alfredo Alcala's barbarian epic 'Vector' (2-7), *Sherlock Holmes*, beautifully drawn by Anton Caravana in 10, Noly Panaligan in 13-14 and 'Bolt' by Alex Niño in 1. Other features of note include Nestor Redondo's gorgeous Bat, and a couple of features from Joe Kubert's obscure Sojourn comic, Lee Elias' detective strip 'Kronos' (8-11) and John Severin's Western Eagle (12-14). For the less committed reader, however, the magazine's best strip is Alex Toth's 'Bravo For Adventure' in 3-4, a superb 1930s adventure strip by one of comics' finest creators that should have a place in everyone's collection.~DAR

Recommended: 3, 4

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* Available in a collected edition

The ROOK

Harris: *5 issues (0-4) 1995*

An altogether different proposition from his Warren predecessor, but no improvement. The Rook is now master of the reality flow, involving himself in alternate realities instead of contenting himself with hopping back through time. The first two issues have him fighting the undead in the old West, though, while the latter two see him fighting hoods possessed by a piece of chaos manifesting as a spider embedded in one of them. Oh yes, indeed. The zero issue prints two versions of a try-out strip, one by Kirk Van Wormer, who got the job, and the other by Caesar, who didn't. Shockingly overwritten throughout by Tom Sniegoski in the manner of a schoolboy's creative-writing assignment, the plots are much ado about nothing. Good name, good idea, but mucked up once again.~WJ

ROOTER

Custom Comics of America: *Series one 6 issues, 1 Annual 1996-1997, series two 2 issues 1998*

There's no denying Kelly Campbell's talent as a cartoonist, but when it comes to telling a story it's a shaggy dog one in both senses of the term. Large panels, little plot and many chases don't make for a satisfying read, and that's probably what killed this comic about an animal band and their glamourous companion. The first issue is toned in orange and brown for most pages, and looks very good indeed, and in purple for others and doesn't look as good. Thereafter it's black and white all the way.~FP

ROSCOE! The Dawg, Ace Detective

Renegade: *4 issue miniseries 1987-1988*

Australian not-funny-animal Raymond Chandler pastiche by Martin Trengove. The simple drawings, especially in the first issue, show some life but there are no good ideas here.~GK

ROSE

Cartoon Books: *3 issue miniseries 2000-2002**

This spin-off from *Bone* aspires to the epic and attains it effortlessly. The story concerns the ultimately tragic rite of passage of Princesses Rose and Briar as they seek to harness their dreaming powers. Writer Jeff Smith brings in good and bad dragons, killer rats, brave swordsmen, talking dogs, locust gods and, in 3, a gripping battle. It is stronger stuff than Smith's usually benign *Bone*, but retains that strip's sense of wonder, a sense enhanced by Charles Vess' terrific artwork. Vess has always possessed a fertile imagination but his elegant designs and inventive landscapes have never been better than here. For Rose, his usually elaborate linework is augmented by some of the most gorgeous watercolours seen in comics, making this an essential purchase for any fantasy fan.~DAR

Recommended: 1-3

ROSWELL

Bongo: *6 issues 1996-1999**

The story of a little green man who "falls to Earth" in a post-war America, and is immediately befriended by scientist/waitress Julienne Fryes and itinerant cowboy Jasper Kudzu (and Jasper's giant rabbit, Dagnabbit), as he flees from the authorities and tries to find his way home. Wittily written and exquisitely drawn by Bill Morrison in a pseudo-vintage style redolent of the old movie cartoons, this comic is a delight.~HS

Recommended: 1-4

ROULETTE

Caliber: *1 issue 1990*

Yet another attempt at an anthology from Caliber, but speedily aborted. 'Gaijin', 'Gambit' and 'Lost Angel' were later completed in one-shots, and 'Dutch Decker' with very promising art from Benjamin Wu, was given a miniseries, again never completed. Too bad, though, if 'Renegade Blue' was your favourite strip, although if it was, you should seek medical advice. 'Gaijin' is the pick of the bunch. What's odd about Gabriel Morrisette's future crime story is the start groaning under the weight of the verbiage before several wordless pages precede a more traditional balance.~WJ

ROUTE 666

CrossGen: *6 issues + 2002 to date*

Cassandra Starkweather can see things that she shouldn't be able to. These include the dead spirits of her best friend, Helene, and her grandfather, as well as the dark spirits that capture other spirits on behalf of the Adversary. Cassie is committed to Dr Melchior's Asylum, where her grandfather explains about a war with this Adversary and release her power to see through the human faces of his monstrous helpers, who take roles in healthcare in order to be near to the dying. Accused of murder, Cassie goes on the run, learning more as she goes and facing the continual threat of arrest or death. 5-6 see Cassie befriended by a serial killer, who decides to help her with what he sees as her killing spree. This is an intelligent and well drawn horror fantasy from Tony Bedard and Karl Moline, whose artwork has the right level of realism to offset the 'unreal', with no links yet revealed to the rest of the CrossGen titles.~NF

THE ROVERS

Malibu: *6 issues 1987-1988*

Eternity: *1 issue (7) 1988*

The future is always a grim and desolate place in comics, and there's no trend-bucking for this gang of bounty-hunting teens. Starting from the clichéd scenario, matters improve with an endearing cast and decent art from the team of Scott Bieser and Mike Roberts. *The Rovers* never really moves beyond Troma teens at play, but there's plenty worse. 6 is an origin story of sorts, and a good place to start if you can't locate the first issue.~FP

ROWLF

Rip-Off: *1 issue 1971*

A rollicking good read from an on-form Richard Corben, and to date the only comic to feature Esperanto-speaking Nazi goblins! The story of a dog transformed into a man (sort of) veers from finely etched romanticism to literally bone-crushing action, and remains one of Corben's finest strips. It was later serialised in *Heavy Metal*.~DAR

Recommended

ROXANNA and the Quest for the Time Bird

NBM: *4 volumes 1987-1989*

Serge Le Tendre's fantasy adventure series was hugely popular when it first appeared in France, drawn by long time partner Regis Loisel in a highly coloured, voluptuous 'heroic' style. Originally called Pelisse, but changed to Roxanna for no apparent reason for the English-speaking market, the books follow the adventures of a band of quirky and very annoying adventurers in a magical world. Sent by a sorceress queen on a quest to find the mysterious Time Bird in order to stop an evil god rising and taking over the world, the pouty, well-stacked Roxanna gets into trouble and is rescued by Brandon, the knight accompanying them. Anyone who's read a fantasy quest book will get the idea, and it's no surprise that Roxanna became a successful adventure game as well.~FJ

ROY ROGERS

AC: *4 issues ('Western Classics') 1989-1991, one-shot ('and the Fourth of July Bandits') 1992, 3 issues ('Western') 1998-1999*

A curious mix of black and white and colour reprints of a whole variety of Roy Rogers strips, plus those of his sidekicks, Dale Evans, Gabby Hayes and even Trigger. Here you'll find early John Buscema artwork on most of the Roy Rogers strips with Russ Manning illustrating the adventures of Dale Evans, but 'Western' includes an Alex Toth version of Roy. 'Western Classics' 3 and 4 feature a higher proportion of articles and photographs. While some of theart's very good, the bowdlerised Western scripts are anaemic. The 'Fourth of July Bandits' is a magazine-sized issue with a scrapbook feature and a new story, told one panel per page in the manner of a colouring-book!~NF

RUBBER BLANKET

Rubber Blanket: *3 issues 1991-1993*

When David Mazzucchelli left the mainstream he didn't do it by halves. These oversized annuals represent a complete change of style, whether it be the minimalist 'Hope and Grope' (a newspaper strip pastiche) or the blocky expressionism of longer stories like 'Dead Dog' (1), 'Near Miss' (1), 'Discovering America' (2) and 'Big Man' (3). His stories are not simple but concern everyday things twisted by obsession. The superb 'Big Man' is about a giant washed up on a shore and taken in by farmers. He preys on their minds, simply by existing, until they betray him to the authorities. Though the title is primarily a vehicle for Mazzucchelli's own work there is also material by Richmond Lewis (1, 2), Ted Stearn (2, 3) and David Hornung (2, 3).~NF

Recommended: 1-3

RUBBER NECKER

Alternative Comics: *2 issues + 2002 to date*

Quite strangely compelling stories from Nick Bertozzi using a variety of styles, both artistic and in his writing. The standout is the serialised 'Drop Ceiling', in which the younger partner in an ailing business is charged with making an employee redundant, from where the plot takes off, taking in some unsavoury characters and odd situations. It's the most reality based of the strips, which generally incorporate some fantasy elements. 'Masochism' in 1 uses surreal imagery for a piece that may or may not be intended as analogy, while 'Adrift in a Mid-Life Melodrama', also 1, displays a grasp of human nature beyond Bertozzi's years. In 2 there's a wonderful whimsical piece about a man obsessed with a particular perfume and determined to isolate the source. The back page gag strips on both issues are icing. The drawing throughout is confident, the storytelling choices very mature, and the subject matter hits a nerve in the manner of Dan Clowes or Chester Brown. This is already of an excellent standard, and Bertozzi should progress into a major talent.~FP

Recommended: 1-2

RUINS

Marvel: *2 issue microseries 1995*

Journalist Phil Sheldon stumbles through a counterpart to *Marvels* set in a parallel universe where all the events that created superbeings happened with a difference and superhuman abilities work disadvantageously. The world is populated with diseased, mutated heroes, a Kree concentration camp, a prostitute Jean Grey, mutants in "correctional facilities" and the last Avengers quinjet is shot down by the military. An intriguing concept is poorly executed, as Warren Ellis goes for maximum shock value at all costs. Improbably, every character bar Sheldon is thoroughly disagreeable. Cliff and Terese Nielson only manage one and a half issues of gritty, abstract, painted artwork, and the awful contrast of Christopher Moeller's completion strikes like a bucket of iced water.~APS

RUMBLE GIRLS

Image: *7 issues 2000-2001*

Silky Warrior Tansie is a faux manga strip set in a school where teenage girls train to operate giant robotic battlesuits. The heroine is outsider Raven Tansania Ransom, beset by rich girl Carmen Cameron and in girlish love with video heart-throb Crimson August who is coincidentally also her gym teacher. In 3 Tansie meets her giant badger-styled battle suit Badgmander Nan 5^5. Meanwhile corporate suits conspire for Ransom to co-star in a new series of Crimson August vids. As some kind of 'reality check' the last 3 issues feature a kitchen sink short feature starring Poppy Fields written by Warren Ellis. Creator Lea Hernandez draws in a kinetic style that transcends its amateur finish. She uses the full gamut of manga storytelling devices and tics, often at the expense of clarity – not that this will deter devotees. The story does have great humour and a familiarity with the commonplaces of shojo manga and perhaps Hernandez is poking fun at her over-egged plot twists.~SW

RUMIC THEATRE

Viz: *1 volume 1996*

Six stories at a minimum thirty-two pages where domestic drama has a bizarre plot element introduced. A family finds itself looking after a penguin in an apartment block where pets are strictly forbidden; the Hirookas find that the unwanted rubbish left in front of their house belongs to the boss and his wife, or a newly-wed couple's struggle with a huge apparition that does its best to prevent their first home purchase. Collected in Japan as a *Big Comics* special in 1994, these stories are light and sentimental but far from silly. 'Hidden in the Pottery' in particular is a fine example of point-of-view storytelling and the comedy of manners in 'House of Garbage' is paced beautifully. It's disappointing to see Rumiko Takahashi's gorgeously painted opening pages to each story run in mono but this won't prevent any enjoyment of her breezy set-pieces.~SW

Recommended

RUMIC WORLD TRILOGY

Viz: *3 volumes 1996*

Fans of Rumiko Takahashi's numerous successful features get the opportunity to sample earlier series and single stories dating back into the early 1980s in these ninety-six page anthologies. Volume 1 features five stories, including a schoolgirl who travels back in time to find it's no accident that she's arrived where she has, a flying saucer invasion farce with has elements in common with Lum, and 'Maris the Chojo', sometimes referred to as "Supergal", an early outing featuring a Barbarella style superheroine. Volume 2 has four episodes of the spy comedy 'Wasted Minds', about immature secret agents with psionic powers, along with two other stories. Volume 3 features 'That Darn Cat', an autobiographical tale where Takahashi tells of her exploits as a cat-sitter, and in 'Wedded Bliss' a couple who let off steam in destructive arguments are muzzled by their neighbours. The five other tales include a reincarnation love story and the humourous 'Face Pack'.~SW

Batman: RUN RIDDLER RUN

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1992*

Batman is briefly allied to his old foe the Riddler as he tries to clear his name after being framed for murder by an armoured private-security force. The three issues are drawn very stylishly by Mark Badger and the story, by Gerard Jones, is okay, but they don't really suit each other.~NF

RUNE

Malibu: *Series One 10 issues (0-9), 1 Giant-Size 1994-1995, series two 4 issues 1995-1996*

Rune is a vampire from outer space who's been trapped on Earth for ten thousand years. In that time he has been God and Devil, but is nearing the end of his life due to disease. In the first story arc, Barry Windsor-Smith and Chris Ulm craft a dark and sardonic epic wherein the Dark God is drawn to the energy of a young boy. He is unaware that he has stumbled into a scheme to steal ultimate power from an alien artifact, orchestrated by the government agency set up to monitor and control superbeings. Ulm assumes full writing chores with 7, and when Javier Saltares replaces Windsor-Smith the loss of quality is staggering. Even the addition of the normally competent Len Kaminski and latterly horror veteran Doug Moench and the seminal Marvel character Adam Warlock can't inject life into the mess. From sophisticated suspense to testosterone bubble gum in one easy slide.~WW

Recommended: 1-6, Giant Size 1

RUNE Miniseries and One-Shots

Malibu: *3 issue miniseries ('Hearts of Darkness') 1995, one-shot ('The Dark God') 1995, 4 issue miniseries ('Curse of Rune') 1995, one-shot ('vs Venom') 1995, one-shot (Rune/Silver Surfer) 1995, one-shot (Rune:Infinity) 1995*

Doug Moench provides a partial origin and a turning-point in Rune's existence in the three-issue 'Hearts of Darkness' miniseries drawn by Kyle Hotz in a style similar to that of Kelley Jones. This is an intelligent attempt to move the Rune series on while retaining the vampiric nature of the lead character. The back-up, 'In Dread Memory' by James Felder, is an uninspired battle between Rune and A'Charr, though the artwork by the Pander brothers has its moments. In the *Curse of Rune* (by Chris Ulm and Kyle Hotz) Gemini and Rune are possessed in turn by Warlock's soul gem. The Aladdin Agent Shuriken and Janus are spectators only to a battle which sees Rune cast out of the Ultraverse in a story bridging the first and second Rune series. *Rune vs Venom* typifies the dull crossovers between Malibu and Marvel characters. Rune is accidentally brought into the Marvel Universe and possessed by one of the alien symbiotes that created Venom. In an attempt to discredit Venom, the symbiote takes Rune on a murder spree, culminating in the kidnapping of Venom's girlfriend. Written by Chris Ulm but with a depressing rota of three artists and two inkers, there's actually very little of Rune in this. *Rune/Silver Surfer* features two stories with the same conclusion as Rune takes the six Infinity gems from Warlock and the Infinity Watch, and The Living Tribunal taxes the Silver Surfer with preventing Rune from using all the gems together. At the end of each tale, in a brief fight, the Silver Surfer blasts the gems from Rune's hand but they fall into the Ultraverse, thus paving the way for Loki to find them, leading to the 'Black September' story that ran through all Malibu's Ultraverse titles. The Surfer story is drawn by John Buscema but that's the only hint of quality about this overpriced nonsense.~NF

RUNOFF

Robots and Monkeys: *5 issues + 2000 to date*

With its portrayal of a small rural town populated by eccentrics disturbed by deaths and inexplicable happenings this immediately brings *Twin Peaks* to mind. And that's not a ridiculous comparison in terms of some of the writing. The fictitious town of Range is an island in the middle of a river in Washington state, also home to a native American reservation. For some reason while people are able to drive into Range, no-one can leave, and all broadcast signals are dead. Tom Manning has some glorious character and comedy moments in each issue, but they're limited by poor storytelling. Too many pages are occupied by moments that don't really move the story forward, a particular frustration given the irregular publication. With 5, though, things really kick into gear. Not enough shops stock this, but don't be put off, though, because you can get all issues from www.robotsandmonkeys.com.~FP

RUSE

CrossGen: *14 issues + 2001 to date*

In the city of Partington, Simon Archard is a detective comparable to Sherlock Holmes, but with even fewer social skills. His assistant is Emma Bishop, who appears to be on a mission dictated by an unknown superior. She has the power to stop time, but mustn't let Simon know. A visit by the Baroness, Miranda Cross, turns the citizens of Partington against Simon as he's framed for murder, whilst also revealing that Miranda can see Emma when she's using her power. In 5, with Simon missing, Emma must solve a series of murders by herself, while ex-partner, Lightbourne tries to kill Simon in 6 (with guest artwork from Jeff Johnson). Simon and Emma investigate what is apparently a village of vampires in 7-8, while 9-12 explain the antagonism between Simon and Lightbourne, who plans to bring the city down on Simon's head. 13-14 see the pair trying to stop a gang of wreckers. Mark Waid (1-12) has produced some excellent mysteries, enhanced by the larger puzzle of Emma. It remains to be seen whether Scott Beatty (12-14) can continue the good work, as the Wreckers story is predictable. Still, the series is beautifully drawn by Butch Guice (all but 6 and 11), and CrossGen have a policy of keeping the work in print via collections.~NF

Recommended: 1-12

RUST

Now: *Series one 13 issues 1987-1988, series two 7 issues 1989*
Adventure: *4 issues 1992*
Caliber: *2 issues 1996*

Prolonged contact with toxic waste didn't kill Scott Baker, but left him deformed, with acid running through his blood vessels, while anything he touches either dies or rusts. In comics no-one comes away from an encounter with toxic waste unenhanced, so he's also impervious and strong. Pathos comes naturally considering the traumatic existence of the title character, but Fred Schiller's consistently unconventional scripts reach beyond, making it a shame there's no artistic continuity. Inventive storytelling for its own sake does intrude, particularly when a climactic confrontation is related by talking heads in 9. Series one focuses as much on Baker's pre-teen niece Cheryl as on him, and 6-8 deal with her fears, with a surprising conclusion. Civilisation disintegrates in 13, leading into the appalling series two. Baker becomes a figure of redemption for the downtrodden in a series characterised by poor artwork and deliberately abstruse writing. The Adventure issues return to the beginning once again, and while not bad they're only noteworthy for the early pencilling of Philip Hester. A shot in *Calibrations* 4 prompted another half decent try, but diminishing returns finally killed *Rust* this time.~WJ

Jon SABLE Freelance

First: *Series one 56 issues 1983-1988, series two 27 issues 1988-1990*

Sable is a mercenary with a conscience who, as a cover for his day job, writes children's books. Despite this piece of whimsy writer/artist Mike Grell ensures the first incarnation of *Sable* is a thriller that lives up to the genre title. Never bogged down by continuity, the consistently well-plotted stories ensure that Grell's questionable grasp of bodily proportions isn't noticed after a while. The series is populated with engaging characters, particularly police captain Josh Winters, envious of Sable's ability to work outside the law. Septuagenarian stuntman Sonny Pratt provides a toned-down comic relief, while the relationship between Sable and his illustrator Myke Blackman simmers slowly, but eventually surely. Sable himself is a man torn between the thrill provided by putting his life on the line and the comforts available.

3-6 are an origin tale establishing Sable's background as an Olympic pentathlete who later ran African safari tours. When his family are murdered by poachers he has his revenge and becomes a soldier of fortune. The story provides a plausible (in context) reason for Sable's dual career, and has a sequel of sorts in 19. Any issue before 34 is worth a look and 2, 7 or 20 are good single-issue samplers, with the best being 11, with the introduction of enticing burglar Maggie the Cat (also in 16, 50 and later her own series). 33 is a Sergio Aragonés guest-shot starring the leprechauns from Sable's children's books, but from that point Grell obviously has other projects on hand. His artwork becomes sketchier and more distorted, and it loses backgrounds, while plots are spread very thin. The problem's rectified by engaging a succession of fill-in artists from 44, but none are able to emulate Grell's mood, Mike Manley coming closest in 46-49. 1-10 are reprinted as *Mike Grell's Sable* in 1989-1990, and a glimpse of an alternate Sable is seen in Grell's *Green Arrow* 15 and 16.

The title contracted to Sable when restarted to coincide with a brief TV series. The harrowing consequences of an AIDS victim returning to Iran in 1-2 has the subtlety of a kick in the teeth. With more issues under his belt writer Marv Wolfman improves, keeping the pages turning, although he's never convincing about Sable's mercenary missions and relies too heavily on loose ends from the previous series. In 6 Sable meets Myke's family, in 9-10 he must rescue his former father-in-law in Kenya, and 19 has the return of Maggie the Cat. Most issues to 19 are pencilled by Bill Jaaska, attempting to be Paul Gulacy but not quite pulling it off (and greatly benefiting when inked by E.R. Cruz). 25-27 provide a conclusion, with new writer Steven Kaye adeptly tying up most loose ends, but the impact of an otherwise excellent storyline is severely restricted by substandard art. Sable and Myke reappear in *Shaman's Tears* 5-8.~FP

Recommended: Series one 1-14, 17-33, 46, 47, series two 6, 9-10

SABRE

Eclipse: *Graphic Novel, 14 issues 1982-1985*

Freed from the constraints of mainstream companies, Don McGregor created a black freedom fighter (who looked suspiciously like Jimi Hendrix as drawn by Paul Gulacy) in a post-holocaust world of animal/human hybrids, nuclear spills and villains with extremely silly names. Sabre is peppered with scenes designed to upset the apple cart: gay sex, (lots of) straight sex, and childbirth. Sabre's one of the few serious comic characters shown changing nappies. 1-2 reprint the *Sabre* graphic novel, and, despite bursts of action, are really a protracted discussion between Sabre and his lover, test-tube creation Melissa Siren, about the nature of freedom and the importance of individuality. That said, the series swiftly turns into a story about couples (inter-racial, het, bi and gay, of course), as in 3 Sabre is captured and Melissa left to face pregnancy in a rebel hideaway. Rescued by his one-time enemy Blackstar Blood, Sabre sets out across an inhospitable landscape where certain states have been 'cancelled' due to nuclear contamination.

McGregor deals with important issues, albeit in a rather grandiose way, and makes you care about his somewhat sentimental characters despite saddling them with monikers like Deuces Wild and Midnight Storm. Paul Gulacy's art is stiff and detailed in its search for realism. Billy Graham's art on 3 is pretty awful, although it's getting slightly less so by 10, when José Ortiz takes over. Ortiz' art is much more confident but rather slapdash and clearly not inspired by the rather nauseating 'Sabre enjoys being a dad' storyline. When, instead of evil oppressors, Sabre's called upon to fight giant sand-bugs you know there's something wrong. Thankfully it was cancelled before McGregor could get any more mawkish.~FJ

Recommended: 1-2

SABRETOOTH

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1993*, 15 issues (Sabretooth Classics) 1994-1995, one-shot 1996, 4 issue miniseries (Sabretooth and Mystique) 1996-1997, one-shot ('Back to Nature') 1998, 4 issues miniseries ('Mary Shelley Overdrive') 2002*

In the first miniseries Sabretooth grunts his way through scratchy Mark Texeira artwork and a Larry Hama script so geared towards exorbitant violence and shock value that a thoroughly illogical story emerges. Some facets of Sabretooth, Mystique and Wolverine's pasts are revealed. Classics reprints Sabretooth's early appearances in chronological story order starting with his second appearance in *Power Man and Iron Fist* 66. His first (*Iron Fist* 14) is reprinted in a Marvel Milestone edition. The 1996 special is an *X-Men* issue guest-starring Sabretooth that escaped under the latter's title. This acceptable if overlong story imparts some empathy to his character and, under Gary Frank's admirable (if somewhat Byrnesque) pencils, Sabretooth has never looked more feral. *Sabretooth and Mystique* is a routine S.H.I.E.L.D. – A.I.M. – HYDRA – world-domination scenario as the two uneasy allies follow up a mission from their distant pasts. Jorge Gonzalez constructs a few too many unlikely coincidences merely to further the plot, and Psycho spends four issues doing what he does best. The shallow 'Back to Nature' sees Sabretooth and Wildchild track down a pair of ex-KGB serial killers. The most recent effort is another meaningless bloodbath as Sabretooth's healing factor is used as an excuse to mutilate him, yet still allow him to prowl around in pristine mint condition half an hour later.~APS

SABRINA THE TEENAGE WITCH

Archie: *Series one 77 issues 1971-1983, 3 'Spooktacular' Specials 1993-1995, one-shot 1996, series two 32 issues 1997-1999, series three 40 issues + 2000 to date*

Conceived as a short-run gag feature in *Archie's Madhouse* in 1962, Sabrina's popularity was such that this muddling-through, apprentice magic user made many appearances there, and in *Archie's TV Laugh-Out*. Her own title was launched on the strength of her segments in the animated *Archie* TV show of the late 1960s. Her supporting cast was limited to her Aunts Zelda and Hilda, her Cousin Ambrose, and her talking cat Salem, all of whom were better at magic than she, and her puny mortal boyfriend Harvey, but the Archie gang frequently dropped over. After a healthy run Sabrina's title quietly expired, but sporadic appearances in Archie anthologies kept her in the readers' consciousness. Her strip in the 1990's *Laugh* revival made the mistake of taking her out of Riverdale, giving her two new best friends – Cleara, an invisible girl, and Eyeda, a lady Cyclops – and sending her to Monster High. Realising that the fun in Sabrina was in seeing her interact with mortals, not other supernatural beings, the publishers rapidly recanted and put her back amongst humans. The 1996 live-action TV pilot, resulting in an ongoing show, led to a further one-shot comic bearing a photo cover of Melissa Joan Hart, Sabrina's TV avatar. This 'pilot' in turn, led to a regular series, largely illustrated by Dan DeCarlo, who co-created the character. In 1999, while the live-action show was still running, a Sabrina cartoon also debuted in which she was de-aged to 12, and the comic was quickly cancelled and relaunched to star the pre-teen version. Fortunately, with 38 (following the cancellation of the cartoon), our heroine is once again a teenage witch. Following DeCarlo's recent demise, *Sabrina*'s adventures are mostly written and drawn by the – presumably pseudonymous – Holly Golightly, one of the more talented of Archie's recent recruits. Sabrina will never produce any epoch-making classic comics, but it remains the pleasing, undemanding fun that its audience requires.~HS

SACHS AND VIOLENS

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1993-1994*

Peter David conducts a guided tour of the world of sleaze, starring soft-core porn model J.J. Sachs and Vietnam veteran Ernie 'Violens' Schultz. The lashings of sex and violence are thoroughly warranted and David's wit is not the only razor-sharp ingredient. George Pérez's gorgeously detailed artwork demands lingering attention. Regrettably, the momentum of the first two issues does not quite sustain to the climax, but the series is still a cut above the average. Not for the faint of heart.~APS

Recommended: 1, 2

SACRED AND PROFANE

Last Gasp: *One-shot 1976*

Published at tabloid newspaper size, this is a peculiar hodge-podge of work from Justin Green. One of the first underground cartoonists to embrace the idea of his field being capable of more than smut and yocks, and smarter than the average bear to boot, Green's output cannot be categorised as a whole. The whimsical aspects of his work encourage a tendency to search for allegory where none exists, except in the broadest sense, such as the demented 'We Fellow Traveleers'. Originally serialised in *Comix Book*, it's a farce about charlatans appropriating religion, yet the incongruous elements monopolise the interest to the point where any meaning dissipates. In more familiar territory there's a fine cynical Binky Brown strip concerning the value of studying art, and a couple of throwaway one pagers featuring junior hooligan Rowdy Noody. The highlight, though, is a centrespread depiction of Purgatory, Bosch-like in its scathing fervour. Not everyone will like Green's comics, and this is probably best left until you've sampled him elsewhere.~WJ

SADDLE JUSTICE

EC: *6 issues (3-8) 1948-1949**

After the death of his father, Bill Gaines continued to publish titles that followed current genre expectations before he started EC's New Trend line. *Saddle Justice* (becoming *Saddle Romances* and then *Weird Science*) combines the hugely popular western genre with the interest in true crime. Most strips in these issues claim to be based on historical fact, but on the evidence of Belle Starr (2) and Pat Garrett (8) these are wildly romanticised versions of the truth. The quality of the scripts and artwork is patchy, but there are exceptions. Al Feldstein's first published EC work is in 3, 'The Treasure of Timberline Top', introducing the soon to be familiar theme of greedy gold miners coming to bad ends. There are three excellent, pencils only strips, two by Johnny Craig ('Colorado Rose' in 5 and 'The Lady Longrider' in 6) and one by Graham Ingels ('Guns Against the Law' in 5). Apart from Craig, Ingels and Feldstein, who have not yet reached their peaks, other, lesser, artists on the series are H. C. Kiefer, Ed Waldman and Stan Asch while the writers include Craig, Feldstein and Gardner Fox. Practically all of the stories concern themselves with criminals rather than with heroes as 'Poetic Justice' becomes a more regular plotting device. Then, strips like 'Desperado from Durango' (4, Ingels) do not shy away from the terrible and grisly deeds of the villain, foreshadowing the gruesome horror titles that helped make EC's reputation.~NF

Recommended: 5

SADDLE ROMANCES

EC: *3 issues (9-11) 1949-1950**

Odd cross-genre hybrid from the pre-horror EC, at a time when they were still groping for a successful formula. And 'groping' is certainly the order of the day, with lurid, come-on titles like 'I Became a Dance-Hall Hostess!', 'I Loved A Murderer!', 'Cheating Cowboy Lover!', and that old favourite, 'Romance Isn't for Tomboys!', covering the same old hackneyed love stories in (mostly modern-day) western drag. It's interesting to see some of the people who would move on to create EC's finest comics uneasily flexing their wings here. There's Graham Ingels in all, and Wally Wood in 10 and11, his earliest EC work, but not interesting enough to warrant the huge prices demanded for the originals. The collection is a hardback volume slipcased with *A Moon, A Girl, Romance* and *Modern Love*, and the title itself slipped into the far more successful *Weird Science*.~HS

THE SAFEST PLACE

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1993*

Steve Ditko, outside the mainstream of Marvel or DC, has never been afraid to be political. *The Safest Place* is a Cold-War thriller set in a totalitarian (probably Communist) country where secrets are being smuggled to the West, an activity in which an innocent woman is implicated. Ditko expertly captures the climate of fear among those searching for the traitors and those whose eagerness to support the status quo causes them to hate others who are still trying to think for themselves.~NF

Recommended

SAFETY BELT MAN

Sirius: *6 issues 1994-1996, 6 issue miniseries ('All Hell') 1996-1997*

Safety Belt Man is a crash test dummy imbued with the spirit of a universe, sort of. He's also a sword and sorcery hero operating in a high-tech society, sort of. Furthermore he's a vehicle for the philosophical ramblings of his writer Robb Horan, sort of. If that all sounds confusing, try reading the comic! An area devoid of ambiguity is that the work of all the artists is horrible. If it matters, 'All Hell' is in colour. Full marks, though, to Horan for starting a company to publish this, and proving himself a far more successful publisher than writer.~FP

SAFFIRE

Image: *3 issue miniseries 2000*

Saffire is an Olympian descended from Zeus. She and her godling pals struggle to right the wrongs of their enemy Fiendus. The series is only just comprehensible after you've read 3's summary. What starts out as a standard Image babe with a sword and watermelons for breasts package devolves into an overpriced talking heads comic by the last issue. The writing is rubbish. The artwork is credited to Mat Broome but the vacillations from brilliant to amateur speak of diverse hands. Bracelets wander from arm to arm, complexions and hair colours change, and clothing varies so much it's almost impossible to tell some characters apart. The series' one concession is its beautiful colour work, particularly where texture and highlighting is concerned. Another Image triumph of technique over content.~SW

SAILOR MOON

Mixx: *10 issues 1998-1999**

Chixx/Tokyo Pop: *25 issues (11-35) 1999-2001**

A complex tale of five high school girls who are secretly superheroines. Naoko Takeuchi originally created the strip as Sailor V about a teenaged girl superhero, and the success of the feature gave her the chance to remodel the concept, "demoting" V to the subsidiary role of Sailor Venus, and concentrating on the presumably more sympathetic character Sailor Moon. Bunny is a whiny, weepy schoolgirl who finds a talking cat called Luna. Said moggy then reveals that Bunny is the reincarnation of the Moon Princess of a vanished ancient civilisation. She can transform into the warrior Sailor Moon (still whiny and a bit of a cry-baby though) and along with the other four Sailor warriors (Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Mercury, all also schoolgirls of her acquaintance) she must protect the world from all danger. They are reunited because a cosmic evil has returned, represented by a group called the Dark Kingdom, and the Sailors are the Earth's only hope. As it's a comic for girls, romance plays a major part and Darien, the boy Bunny secretly adores, is not only in reality her reincarnated true love Endymion, but also a superhero called the Tuxedo Mask.

All that taken aboard, the actual stories are almost totally identical, whether the ultimate evil of the moment is the Dark Kingdom, the Black Moon, subversive Androids, time travelling invaders threatening the 31st century or evil dimensions crashing into ours. There Will be a pretty battle and the power of love Will triumph, but that's actually unimportant as the narrative dynamic is more to do with failing at school, boyfriends and girlish embarrassment. Competent production, but not to everyone's taste. Macho men need not apply.~WW

SAINT ANGEL

Image: *5 issue miniseries (0-4) 2000-2001*

Fantasy adventure in which Prince Jonn of Utopia joins forces with the legendary warrior, Saint Angel against Bashar, King of Neamis, who's made a deal with the alien Markeen to conquer the world of Kei Nor. Co-written by Robert Napton and Karl Altstaetter, this tries to tell too much story in only four issues (0 contains a short prelude and background information about Kei Nor). Altstaetter's manga-influenced artwork provides some flashy set pieces, but there simply isn't the space to develop the story and characters. A short Deity strip runs as backup in 1-4.~NF

ST GEORGE

Marvel/Epic: *8 issues 1988-1989*

One of three linked titles (see *Powerline* and *Doctor Zero*) set in a world like ours except for the existence of a second, super-powered race of 'Shadow' people who have been manipulating society since the dawn of humanity. Troubled priest Michael Devlin is recruited by a mysterious sect to combat monsters that threaten civilisation, unaware that he is merely the latest pawn in a protracted civil war between rival Shadow Dwellers. Despite a good plot and cast plus strong art from Klaus Janson, Dan Spiegle (7), and Jim Lee (8), the pretentious ponderings of writers Dan Chichester and Margaret Clark on the nature of evil act as an almost irresistible soporific. The storylines were concluded in *Critical Mass*.~WW

SAINT GERMAINE

Caliber: *8 issues, one-shot ('Restoration') 1997-1998, one-shot ('Casanova's Lament') 1998, one-shot ('Man in the Iron Mask') 1999*

Germaine is immortal and has lived for hundreds of years, hob-nobbing with European royalty or artistic geniuses all the while, but lost track of his accompanying girlfriend, Lilith (who looks a bit like Sandra Bullock) in revolution era Russia. Now Germaine is worn out and fancies dictating his memoirs to an occult private detective. Meanwhile, Lilith is in town, mostly having sex with the shadow of Louis XVI of France. I think. Does any of that sound silly to you? To be fair, after a slow start, it's easy to get sucked into the story, even with all the jumping around in time. Gary Reed's script is competent, if pretentious, despite some questionable history, and Vincent Locke's slightly scratchy art is effective, although there's a lot of lazy backgrounding. Guest artists in the one-shots, and Andy Bennett in 7, are scarcely distinguishable from Locke, and woe betide the team in 8.~GK

Battle Pope Presents SAINT MICHAEL

Funk-o-Tron: *3 issue miniseries 2001*

There are some funny ideas in this miniseries, such as Saint Michael, heaven's defender, being cast as a career soldier, but overall they remain unexplored in favour of punch-ups with the demons who live on Earth. It's well drawn, though, by Terry Stevens, as is *Braun*, on the flipside. Unfortunately it's another case of interesting ideas never quite coming to fruition.~WJ

SAINT OF KILLERS

Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1996**

The Saint of Killers is a memorable member of *Preacher*'s cast, transparently based on Clint Eastwood's Western loners, a merciless and remorseless agent of celestial vengeance. As such he hardly required an origin, but we get it here anyway, stringing together familiar movie scenarios. The exception is the third issue's detour into Hell, which is sadly no improvement. Interior art from Steve Pugh and Carlos Ezquerra, and excellent Glenn Fabry covers, don't compensate for Garth Ennis scripting on autopilot. It's collected under the *Preacher* logo as 'Ancient History'.~FP

SAINT SINNER

Marvel/Razorline: *7 issues 1993-1994*

Naughty boy Philip Fetter dabbles where he shouldn't and is taken into the hellish Amen dimension where he is tortured for nine years before breaking free, possessed by both an angel and a devil. On Earth again, he is drawn to the torment of others in a succession of moody but insubstantial episodes. A batch of promising subplots hint at quality to come but the muddle is cancelled before it can conclude.~WW

SAINT TAIL

Chix/Tokyo Pop: *18 issues 2000-2002**

You have the nun, the transfer student, the super thief who's really the demure schoolgirl, and the cute but constantly frustrated guy on her trail. For an American comic this would be novel stuff, but as it's translated Japanese material it's par for the course: five from ten standard ingredients have been thrown into the pot and stirred. It should appeal to young girls, but is unlikely to spread any further.~WJ

ST SWITHIN'S DAY

Trident: *One-shot 1990*
Oni Press: *One-shot 1998*

Although comparatively early published work from Grant Morrison, this remains one of his most effective pieces. Adapting extracts from his own teenage diaries, Morrison makes his protagonist an alienated, introspective teenager who travels to London in order to assassinate then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Excellently drawn by Paul Grist, it's a fine study of teen angst, impotence and idealism. Previously serialised in *Trident*, the Oni issue is a reprint.~FP
Recommended

SAKE JOCK

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1995*

An attempt to show that the conformity of Japanese comics isn't universal, and some creators tackle subjects not involving big robots, wacky cute creatures and pre-pubescent sex. The creators on show have individual visions largely confined to mini-comics in the USA, but thanks to the popularity of comics in Japan there's a general publication specialises in such material. The diversity of styles is refreshing, with hardly a speed line in sight, and some strips are very funny, particularly Yasuji Tanioka's 'What a Mixed-Up World'. As with most anthologies running to more than three or four strips, though, the only person to whom everything will appeal is the editor.~WJ

SALIMBA

Blackthorne: *2 issue microseries 1986**

Between *Dazzler* and *Concrete* Paul Chadwick drew this strange fantasy comic about a jungle queen. Salimba falls in love with cursed pirates, and battles strange worms and dog women with lesbian inclinations. It's nonsense, but very nicely drawn by Chadwick. While he'd probably not consider himself the finished article here, there's more life and motion than in any comics he's drawn since. Initially released only in a 3-D format, the collection was printed in more traditional fashion.~FP

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* Available in a collected edition

SALLY FORTH

Eros: *8 issues 1993**

Engagingly dumb teasing stories originally produced in newspaper strip format by Wally Wood, whose heart was certainly in it. Sally's a member of the Co-Ed Commandos and, like all good cheesecake heroines, she gets her kit off at every opportunity, running into characters like Rock Buggers as Wood works his way through parodies of *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers*, *Tarzan*, *Barbarella* and *King Kong*, to name but a few. Wood luxuriates in drawing his buxom character in classic EC style, beautifully inked and toned; such is his skill at pacing that the re-pasted panels read smoothly as a comic book. The collection restores material omitted due to the complexities of re-sizing for the comics, and represents the entirety at the size for which it was drawn.~FJ

SALOME

Eclipse: *One-shot 1986*

Herod has a local prophet named Jokanaan (John the Baptist) in custody. The princess flirts with Narraboth, the hapless captain of the guard, so that she can speak with the prophet. Salome's mother is then disparaged by the holy man for marrying the killer of his own brother, who was also her father. After the princess has performed the dance of the seven veils for Herod she asks for the head of the prophet as payment. P. Craig Russell adapts Oscar Wilde's play with considerable aplomb and subtlety. The concern of the guardsman for his captain, the incestuous leering of the king, the dance itself and the princess's mental crisis are lit and stage-managed beautifully. Will run and run.~SW

Recommended

SAM & MAX, Freelance Police

Fishwrap: *1 issue 1987*
Comico: *1 issue 1989*
Marvel/Epic: *2 issues 1992*

Now better known for the excellent computer game, Sam and Max are a big cuddly dog and a cute psychotic rabbit. Inspired lunacy and ultra-violence abounds, courtesy of creator Steve Purcell. May he earn riches beyond his wildest dreams. One Epic issue reprints the Fishwrap comic in colour with extra material, and the Marlowe book collection, *Sam & Max: Surfin' the Highway*, reprints everything, but in black and white, while containing nine new colour one-pagers. Sam & Max make a brief and unexpected returns in *Critters* 50 and *Oni Double Feature* 10.~WJ

Recommended: Comico, Epic 1-2

SAM AND TWITCH

Image: *23 issues + 1999 to date*

Introduced in *Spawn* 1, Sam Burke and Maximillian 'Twitch' Williams (to give them their full names) start the series as private investigators who return to the New York police at the behest of their former commander who suspects corruption. He doesn't suspect how deep it runs, though, and Sam and Twitch investigate murder scenes with odd body parts, such as four thumbs, seemingly all from the same person. Brian Michael Bendis constructs a suspenseful thriller in 1-8*, involving supernatural aspects, but rooting the story largely in the real world while giving the characters full play. Sam is unrefined, overweight and bullish, while Twitch, who's uncanilly similar to a character with the same name in the 1980s *Shadow* series, is an introspective man whose marriage is collapsing. Artist Angel Medina excellently delineates the grimy and sordid world, but be warned that the collection of the colour issues is in black and white. Publisher Todd McFarlane feels it looks better that way, and he has a fair point, but not everyone agreed. 10-13 involving 'real world' witches doesn't match the first story, although it's well drawn by Alberto Ponticelli. 15-19's conflict between bounty hunters, drawn by Alex Maleev, co-stars Bendis' Jinx character, offers twists and thrills, and starts with a shock. Bendis uses the single issues between longer stories to experiment with storytelling. 9 is viewed via the eyes of a card cheat as his life collpases, and 14 is split into two parts, the first the traditional police at the crime scene plot, the second a rooftop conversation explaining the crime. The strength of all Bendis' issues is in effect producing previously unseen Quentin Tarantino film scripts complete with witty dialogue that sounds natural (but is too clever), and cinematic pacing of what, when dissected, are relatively simple plots.

He might have created Sam and Twtich, but expectations can't have been high at the news Todd McFarlane was to write from 20. Quel surprise, though, as McFarlane turns in the most viscerally scary thriller to date. He lacks Bendis' facility for dialogue, but these issues stand well with the previous work on the title, McFarlane's major fault being not bothering his arse to actually write the comics. Four issues in two years, with almost a year since the last is hardly extending himself or playing fair with the readers. Luckily Maleev has *Daredevil* to put bread on his table.~FP

Recommended: 1-8, 14-19

SAM SLADE Robohunter

Quality: *31 issues 1986-1989*

Following his series as Robo-Hunter, for some reason, Quality chose to reprint these stories out of sequence, opening with Sam Slade arriving in Britain, his robohunting trade having been outlawed in the USA. In the company of his assistant, the gormless Hoagy, and his talking Cuban robo-cigar he sets up as a private eye. The same creative team produce the lead strip throughout, writers John Wagner (under the alias of T. B. Grover) and Alan Grant, and artist Ian Gibson. Gibson's fluid and expressive cartooning perfectly matches the quirky nature of the writing, and he brings more life and character to robots than anyone might believe possible.

'The Day of the Droids'* starts in 5. Sequentially this predates 1-4, and is the peak of Slade's long career. Citizens all over the USA are replaced by robots, and Wagner and Grant created a lunatic population of droids including gangster robots complete with a godfather, a robot football team complete with maniac coach, and a Unionist cocktail- shaker robot. It's a hilarious story that tops all but the best Judge Dredd work by the same creators. Sadly it's downhill from there, due more than anything to a change of publisher (although the name and numbering remain intact). Whereas the artwork produced for British comic pages had been sympathetically resized and coloured for US publication, from 12 it's downright shoddy reproduction all the way, and readers are advised to seek out the stories in their original British editions or the British reprints in *The Best of 2000AD*.

12-13 have the return of Joe Kidd from *Robo-Hunter* 1-5, now a successful TV star as a baby, but there's someone out to kill him, and no shortage of candidates. 14 and 15 feature 'Football Crazy', many elements of which will make little sense to those unfamiliar with British football. It's certainly better than the all-singing, all-dancing 16-19, in which alternative lyrics are applied to familiar tunes. The musical aspects just don't work unless you sing along, and who's going to do that? 20-25 contain 'The Slaying of Slade', the weakest of the long Robo-Hunter serials, as Slade dies, returns as a ghost, occupies his clone and solves a robbery. Too many disparate elements are strung together, and the humour, previously natural, is often forced. 'Slade's Last Case' in 26 and 27 is only a little better, with Sam, retired and obese on the proceeds of the previous case. When he emerges from a health farm in 28 Slade's back to his old self, but it appears his assistants have run off with his fortune. Discovering why involves Slade in a story that's a return to form.

There are decent back-up strips in every issue. Ro-Busters is a thinly disguised version of *Thunderbirds*, with a team of robots as the first-response team to disaster areas. The heart of the strip is the relationship between the militarily correct Hammerstein and the coarse, and amusing, sewer droid Ro-Jaws, wittily scripted by Pat Mills. Wisely, the story reprinted is one of the last of the run, with excellent Dave Gibbons art in 1-6. ABC Warriors also feature before moving into their own title, and Ace Trucking Company take up occupancy in 20-25. Also humorously written by Wagner and Grant, they're a bunch of space truckers with a vast capacity for involving themselves in perilous situations.~FP

Recommended: 1, 2, 5-15, 28-31

SAMURAI

Aircel: *23 issues 1985-1987*
Night Wynd: *4 issue miniseries ('Mystic Cult') 1992, 4 issue miniseries ('Vampire Hunt') 1992*

A black and white series amateurishly drawn and pretentiously written by Barry Blair. Features punks, motorbikes, women in uniform, young boys, ludicrous cockney dialogue, and, yes, giant UN robots. There may not be a plot in it. 13 is the first comics work of Dale Keown.~GK

SAMURAI CAT

Marvel/Epic: *3 issue miniseries 1991*

Ralph Macchio and Frank Cirocco successfully adapt the best selling fantasy humour novels by Mark E. Rogers as martial arts moggy Tomokato, the greatest samurai in Japan, hunts for the murderers of his masters. Sharp, surreal and tongue-in-cheek especially the last issue, a *Star Wars* parody.~WW
Recommended: 1-3

SAMURAI CRUSADER

Viz: *2 volumes 1996-1997*

Hiroi Oji conceived this story of a Japanese Samurai operating in the 1930s, travelling with Ernest Hemingway and encountering spies, deceitful Chinese, Nazis, ninjas and demons. Picking up a sacred sword, our man Kumomaru copes with them all. It's decent adventure material well drawn by Ryoichi Ikegami, but don't let the political context and historical figures lead to greater expectations. These were originally serialised in *Manga Vizion*, and continuing chapters also appeared there.~FP

SAMURAI JACK

DC: *One-shot 2002*

A samurai, son of the Emperor, in exile after his father's defeat by the tyrant Aku, is trained in a multiplicity of martial techniques from around the world. Returning to his home to battle Aku, he's victorious, but succumbs to a spell that propels him into the far future, where Aku is nowmaster of the whole world and setting his sights on the stars. The Earth now has a large population of robots and aliens, and the samurai, taking the name Jack, becomes the defender of some oppressed talking dogs when they're attacked by Aku's robot drones. Based on his own Cartoon Network show, this is written by Genndy Tartatovsky, with artwork by Lynn Naylor and Bill Wray. There's nothing wrong with the (fine) cartooning, but Jack himself is too much of a blank slate, defined only by his high moral stance and his heroism.~NF

SAMURAI JAM

Slave Labor: *4 issues 1994*

In-line skating and all things Japanese obsess the characters in Andi Watson's quirky but likeable one-man title. Not a lot happens, and his insights aren't startling, but it's a pleasant read, drawn in a blocky, angular style that's very striking, although it can make for inexpressive faces.~FJ

SAMURAI PENGUIN

Slave Labor: *9 issues 1986-1988*

Samurai Penguin, written by Dan Vado and drawn by a different artist each issue, was a rather slack parody comic, part of the funny-animal boom that followed the success of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Of his artistic strategy Vado said: "If it weren't for this inconsistency's effect on sales, it would almost be fun." Another "effect on sales" may well have been his tendency to parody other small independent creations that few of his readers had heard of. Nepotistic, with hindsight.~FJ

SAMURAI 7

Gauntlet: *3 issues 1992-1993*

Alazander Crowley, servant of the Lords of Gloom, creates a team of supervillains, Oblivion, in response to his quarry, Kyoshi's own creation of the Samurai 7. Patrick Zircher provides plenty of kinetic action and the promise of some team bonding, but the series ends on a cliffhanger and is unfinished.~NF

SAMUREE

Continuity: *Series one 9 issues 1987-1992, series two 4 issues 1993-1994*
Windjammer: *2 issues 1995*

As one would surmise from the title, this is a superhero comic with martial-arts overtones, and, as one would expect from the publishers, it marries beautiful artwork with nonsensical stories. 1-4 are particularly notable for the bottom-obsessed pencils of Mark Beachum that are as near pornographic as they are accomplished. As ever with a Continuity title, the hand of Neal Adams is rarely far away, and the other artists, S. Clarke Hawbaker (5, 6), Rodney Ramos (7) and Dave Hoover (8 and 9) all benefit from his touch.

The second series is four chapters of 'The Rise of Magic' crossover; it's less superhero-oriented, aiming instead for a supernatural theme and ending up even more impenetrable than before. Rudy Nebres inks some very poor pencils in 1, 2 and 4, and future star Mike Deodato enlivens things in 3. Another great Adams discovery, Rodolpho Damaggio, drew both Windjammer issues with some aplomb, rounding off a series that offers the occasional treat for the eyes, if not the brain.~DAR

SAN FRANCISCO COMIC BOOK

Print Mint: *4 issues 1969-1973*
Last Gasp: *3 issues (5-7) 1975-1983*

A rather aimless underground title specialising in minor pieces by well-known artists (possibly rejected elsewhere), and consequently of great interest to dedicated collectors but of little to more casual readers. Later issues were also something of a showcase for new artists, with Melinda Gebbie (6, 7) and the talented but obscure John Burnham (5-7) particularly shining. By far the series' best strip was from the established Bill Griffith with 5's brief but poignant tribute to the legendary (if unbalanced) artist Rory Hayes.~DAR

SANCTUARY

Viz: *9 issue limited series ('Part One') 1992*, 9 issue limited series ('Part Two') 1993-1994*, 8 issue limited series ('Part Three') 1994-1995*, 7 issue limited series ('Part Four') 1995-1996*, 13 issue limited series ('Part Five') 1996-1997**

Sanctuary is an extremely right-wing political comic, Libertarian almost, written by Sho Fumimura whose previous work is full of pro-Capitalist messages. At times it's ponderous, and every character has an agenda, frequently addressing sloganistic messages to camera. Politicians pontificate on the state of the Japanese spirit mid-shag, and characters are depicted as either politically aware or dumb. It appears to be the exciting story of a mysterious young yakuza and his power struggle to take over his gang, while flirting with the local deputy police chief, who's fallen desperately in love with him despite his reputation. And throughout there are periodic bouts of gang violence and brutal sex to keep that notion alive. Actually it's the unlikely and highly symbolic story of two ex-pat Japanese who survive the Cambodian killing fields and return to their homeland after a huge struggle to find it full of aged politicians, corporate fat cats and visionless salarymen. So the two teens decide to take over the country and rejuvenate it into the sanctuary they dreamed of during their long years in Cambodia.

Akira Hojo drops out of high school early and insinuates himself in the local Yakuza, gaining a reputation for fierce eagerness under psychotic gang lord Mr Tokai because as a gangster "You can do in a single day what it takes an ordinary man 30 years to do." His friend, Chiaki Asami, graduates and enters the slippery world of politics, becoming secretary to the local congressman. Part one starts when they've both risen sufficiently to begin a power struggle to take over the government and re-interest the disillusioned Japanese youth in the joy of politics and ends with Hojo taking over his gang. There follows over a hundred twenty to twenty-five page episodes, which, while dotted with illegal activities and flirtations, are for the most part about men sitting round tables confronting each other. And it's gripping.

Fumimura creates a large and varied cast within a very narrow limit. Most are power hungry politicians, bankers or gangsters, and the differences in their outlooks and aims are few, as Fumimura underlines time and again. His brilliance, as far as his original audience is concerned, is to present a scenario where the basic message is that they all count, that it's important to be a cog in the big machine, but that each cog has power... even though you need a few romantic, dynamic figures to head it up. The key character is neither of the unrealistically pristine 'heroes' Hojo and Asami, who time and again look like they'll get their hands dirty, but are never seen actually carrying out their worst threats, but Mr Tokai, Hojo's old mentor whom he soon surpasses. Tokai is street scum, and at first resists all change, but develops gradually, with a few relapses, into someone looking to the future rather than being a fatalistic killer. He's still prone to saying things like "The quickest way to straighten out a woman is to give her a big thick one," though.

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* Available in a collected edition

The world of *Sanctuary* is a very male and very narrow. Women barely feature except as recreation or victims, and are always kept on the periphery. Even when one of the major characters dies, he chooses to spend his last moments with male friends, not his girlfriend, talking about politics. As such it indulges in a lot of butch mythmaking in order to make political manoeuvring sexy. Gripping episodes include Part Two 1 where the incredibly machiavellian current leader of the Diet dissolves the Japanese government and calls a general election during which he hopes to ruin the young upstarts threatening his power base, or the end of Part Three where Asami tells his fledgling independent MPs that they must rejoin the dinosaur-like conservatives to get to the heart of real power.

If the idea that individual responsibility should be the primary ethical concern of men (and maybe a few women) appeals then you won't have any trouble with the message. Liberals will have problems, not least because it makes all these unsavoury fascists look so damned good. Ryoichi Ikegami does a splendid job of distinguishing between numerous groups of men in suits (although he does for some reason make several of the major characters midgets) and using line weight and body posture to express surprise, anger, consternation, bewilderment and the many other emotions necessary to keep pictures of meetings exciting. It's flawed, but immensely engrossing if you knee doesn't start jerking half way through.~FJ

Recommended: Part One 1-8, Part Two 1-2, Part Three 4-8, Part Five 1-3

SANDMAN

DC: *6 issues 1974-1976*

The true claims to fame of *Sandman* 1 are that it enjoyed phenomenally high sales and marked the last collaboration between Jack Kirby and Joe Simon. It was also monumentally silly. From his Dream Dome, the Sandman monitors dreams, ready to spring into action with the help of his repulsive assistants Brute and Glob. From 2 onwards, Michael Fleisher took over the scripting with no discernible difference and, after a couple of Ernie Chua outings, Kirby returned for 4-6. With villains like General Electric, Zombie Gorillas and Dr Spider, the intrepid reader should tread carefully, but the last issue, with its gorgeous Wally Wood inks, is a much tastier morsel. The unpublished 7 finally saw print in 1982's *Christmas with the Super-Heroes* digest, and this character returns in 11 and 12 of DC's next *Sandman* title.~DAR

SANDMAN

DC: *46 issues 1989-1993**

DC/Vertigo: *29 issues (47-75), 1 Special 1993-1996**

Sandman is Morpheus, the Lord of Dreams. He is a member of the family of the Endless, along with Desire, Despair, Destiny and others. This provides a very broad setting for the telling of fantasy stories, and the comic makes good use of it. The seventy-five-issue run mixes single-issue short stories and longer storylines of six issues and more, covering horror, humour, family drama, metaphysics... you name it – as long as you name horror twice, since it was particularly dominant in the beginning, frequently to scorching effect. It's a comic crammed with ideas and a large cast of memorable characters, who are given some great dialogue (particularly Delirium), and Neil Gaiman writes with an impressive command of styles and techniques. Add to this the artwork to match and amplify, and at its best it is a startling, invigorating read.

1-9 begin with Morpheus imprisoned on Earth for nearly a century, causing disturbances in human dreams and in his realm, and there's considerable work required to restore order. 1-4 are mediocre, with the writing barely compensating for Sam Kieth's shambolic artwork, but with 6 original inker Mike Dringenberg begins pencilling and the writing and art start working together. The result is some genuinely dreamlike sequences (5, 7), a horrific hostage story (6), and a poignant introduction to the first of Morpheus' siblings in 8. Although they're connected, no story lasts longer than two issues.

'The Doll's House' is the first really lengthy continued sequence, concentrating on Rose Walker, a young woman whose family was affected by the disturbances during Morpheus' imprisonment. In 10-16 this involves her, unwittingly, in some dangerous Dreamworld politics. It's a weak story, but introduces more of Morpheus' siblings and human characters, who later become important: Lyta Hall and her son Daniel; and Hob Gadling, who meets Morpheus in a tavern also frequented by Marlowe and Shakespeare in 13, independent of the main storyline. 14 is possibly the best of the entire series – the sickest, funniest parody of a fan convention you'll ever read.

One-issue stories under the collective title of 'Dream Country' occupy 17-20, generally with little involvement from Morpheus. The strongest is 17's 'Calliope', with art by Kelley Jones, which has much to say about creativity and maturity, and some dazzling verbal fireworks. 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' (19), illustrated by Charles Vess, depicts a unique performance of Shakespeare's play and won a World Fantasy Award. 'A Dream of a Thousand Cats' (18) makes good points about fantasies of a Golden Age, though some find it too cutesy, and 'Façade' in 20 returns the obscure DC character Element Girl under tragic circumstances. Another collective title, 'Distant Mirrors' (29-31), encompasses another sequence of short stories. 29's 'Thermidor' is set during the French Revolution and introduces Orpheus, of Greek myth (told in the 1991 Special), and his relationship to Morpheus, which will become very important later. 'August' (30) features the Roman Emperor Augustus and events leading him to make an unusual decision in a strong and thought-provoking story. 'Three Septembers and a January' (31) is a nice piece about the protective properties of fantasy, but worrying for its signs that the Endless are never going to rise above their soap-opera behaviour. 'Convergences' (38-40) is another sequence of short stories. None are particularly strong, though 40 is significant in the Grand Scheme, with its focus on Lyta's son, Daniel.

Morpheus is forced to accept an unwanted responsibility in 'Season of Mists' (21-28), and deputations arrive from several supernatural realms with the purpose of persuading him, by threats or bribes, to hand it over. There are many lively and inventive scenes with the various ambassadors (Norse gods, Egyptian gods, representatives of Order, of Chaos, etc.), and hints are dropped about a missing member of the Endless. However, the story sprawls, and it's difficult to pick any outstanding issues, other than 25. Drawn by Matt Wagner, it's a detour from the main storyline: a ghost story, set in an English public school, introducing characters who later return in *The Children's Crusade*. 'A Dream of You' (32-37) focuses on Barbara (a character introduced in 'The Doll's House') and the rich Narnia-style fantasies she had as a child, with artwork mostly by Shawn McManus. The scenes set in the fantasy world (32 and 35, particularly) are excellent, aching with betrayal and failure and a loss of childhood faith, but the scenes involving humans are a test of patience. The story touches on issues of gender and identity, but only in passing and from a safe distance.

The earlier hint about a missing member of the Endless is picked up for 'Brief Lives', and in 41-49 Morpheus and Delirium indulge in an eccentric search. There's some terrific dialogue from Delirium, especially in 47, and appropriate artwork from Jill Thompson, but the story is twice the necessary length. The essence is imparted in 47-49, which are also the most critical to the Grand Scheme. Another of the 'Distant Mirrors' sequence is in the oversize 50. 'Ramadan' is a short story with an Arabian Nights feel. It's pretty, with artwork by P. Craig Russell, but not outstanding.

'World's End' (51-56) involves travellers from various realms who have taken refuge in an inn during a strange storm, and pass the time by telling stories. Bryan Talbot and Mark Buckingham draw the framing sequences set in the inn each issue, and every story told has a different artist. The most striking are 51, an atmospheric story about a strange city, with very effective art by Alec Stevens, and 53, an interesting Hob Gadling story with art by Michael Zulli.

The culmination of the Grand Scheme occurs in 'The Kindly Ones' (57-69), with nifty artwork, principally by Mark Hempel. The boy Daniel is missing in ominous circumstances, and his mother, Lyta, embarks on a delirious mission to find him or seek vengeance. Tons of ideas and clever sequences, but it seems to go on forever. Still, you probably have to read it just to say you have, and to put your mind at rest. After this point nothing further needs to be said, but unfortunately we have an almost entirely self-indulgent and pointless coda in 'The Wake' (71-74). Michael Zulli's artwork in 71-73 looks pretty at first, but the characters become more and more wooden. Jon J. Muth's Chinese style artwork in 74 is worth a look, and there's a moment that has a genuine feeling of dream logic, but the story has little reason to exist. 'The Tempest' (75) revisits 19's Shakespearean theme, including the return of Charles Vess as artist, and has Shakespeare back in Stratford at the end of his career, working on his last play. There is no sign here of the imagination that fired the early issues – if there's an obvious way of tackling a character or a conversation, that's what Gaiman chooses, every time. One to keep by your bed in case of insomnia.

As you will have gathered from the list above, the comic has its weaknesses, and they become more apparent and frustrating on each re-reading. Most obvious is the tendency towards self-indulgence, which by the end is a full-blown lifestyle. Anyone able to read the last few issues without muttering, "Oh, get on with it!" every two pages is definitely a hardened fan. Then there's the persistent weakness of plot in longer storylines, which may either kick off with a threat that is sheer fantasybabble ("There's a new Dream Vortex!" – you have to take Morpheus' word that this is A Bad Thing), or end on any tension-destroying pretext up to and including the direct intervention of God. *Sandman* contains treasures along the way, but you'd best be warned not to read for plot. Finally, there's Gaiman's reluctance to clarify the relationship the Endless have with the mortal world, or to make a distinction between the different ideas for which the English language uses the word 'dream'. Are the Endless simply ambulatory ideas or are they personalities in their own right? Sometimes they talk as if it's the former (in 8, one calls another an "anthropomorphic personification"), but they always behave as if it's the latter, and the interactions between them have everything of soap opera, and almost nothing of commentary on the nature of human desire or despair or madness. As for the different meanings of the word 'dream', surely there's no real connection between the images our brains generate during sleep and our waking wishes and ambitions (the 'Dream House' or the 'Dream Vacation'). Both, though, come under Morpheus' jurisdiction, and the distinction is never made. These last objections may seem like nitpicking, but they must count against any claim that *Sandman* is a classic piece of fantasy literature. Unusually clever and entertaining by the standards of comics, yes, but the standards in prose have been set by writers who will make the effort to clarify and to make those important distinctions; let's not rush to forget how high those standards can be.~FC

Recommended: 5-8, 13-14, 17-19, 25, 30, 32, 35, 47

SANDMAN MIDNIGHT THEATRE

DC/Vertigo: *One-shot 1995*

This features the unlikely meeting of Wesley Dodds, from *Sandman Mystery Theatre*, and Morpheus, Lord of Dreams from *Sandman*. Morpheus spent decades trapped until the 1980s, making any real team-up impossible. What plotter Matt Wagner and scripter Neil Gaiman have done is produce a case for Dodds' Sandman that involves him accidentally meeting the captured Morpheus for 2 pages. Dodds is investigating the suicide of a friend, and arrives in late 1930s London, meeting an unsavoury group of occultists and his fugitive girlfriend Dian Belmont, who has conveniently become entangled in their intrigues. The period feel and dialogue are handled with Gaiman's usual aplomb but the script becomes grindingly expository in places. The painted artwork by Teddy Kristiansen is impressive and suitably subtle to match the period, but too approximate when it comes to facial expressions, many of which don't compliment Gaiman's detail at all. The silent pages with the Sandman in action remain the best-written ones. A curate's egg for the Wesley Dodds fans.~SW

SANDMAN MYSTERY THEATRE

DC/Vertigo: *70 issues, 1 Annual 1993-1999*

This series has nothing to do with Neil Gaiman's popular Sandman, but the 1940s character with the same name. Sleuth Wesley Dodds stars in new, noirish tales written by Matt Wagner (1-12), Wagner and Steven T. Seagle (13-60) and then just Seagle. There's a strong pulp feel to these dark stories, with hate (racial, sexual or otherwise) playing a large part in the motivation of some extremely nasty villains. Most stories occupy four issues, but running throughout, to give a strong sense of continuity, is Dodds' increasingly intimate relationship with Dian Belmont, his (and her) development as a crime fighter, and his battles of will with the police department.

Episodes are usually named after characters, including, 'The Tarantula' (1-4*), 'The Scorpion' (17-20), 'Dr Death' (21-24), 'The Hourman' (29-32, introducing the two characters to each other), 'The Python' (33-36), 'The Mist' (37-40, the *Starman* villain), 'The Blackhawk' (45-48), a pre-war version of the famous character) and 'The Goblin' (65-68). There's a good balance in the stories of traditional 'super' characters and 'ordinary' criminals, since the Sandman's a better detective than he is a fighter. 'The City' (61-64), rather than a single story, shows Wesley, Dian, the butler, Humphries and Detective Burke all solving their own cases.

It's mostly drawn by Guy Davis in his scratchy, many-lined but effective style, but there have been guest artists, including John Watkiss (5-8), R. G. Taylor (9-12), Warren Pleece (33-36), Matthew Smith (45-48) and Michael Lark (57-60). One annual (1994) contains a story about a search for a Central Park mugger. Written by Seagle and Wagner, it's illustrated over nine chapters by Guy Davis, David Lloyd, John Bolton, Stefano Gaudiano, George Pratt, Alex Ross, Peter Snejbjerg and Dean Ormston. *Sandman Mystery Theatre* was a brave series for Vertigo, and remains a critical, if not commercial, success. Wagner and Seagle crafted some fine mysteries, dealt with some difficult issues (war, religion, abortion), and in Wesley and Dian created an adult, compelling couple.~NF

Recommended: 13-16, 21-24, 29-32, 37-70, Annual 1

Tom Hart's THE SANDS

Black Eye: *3 issue miniseries 1996, Graphic Novel*

Reflecting the title, this series is constantly shifting as Little Hawk wanders into the desert, encountering strange people for no good reason. The narrative is dreamlike, and for many the lack of any real resolution in either the comics or the collection, which adds over a hundred extra pages, will be a major stumbling block. If you like Tom Hart's work give it a try. If you've never come across his material previously this is not the place to start.~WJ

THE SANDWALK ADVENTURES

Active Synapse: *5 issue miniseries 2001-2002**

As with Jay Hosler's other projects, this is quite the offbeat idea. Miniscule mites living in Charles Darwin's eyebrow have constructed a mythology, passed down from generation to generation, concerning Darwin's life based on misinterpreted events from it. One of the mites discovers Darwin, now an old man, can hear her. Darwin believes her a

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* Available in a collected edition

hallucination, but agrees to regular conversations restricted to his solitary walks on a sandy path. This is all an elaborate set-up for relating Darwin's world changing theories in a user-friendly fashion. It's a remarkable work, part mythology and this time enough story to suck in anyone without a particular interest in the educational aspects.~FP
Recommended: 1-5

SAP TUNES

Fantagraphics: *2 issues 1992*

Mythologising of very ordinary moments makes for dull comics, particularly when prime contributor Granger Davis can't be bothered to enliven his largely conversational pieces with any background art.~FP

SAPPHIRE

Ariel: *6 issues 1997*

Sapphire owes a lot to *X-Files*: a special team of British operatives formed to deal with cases with supernatural overtones, it's a paranoid fantasy with innumerable wheels within wheels. Vincent Danks' script is more reminiscent of the down to earth British TV thrillers like *Callan*, although fantasy trappings abound with several characters having visions of the past, psychic wars and demons. These issues deal with the fledgling team's first case, a series of murders that, despite their satanic ritualistic overtones, appear to link into a secret government research project to create mutated humans. Like *X-Files* there's a feeling that there are some questions that will never be answered as layer after layer of plot is excavated.

Danks' art suffers from the stiffness of too much photo-referencing, with some panels tightly and realistically drawn and others betraying wonky perspective or poorly drawn faces. There is some very fine inking (as you'd expect from an ex-inker) but overall it needs to loosen up. The story remains interesting enough, however, to get you past the occasional art problems.~FJ

SARAI

ComicsOne: *8 volumes + 2001 to date*

It's 2041 and humans develop into hideous mutations after they reach the age of sixteen. In this world, Sarai Kannagi is a Battle Maid, a member of the Guard Maid Association, which hires her out to those who need protection. Sarai's adventures encompass a castle of cannibals, villagers turning to stone, hostile telepathic animals, the Sultan Pazoculver's harem, human sacrifices to the God of the Sea and a maid amok. Masahiro Shibata's scripts are designed to keep Sarai and her friends in as few clothes as possible whilst facing some pretty gruesome experiences, obviously tempered by his insightful social commentary. Though unsolicited, a ninth volume, at least, is promised.~NF

SARGE STEEL

Charlton: *10 issues 1964-1967*

There was a moment in the film *Stargate* when Kurt Russell makes his entrance, his head filling the screen. As one the audience rose and shouted "That's a Sarge Steel haircut!", and how right they were. Few characters in comics have been blessed with a haircut to match the good sergeant: short, rigid, and sharp enough to strike a match on. There was more to the comic than a haircut, of course, but not that much more. Sarge Steel was a private eye, a mix of equal parts Sam Spade and James Bond, complete with an ever present entourage of willing (or deadly) dolls and hoods round every corner. The first few issues saw him alternate between fighting Nazis and Commies before going totally over the top from 7. 8 introduced a plethora of U.N.C.L.E. style gadgets from a hypno-chair to exploding shoes. It would be overstating the mark to claim Joe Gill's scripts were significantly better than his usual production-line fare, but he was having fun. Visually the comic was split between Dick Giordano (1-4, 7, 10) and Bill Montes and Ernie Bache, with Giordano being far better, particularly on the final issue. For no obvious reason 9 and 10 were retitled *Secret Agent*, though the contents remain much the same. A year passed between 9 and 10, during which Sarge was the back-up in *Judomaster* 91-98. Steve Skeates wrote the final issue and made it eminently more readable by playing it straight. As an aside it's commonly assumed that he got his name from his steel hand (grafted on following an explosion in Vietnam), but not so. At one point in 1 he's referred to as 'Captain Sergeant Steel', so clearly Sergeant is his first name. They don't make them like that anymore.~DAR

SATAN'S SIX

Topps: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

Based on characters and concepts created by Jack Kirby, the first issue also featured a number of pages drawn by 'The King' and inked by such luminaries as Frank Miller, Todd McFarlane, Steve Ditko, Mike Royer and Joe Sinnott. Neither Jack nor his inkers are working at the height of their powers, and the thinly conceived characters are frankly laughable. Writer Tony Isabella obviously thought so, deciding to fashion a hopelessly jokey storyline around the completed, basically incomprehensible Kirby pages. Every issue is introduced and interrupted by Pristine, Angel of the comic book, who exists solely to make editorial comments like "Don't let the occasional style change confuse you. This place was never big on consistency."

So, we have Satan's Six – Brian Bluedragon, Hard Luck Harrigan, Doctor Mordius, Kuga The Lion-Killer, Dezira of Babylon and Frightful – escaping from the tedium of Limbo and causing havoc on Earth, after striking a deal with the Devil to recruit human souls for Hell. Penciller Jon Cleary is clearly a worshipper at the altar of McFarlane, his grotesquely distorted figures unable to hide a lack of drawing skills. To make this title even more of a ghastly cash-in, 4 features a horrendously inappropriate appearance from *Friday the 13th* psycho Jason, also being published by Topps. All in all, a tacky rip-off.~AL.

SATANIKA

Verotik: *3 issue miniseries 1995*, 8 issues 1996-1998*

Mindless, exploitative drivel from Glenn Danzig and some of the biggest names in comics, who really should know better. Frank Frazetta and Simon Bisley are followed by Duke Mighten as bare, busty, bat-winged Satanika jiggles about posturing and slaughtering an uninspired selection of vampire bimbos and himbos. Why are the terms "adult" and "mature" applied to this kind of storyless nonsense, as it's neither. Banned in lots of places, but for all the wrong reasons.~WW

The SATURDAY MORNING Comic

Marvel: *One-shot 1996*

Utterly mad promotional effort to tie in with an album on which a bunch of slightly left-of- mainstream artists record versions of old Saturday-morning-cartoon theme tunes. For the comic's purposes it seems the future needs saving, and this can only be done by providing the kids with some decent music, inspiring them to rise up against The Suits. Slipshod likenesses of rock musicians from otherwise decent artists vie with an inane script and the bizarre concept for the silliest aspect of the comic. Just say "no".~WJ

SATURDAY NITE

Anson Jew: *2 issues 1998-1999*

Excellent self-published comics. 1 has a possibly autobiographical fable concerning one man being too polite to say 'no' to either a stray cat or a local down and out. Brilliantly drawn in cartoon style by Anson Jew, the short back-up strips complement the lead. In 2 there's a gloomy dissection of a slacker loner's Saturday night, and a strip about a doomed flight. Throughout Jew employs various styles of cartooning, all loose, and all excellent. It's rare that a new talent emerges fully rounded and the finished article, but it occurs here. The only downside is an editorial admission of procrastination meaning future work will probably be slow to emerge.~FP
Recommended: 1-2

SAURIANS

CrossGen: *2 issue microseries ('Unnatural Selection') 2002*

The feral Saurians used as enemies in *Sigil* are fleshed out here, with their backgrounds, beliefs and habits explained to some degree. It also reveals the unpleasant secret behind their later evolutionary progress. It's a competently produced extra for CrossGen completists.~FP

His Name Is SAVAGE

Adventure House: *1 issue 1968*
Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1984*

Boiled so hard he's stuck to the bottom of the pan, Savage is Gil Kane's brutal government covert agent. This was issued as a black and white magazine during a period of popularity for spy fiction and TV; Kane's contribution is certainly a little more sophisticated than contemporary mainstream comics, but has dated badly. The saving grace is the excellent artwork. Freed from the constraints of monthly superhero comics, the fluidity and expression is amazing, and certainly beyond anything he'd produced to that point. The Fantagraphics edition is a reprint on better-quality paper.~WJ

SAVAGE DRAGON

Image: *5 issue miniseries (0-4) 1992-1993, 103 issues + 1993 to date*

The Savage Dragon begins with police lieutenant Frank Darling questioning a green-skinned, fin-headed amnesiac recently found in a burning parking lot. While Dragon, as he is soon nicknamed by hospital staff, is recovering, reports come in of superheroes being maimed and murdered. Darling asks Dragon to help the police, but he refuses until the warehouse where he is working is blown up by the superpowered villains who are terrorising the city. Provoked into action, Dragon joins the police force as a regular cop, albeit an unusual-looking one, waging war on the city's seemingly endless supply of bizarre and freakish ne'er-do-wells. From here on you never lose the feeling that, first and foremost, writer/artist Erik Larsen is having a great deal of fun. The fights are spectacular, the action unrelenting and yet in the middle of it all there's still plenty of time for characterisation. This is both with Dragon and his police colleagues, who become valuable members of the strong supporting cast, and with the members of Freak Force, the other superpowered operatives the cops get onto the payroll, but who eventually quit for their own short-lived title. Some of the best storylines revolve around the relationship between Dragon and his possessive, jealous, ex-hooker girlfriend Rapture – always full of surprises and never afraid to challenge comic conventions. The humour is strong, the stories entertaining and the characterisation top-notch, making *The Savage Dragon* a hugely entertaining title, marred only by the fact that guests turn up a little too regularly. 13, by Jim Lee, was part of Image's crossover week which saw creators swapping titles and Larsen later printed what he originally planned for 13, explaining the two versions of that issue.

The superhero fun and games continue apace in the 20s and 30s, and the first of several major redirections comes with 40, in which Dragon is approached by the government to lead a new superteam. Though the loss of the police precinct setting is a shame, Dragon's cynicism and annoyance at the lycra brigade brings welcome comic relief and the action is as fast and furious as ever. The change also allows the action to be played out on a larger stage including everything from Gods to alternate dimension doubles to alien invasions through the most bizarre supervillains you're likely to see this side of Kirby on acid. Larsen doesn't let up, pause for breath or let the series grow stale right up until the controversial issue 75. Having seen his wife murdered and his life turned upside down, Dragon decides to murder the evil child mastermind Damien Darklord even though he knows this will change history, as many recent events are the result of machinations by the future Darklord who travelled back in time. Dragon doesn't care, does the deed anyway and …

76 kicks of the 'Savage World', as Larsen wipes out in a single blow the supporting cast, situations and world he has carefully crafted over the previous 75 issues. It leaves Dragon in a vastly changed world in which not only is everything different, but significantly worse than the one Darklord had influenced. Over the next few issues, we follow Dragon as he finds his feet in this changed reality, rediscovering characters who may look familiar but don't necessarily act the way he, or the reader, would expect. Larsen always promises that this change is permanent, but in an industry that has rarely had the guts to tinker with successful concepts to such a degree, it takes a few issues to sink in that he really does mean it. Accepting that the pitiful state of this reality is to some extent his fault, Dragon makes it his mission to put things right, which he has accomplished admirably by the next significant anniversary issue, 100. As Dragon faces the opportunity to make a one way trip to his 'real' home, it's a testament to the freshness and originality of Larsen's writing that the outcome genuinely could go either way, leaving readers guessing right up until the final moment. What comes next is as likely to be as different and as changeable as what has come before and just as much fun.

As well as the usual reasons to praise *Savage Dragon*, the accomplishment of more than 100 consecutive issues of a mainstream title by a single creator deserves a special mention. This is particularly noteworthy as Larsen has additionally often turned out a second comic a month for Marvel, DC or Image. What shines through every issue of his work is a genuine love of the comics medium (perhaps more than the comics themselves) and a desire to write for new generations the kind of comics he loved to read as a child. Though he owes an unmissable (and always acknowledged) debt to Kirby, there is nothing backward-looking or navel gazing about Larsen's work. *Savage Dragon* deserves to be remembered as one of the most impressive accomplishments of the 1990s and hopefully beyond. The original miniseries is available as both reprints, called simply *The Dragon*, on lower-grade paper or in a collected edition, as are all issues to 33, although for some reason 34 and 35 were reissued as a slimmer volume titled *Savage Dragon Hellboy*. To celebrate 100 Larsen issued *The Savage Dragon Companion*, offering synopses and background information on all stories to date.~JC

Recommended: 4-6, 10, 27, 28, 31, 62, 75

SAVAGE DRAGON Miniseries and one-shots

Image: *One-shot (vs The Savage Megaton Man) 1993, 3 issue miniseries ('Blood and Guts') 1995*, one-shot (Savage Dragon/Destroyer Duck) 1996, 3 issue miniseries (Red Horizon) 1997 2 issue microseries (Sex and Violence) 1997, 2 issue microseries (Savage Dragon/Marshal Law) 1997, 4 issue miniseries ('Archives') 1998, one-shot (Savage Dragon/Hellboy) 2002*
Mirage: *One-shot (Savage Dragon and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles) 1993*

Erik Larsen's most popular character was created years before he saw professional publication, and much of the work produced for fanzines and comics at the lower end of the quality threshold is available in 'Archives'. It showcases Larsen's plotting strengths, but is otherwise best sampled only by the dedicated.

Larsen collaborates with Don Simpson for the *Megaton Man* comic, but the most successful teaming is when the Dragon is handed over to Pat Mills and Kev O'Neill for a darkly humourous romp through Marshal Law's world. Steve Gerber's satire in the *Destroyer Duck* team-up, which continues in part from *Spider-Man Team-Up* 5, makes for one of the more satisfying one-shots, and it also stars Howard the Duck.

Red Horizon and 'Blood and Guts' have no involvement from Larsen, with the first not very good at all. Jason Pearson is responsible for 'Blood and Guts', involving both elements of the Dragon's police career and a mobster with a mission. It's set just after the original *Savage Dragon* miniseries, so there's much hand clenching and emotional angst about events in that. *Sex and Violence* is of note for the introduction of Jennifer Wilson, who would play a large part in the regular series, and it reads very much like two issues of that. Perhaps Larsen didn't want the topic of domestic violence included there. Don't be fooled by references to Adam Hughes with regard to this series. He just provides layouts for Rick Mays, although there are a few sketch pages in the back.

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* Available in a collected edition

Overall, stay away from *Red Horizon*, and unless you become a dedicated fan, 'Archives', and most of the rest provide *Savage Dragon* material on a par with the parent series.~WJ

SAVAGE DRAGONBERT Full Frontal Nerdity

Image: *One-shot 2002*

These three panel cartoon gags quickly wore out their welcome in the rear of *Savage Dragon*, and this collects everything along with extra material. Erik Larsen thought these were funny enough to publish for over forty issues (57-99), and God knows why, but millions enjoy *Dilbert*. Enjoying *Savage Dragon* is more understandable, so if you like both, try this.~FP

SAVAGE HENRY

Vortex: *13 issues 1987-1990*
Rip-Off: *17 issues (14-30) 1991-1993*
Iconografix: *3 issues 1994, 3 issue miniseries ('Headstrong') 1994*

A spin-off from *Those Annoying Post Bros*, this is really a series about The Bulldaggers, a group of musicians that includes Savage Henry as well as Monsieur Boche (Samoan synthesist), Caroline (a clone), the Lord C'thulu (Elder God) and Conrad Schnitzler (German synthesist). The latter is in fact a 'real' musician, much beloved of creator Matt Howarth, who uses this title both to plug all sorts of brilliant music (in comic strip reviews after the main story) and also to pay homage to any musicians he happens to like. The Residents turn up a couple of times, Nash the Slash, Wire, Dieter Meier, Clint Ruin and others all share adventures in Bugtown with the Bulldaggers.

Hiroshima kills everyone in the first major story (2-7) but our heroes persevere, except that there's only one Caroline left at the end. 14-16 is a history of the band while 17-22 is a dreamtime adventure inside Ayers Rock, where the city of Harmony has been invaded by Headbangers. Harmony, by the way, is a Xanadu for experimental musicians. Caroline is kidnapped (24-25) and Hawkwind guest-star in 26. 'The Blue Bunker Ruse' (28-30) features the Post Bros themselves and concludes with Hiroshima ruling a world devoted to the music of the Bulldaggers, which she hates despite once being a member herself.

After moving to Iconografix, the series comes in shorter bursts but is otherwise unchanged and unchanging. Musicians continue to guest (Moby, Richard Pinhas) and the stories continue to revolve around music and the activities of the band. For those who find the violent anti-social antics of the Post Bros unamusing, this title is easier on the conscience but it's still seriously weird (in the nicest possible way).~NF

Recommended: 2-7, 17-22

SAVAGE LOVE

Bear Bones: *2 issues 1994*

Dan Savage, gay advice columnist for the *Seattle Stranger* newspaper, has various bits of his biography, philosophy and outright Things He Made Up illustrated by various cartoonists. Hilarious, poignant, sarcastic and almost certainly libellous. The best pieces are 'Ken Comes Out To Barbie' in 1 and 'You're A Gay Man Danny Brown' in 2, but there isn't a dud in either issue.~HS

Recommended: 1, 2

SAVAGE PLANET

Basement: *2 issues + 2002 to date*

We're very much in *Xenozoic Tales* territory here, with humanity colonising a world originally shred by dinosaurs and humans who're not as technically advanced. Artists Dan Parsons and Kevin Rasel certainly show promise, and there's definitely a place for a good fantasy comic, but at the moment this is more the sum of its influences rather than anything special.~FP

The SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN the Barbarian

Marvel: *235 issues, 1 Annual 1974-1995*

Marvel's longest-running black and white magazine owed its success to two things. Firstly, a series of stable creative teams, particularly the enthusiastic meeting of Roy Thomas, John Buscema and a number of talented inkers, most frequently Tony De Zuniga. Secondly, the magazine moved with the times, and spiced up the stories with extra sex and violence in the later years while sticking close to the spirit of Howard's original *Conan* stories, more so than the colour comic.

Conan is a barbarian warrior from freezing Cimmeria, the product of a savage and brutish tribe who live for killing and hope for nothing more than to die in battle. Created by Robert E. Howard, a depressive loner who eventually shot himself because he couldn't cope with his mother's death, Conan was everything an arrested personality wished to be: ruthless but honourable, deadly in battle, indomitable of will and a pussy magnet to boot. *Savage Sword*, like the original stories, covers his whole career from teenager to middle-aged king, mixing short, 'see-monster-kill-monster' stories with longer quests. Initially, like most 1970s black and white magazines, it used a wide range of artists. In the first ten issues you get several Neal Adams stories, Barry Windsor-Smith reprints, Howard Chaykin, Jim Starlin and Alex Niño even. However, once John Buscema settled in he made the world of Conan his own, giving the surly barbarian his familiar beetle-browed look and shaggy knickers, while Thomas adapted his way through pretty much the whole Robert E. Howard canon, introducing figures from other stories and filling in the bits Howard and his many editors had missed out. Since Howard's natural man vs the decadence of civilisation philosophy was common to most of the genres he wrote in, not just the fantasy stories, Thomas was able to plunder widely.

Also worth reading, even if you aren't a particular fan of heroic fantasy, are Michael Fleisher's irreverent and politically incorrect scripts, starting with 88, which, when he took over from Thomas for a brief period, were a breath of fresh air, and rather funny with it. Despite its lengthy run, *Savage Sword of Conan*'s appeal didn't really waver. Sampling half a dozen issues will tell you whether it's for you or not. *Marvel Super Special* 9 was an all-Conan issue, most notable for Howard Chaykin's intelligent take on Red Sonja, Conan's occasional partner/girlfriend. Unfortunately it has some of the most hideous colouring you'll see in a comic, which all but obscures the art.~FJ

Recommended: 15-31, 88

SAVAGE TALES

Marvel: *Series one 11 issues, 1 Annual 1971-1975, series two 9 issues 1985-1987*

The flagship of Marvel's black and white magazine line, the first series of *Savage Tales* featured consistently fine strips starring Conan, Ka-Zar and a lot of lesser sword-and-sorcery characters. Its first issue boasted the first Man-Thing by Gerry Conway and Gray Morrow, and the début of Stan Lee and John Romita's Femizons as well as a rather brutal Ka-Zar tale by Lee and John Buscema. Its highspot, though, was the Conan strip 'The Frost Giant's Daughter', by Roy Thomas and the ever-improving Barry Windsor-Smith. In the eighteen months between 1 and 2, Smith had grown enormously in stature, and his art on the epic 'Red Nails' (fifty-eight pages spread between 2 and 3) was quite breathtaking. Writer Roy Thomas clearly relished the rather more mature audience afforded him by the magazine format, and the Conan tales in 4, drawn by Gil Kane, and 5, by Jim Starlin, were equally fine.

After five issues Conan graduated to his own magazine and Ka-Zar was promoted to the lead position. Gerry Conway's stories were efficient enough, but the feature lacked enough distinction from others of its kind, although 9's 'Dark Island of Doom', with its emphasis on sabre-toothed sidekick Zabu, was excellent. The strip was unusually well blessed artistically, with John Buscema, inked by Tony De Zuniga in 6-8, and Steve Gan in 9 and 11, producing nice work, although the Russ Heath effort in 10 was clearly a rushed job.

The magazine's back-up strips drew widely from Marvel's roster of sword-and-sorcery characters, accompanied by the occasional article. Notable strips included Brak The Barbarian in 5 and 7-9, and Shanna The She-Devil in 9 and 10, while 2 and 11 contained a couple of nice shorts drawn by Gray Morrow and Russ Heath respectively. A couple of choice Joe Maneely Black Knight reprints in 2 and 4 rounded out a thoroughly satisfying package, with each issue having something of interest. The annual collected Barry Smith's Ka-Zar stories from *Astonishing Tales*, among other things.

The 1980s revival was quite a different proposition, eschewing more established characters, preferring instead short and contrived men's adventure stories (for want of a better phrase). The whole tone was disappointingly heartless and brutal, aiming squarely at the Punisher's core audience, and not even the likes of John Severin, Gray Morrow and a surprisingly on-form Herb Trimpe could make it at all palatable. The sole exceptions to this were a pair of Vietnam shorts by Doug Murray, particularly well drawn by Michael Golden, very much a forerunner of their later 'Nam series.~DAR

Recommended: Series one 1-5, 9, 11

SAVANT GARDE

Image/WildStorm: *7 issues 1997*

Savant Garde is a spin-off team from WildC.A.T.s led by Savant, sister of Zealot. Barbara Kesel plays up the light-hearted side of superheroics as Savant's curiosity and acquisitive instincts keep leading her into trouble requiring the rest of the team to get her out of it. Her long friendship with assistant Mabel is well depicted, Majestic's presence adds some dignity to the proceedings (he hopes), Cybernary's recuperating from her own short-lived series while Disperse, Sheba and Met-L are new to the WildStorm Universe. With Ryan Odagawa's artwork it all adds up to a pleasant if unchallenging read. There are also three 'Fan Editions' containing eight-page strips that make up an introductory story. They were given away with *Overstreet's Fan Magazine* 22-24 and appeared before the regular series.~NF

SAVIOUR

Trident: *5 issues 1989-1990**

Everyone thinks the superbeing known as Saviour is the new Messiah. Unfortunately for them the real Son of God has returned as a feckless down-and-out with a fat whore as a disciple, and Saviour is actually Satan. Or is he? Mark Millar churns guts in this unsubtle but powerful exploration of Christianity as superheroic myth. Although it tries to shock a bit too hard with scenes of child abuse and *Exorcist*-like priest-battering, blasphemy adds a certain sharpness to the story, excellently illustrated throughout, by Daniel Vallely (1 – a bit of a find who promptly disappeared off the face of the earth) and Nige Kitching (2-5). Sadly unconcluded.~FJ

SAY WHAT?!

Gettosake: *2 issues 2000*

Maurice Love turns out a slice of life comedy drama about a group of friends who've just left high school. He's a talented cartoonist and funny writer, taking his cue from TV comedies with slightly surreal elements that break the wall between cast and viewer.~FP

SCAN by Matt Howarth

Iconografix: *2 issues 1992*

Strange science fiction story told from numerous viewpoints, the focus being a sand-covered planet that transports beings from around the galaxy for precisely thirty-seven seconds before transporting them back. Howarth isn't to all tastes, but this is more accessible than some of his work.~FP

SCARAB

DC/Vertigo: *8 issue limited series 1993-1994*

This was previously announced as a *Dr Fate* miniseries. John Smith's premise has a former mystic hero of the 1940s rejuvenated and setting out to rescue his long-missing wife and former partner. DC had cold feet about the story and insisted on a taste-alike version being substituted for Fate. Just as well, since the ensuing mélange of Hippyshit 101 stream-of-consciousness drivel wouldn't have done Fate any credit. Best read under the influence of illegal substances.~HS

SCARAMOUCH

Innovation: *2 issues 1990-1991*

Scaramouch is a hip young dude who has to travel the world eating magical energy to survive. He's usually accompanied by his girlfriend Tescile Le Fevre, supermodel and arms manufacturer. Vacuous nonsense.~WW

SCARE TACTICS

DC: *10 issues 1996-1997*

Strangely likeable, if simplistic, comic about a bunch of ghouls. Well, a gothy vampiress, a hillbilly werewolf, a shambling lump and a venom-spitting lizard boy from the hood, who form a rock band to explain their strange appearance and keep one step ahead of the powers that be in their hi-tech monster-mobile. Len Kaminski's script is lively even if his characters are fairly by the book, and each is showcased in individual issues as the series progresses. Anthony Williams and Andy Lanning's art is suitably cartoony and bold; from one issue to the next it does tend to change inking style, and the art is at its worst when they attempt freeform spreads rather than sticking to ordinary layouts. None of it stands up to much examination but it's perfectly harmless for younger readers. Note that there's a four month hiatus between issues 9 and 10 when various characters teamed up in Specials with more established characters.~FJ

SCARLET CRUSH

Awesome: *1 issue 1998*

John Stinsman is a big *Star Wars* fan, and almost the entire issue consists of scenes from the films with the characters replaced by thinly veiled simulacrums. The source should be with you if you're a fan, so you won't need this. It's also worth mentioning that there are five alternative covers, each featuring a woman with her breasts hanging out who doesn't appear in the comic. Derivative exploitation? Awesome? Surely not.~WJ

SCARLET IN GASLIGHT

Eternity: *4 issue miniseries 1987-1988**

Fascinatingly conceived but poorly realised story of a meeting between Sherlock Holmes and Count Dracula. After initially experiencing a nervous breakdown, Holmes, along with Dr Watson and Abraham Van Helsing, must join forces with Dracula to prevent Professor Moriarty using Vampire blood to turn London's criminals into a zombie army. Flawed but readable.~WW

SCARLET KISS

All-American: *One-shot 1990*

B-Movie return of the 18th century vampire plot with hints of lesbianism for the lads. Too poorly drawn for titillation, so just crap.~FP

SCARLET SCORPION/DARKSHADE

AC: *1 issue 1995*

Flip-book with the *Scarlet Scorpion* on one side and *Shade* on the other, which is only interesting because there are a couple of plot threads leaking from *FemForce*. To be fair, the Scarlet Scorpion story has at least the makings of an average superhero strip, but the artwork on both characters is very unappealing.~NF

SCARLET THUNDER

Amaze Ink: *4 issue miniseries 1995-1996*

High-speed sprint down memory lane as Dan Vado and Rick Forgus bring us the story of two super-speedsters created to help the USA win World War II. A delightful tribute to Golden Age superheroics that stylishly manages to combine 1940s optimism with 1990s hard edge.~WW

Recommended: 1-4

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* Available in a collected edition

SCARLET WITCH

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1994*

Ostensibly an exploration of the former Avenger's status as a "nexus being", this is in fact a tired exercise in shopworn demonic cliché-baiting. "The end of the old Scarlet Witch", the conclusion boasts. So, is this gormless bint with her head stuck through a tablecloth supposed to be an improvement?~HS

SCARLETT

DC: *14 issues 1993-1994*

It seems the legends about vampires are true after all. They've been around since time immemorial, integrating with society, yet with their own hierarchy and several groups within it. Seventeen-year-old redhead Bly Pharis, the Scarlett of the title, becomes involved with these unsavoury creatures when her parents are murdered. She conveniently discovers abilities she was previously unaware of, and that she's mentioned in ancient prophesies. 1-4 have mystery, action, violence, an appealing lead character and adequate if not spectacular art, and are fun in a B-movie fashion. Gray Morrow's art in 5-9 improves matters, but the downside is massive and often unrequired exposition infodumps for new introductions, and too many characters whose sole reason for being part of the comic is wacky diversity for an issue or two. A brave failure pre-empting the mood of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, cancelled way before the ideas had expired, the final three issues are a premature and rushed conclusion.~FP

SCARS

Avatar: *1 issue + 2002 to date*

Warren Ellis writes a police drama featuring the really ghastly crimes they don't show on TV. There's an element of shock for shock's sake, and the art is stiff and static, but on the basis of the first issue, fans of Ellis' work will enjoy this.~FP

THE SCARY BOOK

Caliber: *2 issues 1992*

Scary? No. Poor and amateur? Yes. And it's a comic, not a book.~WJ

SCARY GODMOTHER

Sirius: *One-shot ('Bloody Valentine Special') 1998, one-shot ('Holiday Spooktacular)' 1998, 3 issue miniseries ('Wild About Harry') 2000, one-shot ('Activity Book') 2000, 6 issue miniseries ('Ghouls Out For Summer') 2001-2002*

Magnificent whimsy from Jill Thompson based on her own children's book series. Cute little Hannah Marie has a mean trick played on her by spiteful older kid during her first Halloween, but is rescued by the exotic and peculiar Scary Godmother. The comic adventures pick up with Hannah Marie more or less living with her in the magical place called the Fright Side with a coterie of fantastic horror icons such as Ruby and Max, the Vampire couple who are having relationship problems, and their young son Orson, who always wants to bite Hannah Marie ('Bloody Valentine'). There's also Mr. Boogeylegs, the scary spirit of Christmas ('Holiday Spooktacular'), and Harry the Fanboy-geek werewolf, finally kicked out by his gypsy mom in 'Wild about Harry'. 'Activity Book' is just that, with strips detailing creative pastimes, and puzzles as well. The longer miniseries tells of Hannah-Marie tribulations at summer camp in the real world whilst Scary Godmother is attending an old School reunion-cum-Witches convention. Although aimed ostensibly at a young audience Thompson's blend of bizarre humour and insightful knowledge of what kids perceive of the adult world makes for an absolute triumph of storytelling. Damned good art too. Get them for the kids and keep them for yourself.~WW

Recommended: 'Bloody Valentine', 'Holiday Spooktacular', 'Wild About Harry 1-3, Miniseries 1-6

SCARY MISS MARY

Mighty Fine: *One-shot ('Fun With Knives') 2001*

Mary is born into a family of magicians, her father being a knife thrower. Edward is a doll that she creates from socks and yarn in an attempt to be accepted by her classmates, who don't understand her innocent fascination with knives and sharp objects. Jill Friemark's animation style, with big anime eyes, adds to the sense of fun and cuteness contrasted with the almost heartbreaking purity of Mary. The origin and few short pieces here serve only to whet the appetite for more adventures, but, published as a marketing tool for Fine clothing (it comes with a set of stickers), this may be all that there is.~NF

SCARY TALES

Charlton: *46 issues 1975-1979 (1-20), 1980-1984 (21-46)*

Horror anthology that's entertaining in small doses, featuring the work of all of the usual 1970s Charlton suspects including Joe Staton, Don Newton, Steve Ditko, Tom Sutton, Charles Nicholas and Vince Alascia and Wayne Howard. Of note are a Man-Thing rip-off in 4 and early work by Mike Zeck in 10. The stories, by Joe Gill and Nick Cuti amongst others, are usually sting-in-the-tail, randomly introduced by Countess Von Bludd. From 12, most issues are actually reprints from earlier Charlton horror series.~NF

SCATTERBRAIN

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1998**

A humour anthology with high production values and a host of top creators. 'Tom', a light-hearted dinosaur strip by Spanish artist Daniel Torres runs in 2-4, and Steve Parkhouse's 'Red Erchie' written by Keith Young runs in 1 and 2. Other highlights in 1 include 'Abu Gung' by Mike Mignola and 'Cluck of Fear' by Chris Garbutt. We meet Tommy X, the school-aged tyrannosaur, drawn by Brian McDonald and written by Brian O'Connell, in 2. There's a page density resembling Floyd Gottfredson's 1930s Mickey Mouse strips in 3's 'Bronco Teddy' by Jim Woodring. 4 includes 'Bugged' by Sergio Aragonés and Mark Evanier as well as Jay Stephen's' 'Oddette' and the delights of Craig Thompson's 'Musical Lump Wagon'. All 4 issues feature Dave Cooper's Pip and Norton, scripted by Gavin McInnes. Patchy but consistently entertaining.~SW

SCAVENGERS

Quality: *26 issues 1987-1989*

Catchall title for reprints from Britain's *2000AD*. Dinosaurs and giant animals are the theme, and it doesn't get better than the early issues, featuring 'Flesh'. When mankind has exterminated all animals, there's no longer any meat. The solution? Go back in time, farm dinosaurs and send the meat back to the future. Of course, the dinosaurs begin to take exception to the intrusion, particularly a battle-hardened tyrannosaur called Old One Eye. Gloriously and gruesomely violent, if your sense of humour extends that way it's a barrel of laughs, and the first two issues also have a good Judge Dredd dinosaur strip. The follow-up from 20 is basically the same plot, except it's sea-dwelling dinosaurs to be harvested. Beyond that, things go wrong. Once you've seen dinosaurs rampaging through 23rd-century factories you're not going to settle for the likes of the C-movie style 'Ant Wars', 'Shako' and 'Helltrekkers'. The former has giant ants rampaging through South America, Shako is a rampaging polar bear, and 'Helltrekkers' is a future version of the 19th-century wagon trails, beset by danger all the way, but pedestrian throughout.~FP

SCENARIO A

Antarctic: *3 issue miniseries 1998*

In the near future a secret society known as The Order of Sekhmet is all that stands against subtle world domination by an organisation called RAIL. The gorgeous Serina Hollander is The Order's most insubordinate agent but, fortunately for her, she doesn't lack talent. She manages more than her fair share of bullet dodging in this fast-paced story. Creator David Hahn is aided by scripter Damon Watson in this densely plotted conspiracy thriller. Hahn's artwork is slick and consistently eye-friendly.~SW

SCENE OF THE CRIME

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1999**

Jack Herriman, private detective, lives with his crime-scene photographer uncle and tries to make sense of his past after

recovering from a drug habit. When he's handed the case of a missing person that turns into a murder investigation, he must also resolve some of his own family conflicts in the search for the truth. Written by Ed Brubaker, this is an excellent, hard-boiled mystery and Michael Lark's edgy artwork is a perfect accompaniment.~NF
Recommended: 1-4

SCHIZO

Fantagraphics: *3 issues 1995-1998*

Loveable Ivan Brunetti depicts himself in a Charlie Brown shirt urinating and defecating all over his sorry-ass self. On a typical page, Ivan plays football with the Earth, stabs it and fucks the wound, then shoots it and shits in the hole before setting it alight. Drug addiction is good because it condenses all of life's many worries into a single problem, he says. The closest comparison is probably Despair, but Brunetti consistently trumps Crumb with spite, invention, and outrage. "Dang me", God complains, after sodomising the baby Jesus in the form of Swee'pea, while his pederast friends Wimpy and Popeye look on, "I didn't even come...". If you are old-fashioned enough to take offence at any work of art, you probably will at *Schizo*. Each issue leavens the long self-abusing episodes of Brunetti's self-caricature with clumps of daily format strips made as dirtily funny as possible. 'Grandpa Needs Dildos' and 'Dr. Prick' are among the printable titles. You have to see these to believe them. 1, unlike the others, also includes strips about a couple of things Ivan likes: "Girls" and the photographer Man Ray!

2 shows a leap in his already considerable technical skills, particularly the clever use of dot tones and panel rhythms. Examples are the zooming sequence of him popping a zit or the page of nine panels of Ivan swearing in the shower followed by an identical layout in which he ages from a sperm to a skeleton, then a splash page of his giant ugly head trailing its little pudgy body with tiny penis and another of sixty-seven Ivans assaulting and maiming each other. 3, which appeared after a two year gap, has only twenty-eight pages, half as many as 1 and 2, but what pages! The first twenty are chapter 4 of 'Self-Caricature': 'Work Equals Degradation', and it's even more relentlessly funny than before. 320 uniform panels, most of them portraying a full-length Ivan, perfectly convey the nightmare of a thinking person working in an office, all brilliantly cartooned.

Some comics retailers, justifiably afraid of police raids, won't stock *Schizo*. It's the most pathetically hopeful, powerfully motivating (the 'secret' agenda of the negative mental attitudinist), and funniest by far comic ever published, and somebody, who's probably right, thinks somebody doesn't want you to read it!~GK
Recommended: 1-3

SCHOOL GIRLS

Image: *3 issue miniseries 2000**

Californian schoolgirl Shelly deals with a death in her family and the unwanted attentions of a boy and his bullying girlfriend. She sounds more like a forty-year old social worker as she resolves her life problems. Nicely drawn in a western style but with the reliance on facials, letratone effects and the low panels-per-page counts that typify Japanese girls comics. Penciller Mark Dos Santos and writer/inker Leyland Myrick's take on the shojo-manga comic is well-realised but ultimately too anodyne for a revisit.~SW

S.C.I. SPY

DC/Vertigo: *6 issue miniseries 2002*

One thousand years after the devastation of Earth, humanity thrives on the seventeen worlds of the Arcturus System. However, the twelve outer worlds are in growing conflict with the terraformed inner planets. Sebastian is a human agent (of SCI Spy), raised by the artificial intelligence, Motherbank after being found floating in space as a baby. He begins to question what he's been led to believe about the end of Earth and Motherbank's part in it when he meets fellow agent, Isis Nile and they begin to uncover the alliances behind a recent wave of terrorist activity. With its intrigue, gadgets, world-threatening villains and beautiful women, this is very much *James Bond* in space, and there's nothing particularly revelatory about the experience. On the other hand, being by Doug Moench and Paul Gulacy, it's well-produced, well-thought out and well-drawn. And a lot of fun, if you like this kind of thing.~NF

SCI-TECH

WildStorm: *4 issue miniseries 1999*

A long-running conflict between nature and technology erupts with science reporter Leo Lomax caught in the middle. Irresponsible in the extreme, under pressure he reveals heroic tendencies, and discovers something about himself besides. As the title suggests, the sympathies of plot lie with science, but otherwise we're very much in *Indiana Jones* territory for this excessively wordy romp.~WJ

A SCIENCE AFFAIR

Antarctic: *2 issue microseries 1994, one-shot 1998*

Amusing crossover between various characters from *Gold Digger* and *Ninja High School*, in which two separate sets of villains want to capture or kill Zetra-Three, who's on his way to a science fair. Cheetah, Gold Digger and several girls from the Ninja High School are drawn into a huge fight with monsters, giant robots and aliens. Somehow, Fred Perry also squeezes in the bizarre Super Science Ninja Team Treat Man (whose weapons include giant spoons and Pez dispensers). Perry's script and artwork both feel cramped at times, but there's also an attractive lightness of touch, that makes for an enjoyable romp. The 1998 one-shot collects the original two issue series.~NF

SCIMIDAR

Eternity: *4 issue miniseries 1988-1989, 4 issue miniseries (Scimidar II) 1989, 4 issue miniseries (Scimidar III) 1990, 4 issue miniseries (Scimidar IV 'Wild Thing') 1990, 4 issue miniseries (Scimidar V 'Living Color') 1991, 4 issue miniseries (Scimidar VI 'Slashdance') 1992-1993*
CFD: *1 issue 1995*

We've already wasted too much space just listing *Scimidar* miniseries. Suffice it to say that Scimidar is a violent badgirl, an 'intellectual' assassin who likes to understand who she's being asked to kill, but who also has a fondness for licking blood off her knives while showing you her crotch. Repulsive stuff that benefits from neither good writing nor art.~FJ

SCION

CrossGen: *30 issues + 2000 to date*

The scion of the title is Ethan, younger prince of the western Heron Dynasty. He wins a coming of age ritual through the unconscious use of recently bestowed special abilities, of which he was previously unaware. This is considered illegal by the opposing prince, Bron of the eastern Raven Dynasty, with whom a fragile truce is maintained. The price of Ethan's victory is to become a Raven prisoner for a year. He is spirited away, though, by the attractive Asheligh, coincidentally a Raven princess, who is fighting her own war to achieve equality for the non-humanoid races on the planet. The issue of state condoned prejudice is rather skimmed over in passing, mind, although prompts some very nice vistas in 26 from artist Jim Cheung during the story of a slave's flight to freedom. Members of The First intervene, Bron is also powered up, and Ethan becomes a man. Ron Marz plots an ongoing fantasy soap opera that meanders like a country bus, taking until 25 to provide a few resolutions. If this appeals rather than repels, it's all produced to professional standards, although Cheung's emaciated women could do with a good meal. CrossGen publish collections as soon as enough material becomes available, thus keeping all issues in print.~FP

SCOOBY DOO

Gold Key: *30 issues 1970-1975*

Frankly excellent comic series, mostly written by Mark Evanier and drawn by Dan Spiegle. Evanier's scripts follow the cartoon formula but keep the jokes coming as Scooby,

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* Available in a collected edition

Shaggy, Velma, Daphne and Fred travel around America finding fraudulent ghosts and monsters practically anywhere. Spiegle doesn't overly define the main characters but his draughtsmanship is given full reign in the backgrounds and supporting cast. There are some short back-ups (including 'The Weird World of Dr. Strange' – a werewolf, Jekyll-and-Hyde scientist – from 1966) until issue 17, after which most issues contain two Scooby adventures.~NF

Recommended: 12, 13, 17-22, 27, 28-30

SCOOBY DOO

Marvel: *9 issues 1977-1979*

Marvel's short-lived attempt to do Hanna Barbera's *Scooby Doo* at least keeps the talents of Mark Evanier and Dan Spiegle. The scripts are a little less fresh and Spiegle's artwork bears more of his own stamp, but overall these are still good comics that capture the spirit and flavour of the cartoon series. Dynomutt (1-6) is the back-up (by Evanier and Paul Norris) in short stories that preview the next month's *Dynomutt* issues.~NF

Recommended: 1-9

SCOOBY DOO

Archie: *21 issues 1995-1997*

Archie did at least try to appease long-time fans by hiring Evanier and Spiegle for a few issues (10, 14, 17). Otherwise, quite apart from having Scrappy Doo in some of them, the tiresome stories by Henry Vallely, Bill Matheny and, mostly, Michael Kirschenbaum make too many references to current culture or politics. The success of *Scooby Doo* has much to do with its universality: including comments about Mel Gibson erodes that.~NF

Recommended: 17

SCOOBY DOO

DC: *67 issues +, 4 Specials 1997 to date*

Part of DC's Cartoon Network line, *Scooby Doo* retains the plots and characters of the earliest cartoons (no Scrappy etc) without being too repetitive. Initially, it helps that the main story often contains a fact to be explained in a features page (e.g. Golems, Druids, Islam, Cowgirls, Reincarnation), while the need to tell a funny story isn't sacrificed to the editorial, but this feature is dropped after 13. Most issues contain two self-contained, short stories, exceptions being a Roswell story (26-27) and the more ambitious 'The Dragon's Eye' (60-66), which tells separate adventures each issue as the gang go globetrotting after a mysterious thief, who's gathering the fragments of a larger jewel. Plots largely manage to stay within the confines of the original concept, though one or two do dabble with 'real' unexplained characters (a ghost in 25 and real aliens in 27). The four annual specials (two *Spooky Spectaculars*, a *Spooky Summer Special* and a *Super Scarefest!*) all contain reprints from the previous year's issues. The most frequent writers are Terrance Griep Jr (throughout) and John Rozum (from 17) with additional stories from at least a dozen others. A few other writers of note have appeared only occasionally, such as Barbara Slate (3), Sam Henderson (4), Paul S. Newman (17, 24) and Bob Fingerman (35, 38, 39, 45, 46). The artwork has been standardised, in keeping with the cartoon appearances of the characters, despite there being over fifteen artists on the series. Joe Staton remains the regular penciler, having strips in most issues since 3. Others of note are Ivan Brunetti (1), Ernie Colón (to 8), Don Perlin (a brief run between 24 and 33), Dan DeCarlo (46 and 51, though unsympathetically inked in the latter) and Karen Matchette (45, 47, 51, 55, 57).~NF

Swing With SCOOTER

DC: *36 issues 1966-1972*

Joe Orlando turns in some nice art in the first issues of this 1960s up-to-the-minute version of *Archie*. Considering it's basically a school and teen life strip there are transformations more bizarre than any superhero title as Scooter and crew are turned into vegetables in 7 and shrunk in 8. After Orlando's departure with 11 attempts to disguise the Archie style lapsed completely, with artists Stan Goldberg, Win Mortimer, and Henry Scarpelli obviously under instructions to copy. No better or worse than its inspiration, the concentration on being hip is always amusing in retrospect.~WJ

SCORCHED BIRTH

Pig Run Press: *One-shot 1999*

Recollections of strange or disturbing events during younger years that starts very strongly with Marie Javins' remembrances of her family and Don Hudson dredging up a particularly traumatic childhood incident. Thereafter there are too many "so what?" stories, although writer Joey Cavalieri reveals a hitherto unsuspected talent for cartooning, and the one page by Jessica Wolk-Stanley is honest and a laugh.~FP

SCORCHED EARTH

Tundra: *4 issues 1991*

In a future Earth destroyed by pollution, scientist Elliot Godwin has the power to heal the environmental damage and is pursued by various factions, from the (predictably) evil government to Hopi Indians who want to make him the god of an ancient messiah prophecy. Michael Gaydos and John Gentile's tale is glossily presented, with shiny paper and painted artwork, but there's little original in here to make it worth the effort.~JC

THE SCORE

Piranha Press: *4 issue miniseries 1990*

Major rock star Philip Sand loses his memory while writing a movie soundtrack. As parts fall back into place he's caught between two moguls, each of whom believes he has information that would enable him to wrest control of the other's influence. The phrase "The Score" keeps recurring, both as a motif and a possible threat. Unfortunately Sand has no idea what it refers to. This is a taut and surprisingly gritty mystery from Gerard Jones, ably illustrated by Mark Badger. There are plenty of surprises, not least the constant uncertainty of who's working with whom, but a major failing is that there's not a single likeable character, deadening any emotional impact. If you can live with that give *The Score* a try.~WJ

SCORPIO ROSE

Eclipse: *2 issues 1983*

With her leg-warmers, pink hair and leotard Scorpio Rose comes on like the Witch from *Fame*. Rushing to embrace the opportunities afforded by independent publishers, Steve Englehart reprised Madame Xanadu for Eclipse as a flame-haired gypsy whose mystic powers and immortality emerged when her lover, who was possessed by a demon during a knife fight, raped her. The story never really got going. Lots of people are after her Book of Fleshe, and the lover turns up after it along with the gypsy he killed in the original fight. Marshall Rogers provided shadowy, beautifully composed art, and also drew the back-up, Dr Orient, written by Frank Lauria.~FJ

THE SCORPION

Atlas: *3 issues 1975*

Howard Chaykin turns in pulp-style adventures of a 1930s mercenary in the first two issues, arguably the best comics published by Atlas. The third issue inexplicably concentrates on a contemporary costumed character with the same name, and is terrible. Chaykin later transferred his version of The Scorpion to Marvel, calling the character Dominic Fortune.~FP

THE SCORPION KING

Dark Horse: *2 issue microseries 2002*

The adaptation of a movie vehicle for wrestler The Rock. If this is anything to go by it gives him plenty of chances to ripple his muscles, and relies on spectacle rather than plot. Cliff Richards and Will Conrad produce nice artwork, gloomily coloured by Dave Stewart, but otherwise there's not much to recommend this.~WJ

SCOUT

Eclipse: *Series one 24 issues 1985-1987, series two ('War Shaman') 16 issues 1988-1989*

In Tim Truman's futuristic Western, Scout is an Apache summoned by the supernatural Gahn to defeat Four Monsters who are currently in positions of power in the USA (including the presidency). Forewarned by Scout's killing of the first monster, the President sends two of Scout's army-training friends (Rosanna Winter and Raymond Vaughan) to kill him. Operating in a world of ecological disaster and social disintegration, Scout has killed the monsters by the end of 6. He goes on to become a rallying point for the hungry and discontented people, accompanied by a spiritual leader, Doody, whose bible is *The Lord of the Rings*. By 14 Doody is dead and Scout has been wounded and captured by Winter, but her allegiances have been shaken by contact with an Israeli secret agent who tells her about the real effects of the US policies she's supporting. Teamed up with Monday the Eliminator (after they've fought each other through the 3-D Special, issue 16), Scout winds up in the middle of a global war (20-24). 1-14 are reprinted in two collections.

'War Shaman' picks up the story ten years later as Scout descends from a mountain retreat following the death of his wife. The America he returns to is still torn by civil war; the series depicts his search for a new home as he crosses paths with old acquaintances Vaughan and Winter. Arguably Truman's finest hour, Scout features mature scripts and artwork. Its main fault is a tendency to lose the plot and meander, but overall it's a very enjoyable read. Two further Scout series were discussed but haven't yet appeared. Notable back-ups include 'Fashion in Action' (1-8) and 'Monday the Eliminator' (11-14, before becoming part of the main storyline). There was also Beau Smith's 'Beau Le Duke' ('War Shaman' 13-16), centred around a supporting character from the first series.~NF

SCREAM

Skywald: *11 issues 1973-1975*

Following the success of *Nightmare* and *Psycho*, this was the last of Skywald's black and white horror magazines. Like its companions it was edited, and for the most part written, by the eccentric Al Hewetson, and typically the stories were overblown, lurid and downright strange. Titles like 'Are You Dead Yet?' in 5 and 'Satan's Third Reich' in 7 should give an idea of the material the unsuspecting reader can stumble across here. Scream mixed serials with copious adaptations of Poe and Lovecraft. 'Nosferatu' ran from 1, drawn by Zeser, 'Lady Satan' debuted in 2, drawn by the stylish Ricardo Villamonte, and there was Frankenstein from 6 by Cesar Lopez. The most notable serial, though, was 'The Victims' in most issues from 6, a bizarre mix of Perils of Pauline cliffhangers, horror clichés and gratuitous cheesecake art. That said, if you're looking for brainless fun and are prepared to leave your critical faculties at home this could be the strip for you, and in any case Suso's art is a joy to behold. It was reprinted in five issues by Eternity in the late 1980s.~DAR

SCREAM COMICS

Current Books: *19 issues 1944-1948*

The title notwithstanding, this offers simple gag humour strips for and starring children; a type of comic extinct in the USA, yet thriving in the UK. They're nicely produced to a generic house style, and, surprisingly, black characters have their own strips, enlightenment compromised by big-lipped caricatures. 11 draws flak for it's Native American strip, which is no worse than Little Plum, but the depiction of island inhabitants in that issue's 'Andy and his Airplane' strip is something to be ashamed about.~FP

SCREAMING KITTY

Slave Labor: *3 issues 2001*

Genuinely whacko, almost stream-of-consciousness gag cartooning from Dan Gregory with the eponymous Cat acting as an introducer for a bizarre procession of weird characters. Short, sharp and furious in the thematic style of Ren and Stimpy or Cow and Chicken, but sadly missing the mark as often as it tickles the funny bone. The pastiche of The Monkey's Paw in 3 is a highpoint. One of those truly rare times when the reader's sensibilities are as important as the work for a successful read.~WW

SCREEN PLAY

Slave Labor: *1 issue 1989*

A major movie is in production, reviving Major Nebula, an old space-hero TV series. The show underwent a complete transformation for its second run, progressing from pure corn to thoughtful terror under the hand of mysterious new writer I.M. Thorgon, except that all was not happy on set. Intriguing, well plotted and paced, and sadly incomplete, it's a very promising début from writer and artist Ashley Holt. Whatever happened to him?~FP

SCREWBALL SQUIRREL

Dark Horse: *3 issues 1995*

Yet another attempt to bring *Tom and Jerry*-style violent slapstick to comics. And yet another failure to capture the humour, energy and inventiveness of the cartoons. Written by Bob Fingerman and drawn by Greg Hyland, these Screwball Squirrel stories are madcap but terribly uninspired, with endlessly repeated jokes. Back-ups featuring other Tex Avery characters are not much better, with the Droopy story in 2 so knowing it's unbearable.~NF

SCROOGE McDUCK IN THE YUKON

Gladstone: *One-shot 1995*

For reasons best known to themselves, Gladstone published this Don Rosa Uncle Scrooge story as a special rather than allocating space in the regular *Uncle Scrooge* titles. It's good stuff, a continuity implant set in the Yukon before Scrooge hit the vein that made his fortune, with a fine supporting cast, good gags and the poignancy of Scrooge's failed romance with Glittering Goldie. As the lead features a Mountie, the Three Little Pigs back-up concentrates on them as Mounties, but it's filler and you should be getting this for Scrooge and Rosa.~WJ

Recommended

SCUD: the Disposable Assassin

Fireman Press: *19 issues 1994-1997*, 5 issue miniseries ('Tales from the Vending Machine') 1998*

In a future where robots, aliens and bionic augmentation are commonplace and where crime and injustice run rampant Scuds are artificial hitmen that you can hire simply by putting coins in a vending machine. Once they accomplish their assignment they're supposed to self-destruct, but one day…

Creator Rob Schrab and writer Dan Harmon tell the tale of the weapon that learns how to make friends and ensure his enemies stay dead. Excessively violent, fast-paced and played mostly for laughs with a storyline that is practically non-existent, it is nonetheless a stylish exercise in action that almost transcends its insubstantial, one-trick-pony nature. Sadly as the series progresses it becomes so much more about the ancillary characters such as the gangsters of the Future Mafia that the later issues are actually inextricable from the spin-off *La Cosa Nostroid*, thereby losing a lot of the early spontaneity. 'Tales from the Vending Machine' is a loosely connected string of contributions from guest creators such as Trent Kaniuga, Doug TenNapel and Josh Mason and Jorge Pacheco, featuring concepts from the original run. The best of these is Scud: No Name series from 2, a tribute to the Clint Eastwood westerns by Ruben Martinez and Teddy Tenenbaum. High quality storytelling but if you've read one it feels like you've read them all.~WW

THE SCYTHE

Caliber: *One-shot 1996*

Pretentious writing disguises that this is the same ordinary-man-turns-vigilante-after-his-family-are-killed story that you've read dozens of time elsewhere. There are some gruesome touches thrown in, and the main character is well designed, but the ponderous whole reduces any chance of a return appearance.~FP

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* Available in a collected edition

SEA DEVILS

DC: *35 issues 1961-1967*

Ahh...nostalgia. Why does no one produce undersea-adventure comics anymore? Graduating from *Showcase* 27-29, we have four Sea Devils, the cerebral leader, his blonde girlfriend, her kid brother and a loveable hunk of meat, surely the prototypes of the Fantastic Four. Elegantly illustrated by Russ Heath for the first ten issues, and featuring beautifully toned covers, the Sea Devils' stories are ephemeral light entertainment, as much a period piece as *I Love Lucy* and *Rock Around the Clock*.~FP

SEA HUNT

Dell: *13 issues 1958-1962*

Diving expert Mike Nelson's international adventures are based on the TV series that had some of the highest audience ratings at the start of the 1960s, inspiring all sorts of underwater comics with its popularity. 1-3 were part of Dell's *Four Color* umbrella title with the independent numbering commencing with 4. The scripts are uncredited but the artwork is mostly identifiable and noteworthy. Dan Spiegle adds his usual dash of character to the first issue, Alex Toth pencils 3 with Russ Manning drawing 4-6, 8-11 and 13.~SW

The SEARCHERS

Caliber: *4 issues 1996, 2 issues ('Apostle of Mercy') 1997*

By virtue of mystical happenstance the characters from the most prominent turn-of-the-century science-fiction novels emerge from the books to procreate. In the present day their descendants are gathered to prevent another mystical event with potentially catastrophic consequences. Very enjoyable in the manner of the 1960s films made from the turn-of-the-century novels, although one might wish for more subtly inserted exposition dumps.~FP

SEBASTIAN

Disney: *2 issue microseries 1992*

Ugly Sebastian the lobster is one of the strangest ever choices for the cute companion role in a Disney cartoon, and here he leaves the Little Mermaid to see the wider world. It's competently produced, but strictly average material with the only surprises among the contributors: Peter David, Jackson Guice, and Pat McGreal.~WJ

SEBASTIAN O

DC/Vertigo: *3 issue miniseries 1993*

Victorian England with 21st-century technology à la Captain Nemo is the setting for the exploits of a psychotic renegade dandy. Imprisoned for his bohemian behaviour, Sebastian O escapes to cause havoc among the somewhat seedy establishment. Surprisingly unpretentious writing from Grant Morrison and excellent period art from Steve Yeowell. "One must commit acts of the highest treason only when dressed in the most resplendent finery..." How true. Marvellous.~HY

Recommended: 1-3

SECOND CITY

Harrier: *4 issue miniseries 1986-1987**

Confused mystery script from Paul Duncan throws in the kitchen sink and produces a story complicated but far from complex. With most other Phil Elliott artwork you at least get a story that's interesting, so there's little reason to seek this out.~FJ

Jack Kirby's SECRET CITY SAGA

Topps: *5 issues (0-4) 1993*

The prolific Jack Kirby's sketch pages were purchased by Topps, who developed *Secret City Saga* from his character designs. They managed an entertaining series, with an accompanying nostalgic glow harking back to the early days of Marvel, not least by employing Roy Thomas and Steve Ditko to write and draw. That being so, the themes are 100% Kirby. A millennia-old race exists beneath the Earth, perpetuating themselves during times of disaster by suspended animation. Three warriors, mutated to give them extra abilities, awake in the 1990s and make their way to the surface. This is detailed in individual issues titled *Bombast*, *Captain Glory* and *Nightglider*, which introduce the cast. While also imbued with the spirit of early Marvel comics, they're not as skilfully written, although there is a small thrill to be had in seeing the odd art combination of Dick Ayers and John Severin once again. The ending of each solo issue leads into *Secret City Saga* 1. Some less reputable types also survive the cataclysm and are bent on enforcing their will on Earth. The zero issue is a largely superfluous trade promotion giving a little background to the series (explained in 1 anyway), but has some nice Walt Simonson art and also introduces *Satan's Six*. Ditko's not on top form, but certainly adequate, and, denied previous continuity reference points, Roy Thomas remembers how to tell a story again. This thrilled few when originally published, but is deserving of another glance.~FP

THE SECRET DEFENDERS

Marvel: *25 issues 1993-1995*

The title apart, this has little to do with the first version of *The Defenders*, initially presenting off-beat combinations of Marvel superheroes pitted against mystical menaces they wouldn't usually encounter. The constant factor is Doctor Strange, who selects the necessary participants by consulting his tarot deck. It's all reasonable superhero stuff. Credit then to Ron Marz, Tom Grindberg and Don Hudson for experimenting with a team of villains under the direction of Thanos in 12-14, the best story in the run. With 15 the creative team changes and emphasis shifts to a regular team of Druid, Shadowoman and Cadaver plus guest stars. The resulting dull formula material lasts longer than any other period of the title, and cancellation was creative mercy killing.~WJ

SECRET HEARTS

DC: *153 issues 1949-1973*

Second of the major DC romance launches, *Secret Hearts* was second to none in quality, with top-notch art (Alex Toth, Mike Sekowsky / Bernard Sachs, Gray Morrow, John Romita, J. Scott Pike, Gene Colan) and stories that, while every bit as silly as those in its sisters, at least showed some imagination. Covers, in keeping with the 'Secret' motif, frequently showed the heroine in some romantic dilemma, either self-inflicted (she'd made up a boyfriend so as not to be left out of girl talk...so what does she do when her girlfriends tell her 'new' boy-friend she's going steady?), or external (her declared- dead fiancé returns from the war...but what can she tell her new boy-friend?). Two serials ran in the book 'Search for Happiness', 110-138, a perfunctory and unsatisfactory saga of a young girl's quest for the perfect partner and her perpetual disappointments, and chapters 2 and 3 of the shorter but higher-voltage '20 Miles to Heartbreak', a drama of riches, deception and as much passion as the Comics Code would allow, which crossed over into *Young Love*.~HS

SECRET MESSAGES

Caliber: *1 issue ('Abductions') 1998*

NBM: *5 issue miniseries 2001-2002*

Larry Hancock and Michael Cherkas continue *Silent Invasion* with another slice of 1950s paranoia. It's now 1965 and ex-FBI agent Phil Housley is a down-at-heel private detective who's supporting his secretary (or vice versa) and ex-wife. His fortunes appear to have changed for the better when he's hired to find a missing husband, but he regrets taking the case when it appears that his quarry may have been abducted by aliens and he finds evidence that Matt Sinkage may be involved. With its hard-boiled approach, this is an enjoyable strip, but dilutes the impact somewhat of the previous episodes because most of the moves have been seen before. 'Abductions' is reprinted (with some reworking) in issues 1 and 2 of the miniseries.~NF

THE SECRET OF THE SALAMANDER

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1992*

The Secret of the Salamander, by Jacques Tardi, starring his female investigator Adele Blanc-Sec, is a particularly convoluted, self-referential mystery that starts out in World War I trenches and involves secret world organisations (a sort of Bildenberg Committee) and the Mafia. Humorous, cynical, toying with story-telling conventions, this is Tardi at his most disrespectful and intriguing.~NF

Recommended

SECRET ORIGINS

DC: *Series one 7 issues 1973-1974, series two 50 issues, 3 Annuals, 1 Special 1986-1990, one-shot (80-Page Giant) 1998, one-shot (80-Page Giant) 1999, one-shot (Secret Files & Origins: DC Villains) 2000*

The first DC comic with titled *Secret Origins* was actually an issue of *80-Page Giant*, and dealt with under that title. The 1970s series reprints various superhero origin stories, ranging from 1938 (Superman in 1) to 1968 (Legion of Super-Heroes in 6). They're worth a look, since the stories are usually entertaining, and each issue has a discussion of the way a character's origin story has changed over the years. Of course, they're also a cheap way of seeing now rather rare stories. 3's reprinting of Wonder Woman's origin from 1942 stands above the rest. William Moulton Marston's story is fresh and original, and the artwork from Harry S. Peter is utterly individual and charming. When you consider that people producing comics in 1942 thought that their work would be read once and thrown away, it is humbling to see how much care and effort Marston and Peter still chose to pour into this story. Others covered are Batman and Flash (1), Supergirl, Atom and Green Lantern (2), Wildcat (3), Vigilante and Kid Eternity (4), The Spectre (5), Blackhawk (6) and Robin and Aquaman in 7.

The second series contains new stories (for the most part closely based on older versions), and the characters covered become steadily more obscure as the series progresses. It was never a particularly strong series, though most issues have some entertainment value. The list of those worth tracking down is short: 10, for Alan Moore's take on the Phantom Stranger, with art by Joe Orlando, and useful comments on the problems faced by someone who refuses to pick a side on a particular issue; 24, for Gary Cohn and Dan Mishkin on the Blue Devil, with art by Ty Templeton and some hilarious moments, although it comes adrift at the end; 37 for Templeton again, on the Legion of Substitute Heroes (flawless, this one); and 46 for the origin of their clubhouse and an introduction to Arm-Fall-Off Boy, written by Gerard Jones with art by Curt Swan and Ty Templeton (again).

Artist Murphy Anderson's love of the old Quality characters shines through on Doll Man (8), Uncle Sam (19) and the ludicrous Black Condor (21), where he faithfully updates Lou Fine's art for the original story. Also of interest are Michael Gilbert's Spectre (15), the bizarre Creeper (18), Gil Kane's artwork on Midnight (28), Sheldon Mayer's short, humorous Red Tornado (29), Neil Gaiman on Poison Ivy (36), Detective Chimp (40) and Ambush Bug (48). The final issue was ninety-six pages covering six characters. Alan Brennert and Joe Staton's Black Canary is the standout, but Al Weiss' art for Johnny Thunder, influenced by Kane is also noteworthy.

The 1989 Special devoted itself to "Gotham City's vilest villains", using a framing sequence featuring a TV crew making a documentary (writer Neil Gaiman, artists Mike Hoffman and Kevin Nowlan), and taking in the Penguin, the Riddler, and Two-Face. The Riddler story is particularly appealing, written by Neil Gaiman, with artwork by Bernie Mireault and Matt Wagner. The 1990s 80pg Giants are confusingly both numbered 1. The 1998 edition concentrates on Young Justice, and in 1999 Vandal Savage is gathering villains to attack the Titans in their own title. They're well produced, and should appeal to readers of the titles they concern. Of lesser quality is the *Secret Files* issue, again with Vandal Savage at the forefront. Only four pages drawn by Phil Winslade are in any way a treat.~FC

Recommended: Series one 3, series two 10, 24, 37, 46, 1989 Special

SECRET SIX

DC: *7 issues 1968-1969*

Six people with different backgrounds and abilities were brought together by the mysterious Mockingbird to combat evil-doers beyond the reach of the law. Mockingbird had helped each of the six in the past and still controlled their fates. This was a fine espionage series written by the very versatile E. Nelson Bridwell, and would have made a great TV series. There was an intriguing twist: one of the six was Mockingbird, but who? Well, all was revealed almost twenty years on in *Action Comics* 601, when the feature was revived. Apparently the identity revealed wasn't who Bridwell intended the character to be.~HY

SECRET SOCIETY OF SUPER-VILLAINS

DC: *15 issues, 1 Special 1976-1978*

Despite the ludicrous title there's much to enjoy here in a light-hearted fashion. Plagued throughout by shoddy art, and constantly shifting creative staff, no one really settles until writer Gerry Conway takes control with 8. The best issues are 1-5, instituting the Society (complete with clubhouse) funded by a mysterious benefactor, and mixing in concepts from two classic DC runs, Jack Kirby's *New Gods* and the Manhunter strip from *Detective.* Publicist Funky Flashman (Kirby's thinly veiled Stan Lee jibe from *Mister Miracle)* is thrown into the mix to good effect from 4, but from 6 the title loses its way, with revived 1950s superhero Captain Comet teaming with assorted DC superheroes to bring the villains to justice. By the time Conway has begun to set matters right again, cancellation has struck, with plots being concluded in *JLA* 166-168.~FP

Marvel Super Heroes SECRET WARS

Marvel: *12 issue limited series 1984-1985*, 9 issue limited series 1985-1986*

Marvel's grand event of 1984 materialised as a grand fiasco. The Beyonder, an omnipotent being, discovers the Marvel Universe. His dubious method of investigation comprises transporting most major Marvel heroes and villains to an artificially constructed planet. Cue twelve issues of mindless mayhem where most sub-plots manifest as petty bickering amongst allies, unaided by Jim Shooter's artless dialogue and Mike Zeck's unusually lacklustre pencils. A new Spider-Woman is introduced in 7, and Spider-Man's black costume makes its début in 8. Otherwise all developments, including character deaths, are reinstated to issue 1's status quo by the wish fulfilment powers abounding in the final issues. What was the point?

Barely three months after the first series Marvel tried again. The Beyonder still considers the human race to be worthy of study, so manifests on earth as a Michael Jackson lookalike in order to experience every facet of human existence. The inherent fatal flaw is that no human writer can convincingly portray utterly omnipotent characters, as Jim Shooter proceeds to demonstrate. The resulting escapade depicts a spoilt two-year-old brat with limitless power flitting around the globe as multitudes of heroes chase mindlessly. That said, the diversity afforded by the premise results in an improvement on the first series, and the ending is creditable. Be warned that the relentless tie-ins to over thirty issues of other titles give an incomplete feel to this series if read in isolation.~APS

SECRET WEAPONS

Valiant: *21 issues 1993-1995*

Built around a core of two characters introduced in *Harbinger, Livewire* and *Stronghold,* and the pre-pubescent Geomancer, Secret Weapons begins as Valiant's answer to The Defenders, with other superheroes augmenting the trio for each particular mission. Joe St Pierre writes and draws most of 1-10, and with the exception of 6 and 7 (involving the dull spider aliens that proliferate in Valiant titles) they're solid superhero stories. Power suits acquired by British intelligence services in 10 are distributed in 11, as the title changes direction to focus on a quartet of new characters. It transpires, though, that there are problems associated with the power suits, and most of the remaining issues are devoted to sorting them out. While okay, they don't match the earlier material, and 20 and 21, with Bloodshot on the rampage and crossing over into other titles, are very poor.~FP

Recommended: 1, 2, 8

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* Available in a collected edition

SECRETS OF SINISTER HOUSE

DC: *14 issues (5-18) 1972-1974*

Continuing the numbering from Gothic romance comic *Sinister House of Secret Love*, 5, nicely crafted by Michael Fleisher and Dick Giordano, was originally intended for that comic. From 6 it reverted to DC's more typical collections of twist-in-the-tale mysteries, and was a somewhat hit- or-miss affair. Writers like Robert Kanigher, Steve Skeates and Jack Oleck were at the very least competent, if often uninspired, but the occasional inventive story by Sheldon Mayer brightened things up a bit (particularly 7, which he wrote in its entirety). Artistically it was also a mixed bag, with the likes of Mike Sekowsky and Bill Draut rubbing shoulders with the rather more exciting likes of Sam Glanzman (7), and the team of Larry Hama and Neal Adams in 10. The title's most consistent quality was supplied by its Filipino contingent, notably Alfredo Alcala (6, 10, 12-14), Rico Rival (9), Gerry Talaoc (10) and the ever-reliable Nestor Redondo (7, 15). Alex Niño also produced some feverishly imaginative work (8, 11, 13), which occasionally approached psychedelic surreality.

What was really required was an individual identity, and towards the end of the run the title experimented with a number of new directions. In one example E. Nelson Bridwell supplied a couple of nice literary adaptations of William Fryer Harvey (12) and Ambrose Bierce (14) short stories. The final few issues contained a number of inventory and reprint stories, most enjoyably a Johnny Peril story in 16, beautifully drawn by Frank Giacoia and Sy Barry, though it was Vincente Alcazar's moody drawing in 16 that most impressed. Overall, *Secrets of Sinister House* is a comic for art fans or those after an unchallenging read.~DAR

Recommended: 7, 8, 11-13, 16

SECRETS OF THE HAUNTED HOUSE

DC: *48 issues, 1 Special 1975-1978*

Nothing here to give your spine a chill, but you can always find the occasional nicely drawn story. Mike Golden's effort in 10 comes to mind. A fairly interesting series starring the blind Mr E, who would later play a major role in the *Books of Magic* miniseries, appeared in 31-41.~HY

SECRETS OF THE LEGION OF SUPER-HEROES

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1981*

You know those sit-com episodes where time or money has clearly run out and the regulars gather round a set and say "Remember when..." and flashbacks ensue? Well, this is like that. Legion father-figure R.J. Brande is fatally ill and being visited by all twenty-seven Legionnaires at once, which surely violates hospital regulations regarding maximum room occupancy. He can only be saved by genetic material from his hitherto unknown child, who is – gasp – one of the Legion. Cue the flashbacks, as every member has their origin reviewed. Ploddingly narrated by E. Nelson Bridwell and execrably illustrated by Jimmy Janes, this is probably the single most pointless *LSH* spin-off, and it's had stiff competition.~HS

SECRETS OF THE VALIANT UNIVERSE

Valiant: *3 issues, 1994-1995*

Not a series, but three unconnected specials published sporadically several months apart. 1, a giveaway with the *Wizard* magazine's *Valiant Special*, showcased all of the Valiant heroes in two-page stories, a couple of which had major repercussions in their regular series. 2 featured Master Darque, and was part of the 'Chaos Effect' crossover, and 3 was an untold story of the Rai who perished in the 'Unity' crossover.~HS

SECTAURS, Warriors Of Symbion

Marvel: *8 issues 1985-1986*

"Somewhere in space spins a planet known to its insect-evolved inhabitants as... Symbion." Well, who are we to judge what form insect evolution would take on another planet, but it seems odd that it should produce an intelligent life-form exactly like homo sapiens apart from little antennae and compound eyes (which have a pupil-like dot in the middle so you can see where the characters are looking). What you have here is a standard sword-and-sorcery story with a few gimmicks such as giant insects instead of horses and the aforementioned eyes. The heroes are on a quest to find the centre of forbidden technology that dates from before the Great Cataclysm – a quest which is also a race against the baddies of the Dark Dominion. It's not painfully bad, but neither is it rewarding. Bill Mantlo's writing has minimal imagination, confused storytelling, a flat ending, and no signs of humour or characterisation. The artwork does keep a consistent alien feel, despite several changes of art team, but it's not an attractive feel. Don't bother.~FC

SECTION ZERO

Image/Gorilla: *3 issues 2000*

Good fun from writer Karl Kesel in this *Fantastic Four* meets *The X-Files* super-adventure comic. Tom Grummett also helps to push things along at a healthy pace with his excellent storytelling and easy-on-the-eye artwork.~DB

SEDUCTION

Eternity: *One-shot 1991*

Anthology of maudlin, inept and rushed looking short love stories from Eternity's B-list creators. A thinly disguised attempt to capitalise on the unexpected success of their 1950s romance reprints. For only the lonely and probably not even them.~WW

THE SEDUCTION OF MIKE

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1998*

One man's life as told through comics in a slim paperback. Each page is a loving pastiche of an old comic cover drawn in the style of the time. So we have 'Mid-Level Action' a-la Joe Shuster, 'Bizarre Fears', which looks like Wally Wood, and 'Luv and Mufflers' as if drawn by Jaime Hernandez. R. Sikoryak and Michael Smith just about make it last the entire book, although to enliven things there is a comic strip in the middle drawn in the style of *Little Lulu*. Fun.~DAR

SEDUCTION OF THE INNOCENT

Eclipse: *6 issues 1985-1986*

Seduction of the Innocent reprints pre-Comics Code horror stories, mostly from Standard titles, but oh! what a collection of the great and the good. There's an Alex Toth strip in every issue which would, on its own, make this title worth buying, but over the six issues we also get work by Jerry Grandenetti, Jack Katz (of *First Kingdom* fame), Murphy Anderson, Ruben Moreira, Mort Meskin and Nick Cardy. These are not the stories that Fredric Wertham's infamous book used as examples, but by their nature they stood to be condemned along with the more disreputable stories then published. Two 3-D issues were also produced. The first contained the previously unpublished *Adventure into Darkness* 15. Frankly, the 3-D process is a waste of time, obscuring the quality of the artwork.~NF

Recommended: 1-6

SEEKER

Caliber: *3 issues 1998, one-shot ('Dawn of Armageddon') 1999*

Seeker was a popular costumed vigilante who was institutionalised when she claimed to be a reincarnated Atlantean warrior. The FBI decide to co-opt the concept with their own agent and achieve some degree of success when the original escapes. Solid action drama with the right amount of supernatural overtones by writer Gary Reed with various artists, but the series was cancelled short of its natural conclusion. The final two episodes were later gathered as a one-shot, but it's just a strung out fight between the original and the replacement.~WW

SEEKER 3000

Marvel: *One-shot 1998, 4 issue miniseries 1998*

Back in 1978 *Marvel Premiere* 41 ran an enjoyable space strip called 'Seeker 3000', set in a future where the Earth is about to be swallowed by the sun. It was reprinted as the one-shot. Two decades later writers Dan Abnett and Ian Edginton picked up the story twenty five years after we left it. The cast from the original, Captain Jordan Shaw, science officer Valida Payton and telepath Phaedra are still there, albeit briefly in Shaw's case. What's missing is the ship's computer infested with the personality of Shaw's enemy, Jason, which has been cleansed and is now called Censys. Shame. After 25 years there's also a 'next generation' of crewmembers including Shaw and Payton's son Carter, Shaw's clone Jericho and a cute young telepath called Cyrene. The set-ups of TV shows like *Star Trek* and the more recent *Space: Above and Beyond* inform just about every aspect of this project. The scripts are solid and entertaining if a little mannered and Andrew Currie's artwork looks great under a good inker like Art Nichols. This remains a cynical, derivative package aimed at *Star Trek fans*.~SW

SEEKERS into the Mystery

DC/Vertigo: *15 issues 1996-1997*

J.M. DeMatteis is a writer attempting to transcend the mundanity clogging the shelves of the comic store, which is commendable. He tends, however, to retread the same ground in his 'serious' works, much in the manner of a dog following a scent. There'll be a few idiosyncratic foibles as diversions, some family trauma, and woolly symbolism, but short of a yank on the neck there's nothing that'll stop his pontifications meandering on to the same ineffable conclusion that there must be more to life. It's hardly a startling revelation, and DeMatteis has no insight unavailable to the remainder of humanity. This, coupled with occasionally poetic, but often verbose, prose, has given DeMatteis a status and reputation inconsistent with his work.

Given the titular premise of *Seekers* was once again to present a quest for enlightenment, the signs were dire. Which makes the quality of the early issues shocking. Instead of forcing superheroes into awkward plots or hiding behind twee counterparts, DeMatteis largely dispensed with fantasy trappings to present real characters. His initial lead, Lucas Hart, tormented, struggling writer, is autobiographically based to a degree, and other cast members also have a resonance beyond the dictates of plot. DeMatteis finally combined his marginalised flair for humour with his preoccupations to produce a fully rounded story, referring to his past work in the first issue. He also tapped into a growing fascination with all matters unexplained as the millennium approached. This is very much the writer's title, but artists Glenn Barr (1-4), Jon J. Muth (drawing, not smearing blobs of paint across a page, in 5 and 10), Jill Thompson (11 on), and particularly Michael Zulli (6-9) are sympathetic collaborators. Hart discovers why he's been plagued by an inner demon in 1-4 and takes a step on the road forward in 5. The best story arc is 6-9, in which Hart, accompanied by his daughter, meets two old ladies who've been conversing with angels since childhood, and Streiberesque aliens. It gave the series a greater purpose and hinges the mysteries with some possible answers. *Seekers* had some annoying aspects (and 10 is a horrendous lapse back, that almost serves as a catalogue of how bad DeMatteis can be), particularly the implicit call for a leap of faith, but it stood head and shoulders over DeMatteis' previous work. If you've found his other comics pretentious or irritating, give *Seekers* a try.~WJ

SELF-LOATHING COMICS

Fantagraphics: *2 issues 1995-1997*

Autobiographical comic strips by Robert and Aline Kominsky-Crumb about life in France. In 1, each takes one half of the comic to explore their daily routine with the usual rationalisations, daydreams and introspection. This is not comfortable reading and is barely storytelling in any conventional sense but both, in different ways, pull you in so that the centrespread (and end of each story) comes as an unwelcome interruption. The themes remain the same but 2 has a more straightforward narrative and some interesting guest creators: daughter Sophie, Art Spiegelman, Charles Burns and Pete Poplaski.~NF

Recommended: 2

SEMPER FI'

Marvel: *9 issues 1988-1989*

'Semper Fidelis' is the motto of the US Marine Corps; this series is one long tribute to the Marines. It appears that since its foundation in 1775, the Marine Corps has never been without a member of the Whittier family, and with two stories in each issue, we see the Whittiers in action across the globe and the centuries. The writing is pure propaganda, with almost no imagination. There is the occasional hint that not every male Whittier is overjoyed at the anticipation or remembrance of war, but these hints are never allowed to develop. Andy Kubert and John Severin contribute some fine artwork, but it's not enough to bring any of the story up to 'good'.~FC

SENSATION COMICS

DC: *116 issues 1942-1953*

William Moulton Marston's creation, Wonder Woman, was so popular with readers (or at least with DC staff) following her début in *All-Star Comics* 8 that she was chosen to headline this new anthology book. Her proto-feminist adventures, illustrated in H.G. Peter's curiously blocky, woodcut style, gave the title a mood and atmosphere unlike everything else the industry had to offer. Unfortunately, Wonder Woman was the only star in *Sensation*'s early years, with stories collected in DC's lavish *Wonder Woman Archives* series. Her back-up strips were the most motley collection of costumed athletes and rip-offs of popular movies of the time ever assembled in a comic book. Mr. Terrific (1-63) was prodigy Terry Sloane. About to commit suicide because everything comes too easy, he discovers a new mission when he rescues a young boy from a life of crime. Throwing together a costume, the most remarkable aspect of which is a sweater with 'Fair Play' knitted on the belly, he sets out as the modestly named avenger of justice. Wildcat (1-90) was boxing champ Ted Grant, who became inspired by a Green Lantern comic (!) to fight crime with his bare knuckles while dressed in black fur. Many fine artists worked on the strip in its later days, including Kurtzman, Krigstein (81, 84) and Kubert (65, 66). The Gay Ghost (1-42) was a deceased nobleman who, possessing the body of his dead descendant after the latter's criminal lifestyle has led to an untimely end, sets out to atone for the man's misdeeds – and score with the latter's girl-friend, handily the reincarnation of the Ghost's own dead love! And then there was Little Boy Blue and the Blue Boys (1-93), three tough slum kids who put on powder-blue long underwear and get laughed out of the neighbourhood... well, no, they should have been, but instead they wage war on crime. Towards the end of the series they were occasionally joined by Little Miss Redhead, a crusading Lolita who clearly already knew more than she should about Life. Finally, The Black Pirate (1-51) was a Fairbanksesque period swashbuckler, later joined by his son on tame aquatic adventures. Art originally by Hawkman illustrator Sheldon Moldoff, tracing harder than ever. Despite the, to be polite, unoriginal nature of most of these strips, they all had respectable runs, the only significant addition after issue 1 being the visiting mystic gem wielder, Sargon the Sorcerer (34-36, 52-83).

By virtue of sheer longevity and persistence, most of these series improved as the years rolled on, but it almost didn't matter what was in the back of the book, as Wonder Woman's heady mix of sado-masochism and suffrage kept pulling in the readers anyway. By the late 1940s, however, sales were falling, and the DC editors decided to try a new tactic. Since Wonder Woman's presence gave *Sensation* a large female readership, they ditched all the, by then, tired back-ups and relaunched *Sensation* as an all-girl comic. The first oestrogen-heavy issue was 94, and Wonder Woman received a makeover for the new look. Still the cover feature, she found herself being carried over stepping stones by her doll-like boyfriend, seated at a desk as "Wonder Woman, Romance Editor"answering letters from the lovelorn, and modelling fashions, all on dismaying pink and lavender covers that must have made the old girl quite bewildered. New back-ups included Dr Pat, a young and, of course, beautiful female MD who struggled to be taken seriously; Valerie Vaughn, aka Lady Danger, dilettante débutante adventuress; and 'Astra, Girl of the Future', an outer-space telecaster. Unsurprisingly, the 'girlie' phase was a catastrophic failure. Despite some nice art (Infantino on Dr Pat, Oksner on Lady Danger), no more girls bought the title than had always done so, and male readers, unnerved by the pastel colours and soppy covers, deserted in droves. With 107, all the features – even Wonder Woman – were ousted, and the title reworked again with supernatural adventurer Johnny Peril as the lead, superbly illustrated by Alex Toth. Infantino, Sy Barry, and other top-line DC artists filled out the rest of the book with haunting and evocative tales of the uncanny. The new formula was a sufficient hit that the title was fleetingly rechristened *Sensation Mystery* from 110, but a lack of decisive sales figures, and the increasingly serious concern by parents and politicians about the – spurious – connections between comics and juvenile delinquency, caused DC to cancel the series with issue 116.~HS

SENSEI

First: *4 issue miniseries 1989*

Despising the complexity of modern society, Tadashi Natori uses a time machine to travel to the nineteenth century. In the best tradition of time-travel stories, things go wrong. Half of him ends up in nineteenth-century USA, the other half is trapped in a post-World War III future, a future he himself determined in the nineteenth century. Wandering two strands of time, Tadashi discovers that the past holds its own perils. Roger Salick and Val Mayerik's *Sensei* is better than most time-travel stories, and they leave you wanting to see more of the character.~FP

SENTINEL

Harrier: *4 issue miniseries 1987*

Based on the format of the British weekly *TV21* in it's earliest incarnation, this series blends newspaper pages with comics to relate adventures of the reporters who are the stars of the strip. When the owner of the eponymous *Sentinel* dies in mysterious circumstances his wastrel son seems unable to escape his father's job and his fate. Turgid and amateurish in places, it is notable for some of the earliest work of Mark Buckingham in 3.~WW

SENTRY

Innovation: *1 Special 1991*

This spin-off from *Hero Alliance* is the Sentry versus Sepulchre, a genius supervillain and serial killer, with a showdown at the opera. Ted Naifeh's stylish, heavily cross-hatched artwork adds interest to an otherwise straightforward superhero story.~NF

THE SENTRY

Marvel: *5 issue miniseries 2000-2001*, 5 One-shots 2001**

Paul Jenkins conceives a decent plot involving the return of Marvel's oldest superhero and why no-one had heard of him for all these years. The mystery is played out down to faked snippets of 1960s comics. Unfortunately, it's also strung out to about triple the length the plot requires. This might not have been noticeable had artist Jae Lee not coasted throughout. His figurework and designs are lovely, but he rarely bothers with any background, giving the entire series an empty look. Beyond the miniseries the Sentry has one-shot encounters drawn by other artists, all the time revealing more of the mystery. The best of them is Phil Winslade's Jack Kirby pastiche on *The Sentry/Fantastic Four*, although *The Sentry/Hulk* has a rare full art job from Bill Sienkiewicz. Lee returns for an all too-predictable conclusion in *The Sentry vs The Void*.~WJ

SERAPHIM

Innovation: *1 issue 1990*

Writer Chris Todd may or may not have an idea of what's going on here, but certainly doesn't bother with the triviality of explaining anything to readers. Just in case someone might be on the verge of figuring it out, though, there's the horrible painted artwork of Doug Talalla to contend with as well. He turns out a series of images depicting, often not very well, whatever he damn well feels like, whether or not it has any relevance to the story. At least Innovation ensured the proposed concluding issues were never seen.~WW

SERGIO ARAGONÉS...

DC: *One-shot (Destroys DC) 1996*

Marvel: *One-shot (Massacres Marvel) 1996*

In *Destroys DC*, Mark Evanier and Sergio Aragonés try for a job at DC, but Sergio worries he'll be ignored unless he can do superheroes, so he has a go at DC's mainstays Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman. In the end, most of DC's heroes have become involved in a plot by the company's old mascot, Johnny DC to get revenge for having been forgotten. For *Massacres Marvel*, they discover the Marvel Bullpen is at lunch, so while Mark has a nap, Sergio draws all the titles that are behind schedule. Aragonés' cartooning is always awe-inspiring and his gags are tremendous fun. There aren't many better parodies of the Marvel and DC universes.~NF

SERINA

Antarctic: *3 issue miniseries 1996, one-shot ('Blade of the Pharaoh') 2000*

Serina is an agent for a covert society of Ancient Egyptians, who, in full regalia, influence world events to their benefit. The miniseries is every bit as ridiculous as it sounds. Between the miniseries and one-shot Serina has starred in *Scenario A*, and by the one-shot David Hahn's art and writing has improved immeasurably. He adroitly sidesteps the previous premise, while remaining true to it, and presents two good stories with a conspiracy and cover-up theme. This is the one to try.~FP

SETH THROB: UNDERGROUND ARTIST

Slave Labor: *7 issues 1993-1995*

By Andy Garcia. A freakish snowstorm has descended on Oblivion City, and Seth, four friends and a demon are trapped in the apartment for days, having a succession of personal and interpersonal crises. Seth's crises as a tortured artist get wearing very quickly, though that's probably exactly the point, especially since the rest of the story is lively and funny and original.~FC

777:THE WRATH

Avatar: *3 issues 1997*

David Quinn and Tim Vigil take the blame for still more adolescent smut and gore featuring evil sexy women and a savage undead beastie, The Wrath. Practically incomprehensible. See also *Faust/777: The Wrath* – if you must.~WW

The 7TH SYSTEM

Sirius: *6 issue miniseries 1998-1999*

The immortal Domonisk, once governor of the 7th System, is overthrown and exiled to a prison planet. Princess Kat, believing that her father will make her governor, if she succeeds, leads an expedition to kill Domonisk, but both are surprised by their feelings for one another and to find themselves captives of the human-hating, Crylon. Neither the narrative not artwork of creator, Roel, convince, the former because too many actions seem illogical or are unexplained, the latter because from page to page, his attention to detail veers from cursory to painstaking.~NF

SEX & DEATH

Millennium: *1 issue 1995*

Dull horror anthology only worth a glance for Mike Deodato drawing in a nice European style and three John Bolton illustrations.~FP

SEX KINKS OF THE RICH AND FAMOUS

Rip-Off: *1 issue 1994*

Perhaps it's the people chosen, but there's something rather disappointing about the level of titillation available here. The longest stories describe the obsessions of Andy Warhol, Ed

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* Available in a collected edition

Wood Jr. and Henry VIII (for feet, angora and breasts respectively) in a matter-of-fact manner that belies the scripts' attempts to make something perverted of the whole thing. Amongst contributions about 'real' people by J.R. Williams, Mike Kazaleh and Dennis Eichhorn, Donna Barr's Desert Peach tale and a fictitious account of Hitler's snot fetish seem merely misplaced. There's no way of knowing why these stories are being told in one place. Only in the story of Rick James (by Dan Gregory) is the kink harmful to others and not all of the rich and famous are real. An oddity.~NF

SEX WARRIOR

Dark Horse: *2 issue microseries 1993*

Meretricious pap, written by Pat Mills and stiffly drawn by Mike McKone, about a tantrist woman who assists guerrilla fighters by showing them how to go blue and become strong by having lots and lots of sex. Wankers away!~GK

SEXCAPADES

Eros: *9 issue limited series 1996-1997**

Accident prone, make-up artist Hotaru is having an affair with scriptwriter Mitsunari Tobe. Her dog Yukijiro, dead for ten years, is allowed back to look out for her, but only Tobe can see him. Other characters include Tobe's wife, Shiiko, and daughter, Kisato and a young actress, Tamaki Ando, who fancies Tobe. Creator, Jiro Chiba does provide some lighter moments, but this is a quite serious drama about relationships, love and pain, with, nevertheless, plenty of sex in a clean, unexaggerated manga style.~NF

SEXHIBITON

Eros: *8 issues 1995-1996*

Well drawn sex comics by Gari Suehiro, largely exploring themes of domination and public nudity, although there's plenty of straightforward sex as well. Where this scores over many other sex-related titles is in the inventive nature of the stories. There's a sense of laying the table before the dinner is served, with the sex being an (integral) part of the tale being told, not the sole reason for it. There is a concern about some stories featuring characters bordering the age of consent, seemingly a common obsession of Japanese sex comics, particularly in 7, coincidentally the best story.~FP

SEXY SYMPHONIES

Eros: *6 issue miniseries 2001-2002*

Provided you like the collagen-lipped beauties drawn by F. Solano-Lopez, this is about as good as you're going to get from a sex comic. Using the slim thread of an erotic comic being passed around a school permits Lopez to showcase the variety of his art styles whilst indulging himself with a number of sexual fantasies. A protracted session with mythical creatures in a woodland glade extends over 3 and 4, but otherwise it's generally two vignettes per issue. They're witty, arousing, and, unlike most Eros material, in colour.~WJ

Recommended: 1-6

SGT FURY and his HOWLING COMMANDOS

Marvel:*167 issues, 7 Annuals 1963-1981*

The antithesis of realistic war comics and one of the most static of Marvel's long-run titles. Set in World War II, the plot for any issue picked at random involves Nick Fury and his team of crack soldiers parachuting into Nazi-occupied territory to rescue a captured Allied commander, destroy a missile base or free a town from Nazi domination. Once the fantasy premise has been swallowed, enjoy the jocular dialogue, initiated by Stan Lee and the well-established (if completely two-dimensional) personalities of Fury and his Howlers.

Roy Thomas took over as writer from 29 and Gary Friedrich from 42, but any changes in scripting style are barely noticeable. Dick Ayers deserves a mention for drawing almost every issue. From 80, every odd-numbered issue reprints earlier stories. Full reprint status is achieved in 121, with the last issue reprinting the first. Noteworthy issues are 13, guest-starring Captain America, the only superhero influence on the title, 18, with the death of Nick Fury's girlfriend, Pamela Hawley, 22's wonderfully humorous dialogue, 27, giving the origin of Fury's eyepatch, and 72, with an unusually thoughtful plot.~APS

SGT ROCK

DC: *Series one 121 issues (302-422), 4 Annuals, 1 Spectacular 1977-1988, series two 21 issues 1977 (1), 1988-1992 (2-21), 2 issue microseries 1992-1994*

In 1977 DC finally changed the title of *Our Army at War* to what it had been for almost twenty years in all but name, *Sgt Rock*, but otherwise it was largely business as usual. Joe Kubert was still editing, Robert Kanigher was still writing, Sgt Rock was still fighting World War II and various artists were still trying out to replace Russ Heath. The job eventually fell to Frank Redondo from 310, who proved a worthy successor. *Sgt Rock* opens with a three-parter, 302-304, locating Rock's platoon, Easy Co, in Italy. One of Easy's troop finds his fascist brother, now the town mayor and married to his sweetheart. Lots of personal rivalry and mixed loyalties here, and to compound things, the village is expecting a visit from Benito Mussolini himself. These sagas were a rarity for Kanigher, whose preference was for single-issue stories with an occasional twist. Take for instance 317, 'Comics Books Win a Purple Heart'. The cover has Rock standing in front of some classic 1940s DC comics. Inside we find that reading comics is good for the morale of the soldiers, and stuffed down your jacket they can help deflect that all-important bullet from your body.

Although scripting largely reality-based stories, Kanigher quite often introduced a fantasy theme, in two cases time travel. In 318 Rock pontificates on what war would've meant to humans in the Stone Age, and in 326 he imagines he's in the year 2994, battling robot Nazis. These aren't as corny as they may sound, but in a way quite poignant. The same could be said for 349, 'The Dummy', where Easy Co has a new ventriloquist recruit. The war is seen through the dummy's eye, which even sheds a tear at the end of the story when its owner is killed. He returns in 376, now with complete thought patterns. Of course Kanigher doesn't want us to believe the dummy is actually real, but through it makes us view war from all angles, showing how it affects all involved parties. He was also one for championing the rights of African-Americans. In 355 Easy comes across a group of black soldiers dressed in World War I uniforms. They were part of a large black battalion that fought in France during the 1914-1918 conflict, after which they stayed in Europe and were now offering their services to fight for the new cause. The black soldier theme is also taken up in 405-406, 'Angels With Black Wings'. The story begins in the 1960s, where a middle-aged black civil rights demonstrator recalls how he fought for the USA as a pilot during World War II; Kanigher uses the opportunity to spotlight real-life black American war heroes. These stories may seem a bit contrived, but Kanigher certainly had his heart in the right place and spotlighted the injustice of segregation between black and white soldiers during this era.

368 is a thirtieth-anniversary issue where Rock recalls the past through a number of dog-tags belonging to fallen soldiers. Rock in fact dreams of the dead Easy Co soldiers in 375, while 400 highlights the four hundred days that Easy Co have been involved in the war. There are a few issues of note around this time. 395 is an all-Kubert issue with art by Joe, Adam and Andy. 396 offers good reprints depicting children caught up in the conflict, and 404 features the once-regular nemesis of Rock, the Iron Major. The 1984 annual (4) depicts the realities a German major has to face, showing his side of the conflict, portraying a man of principle doing his job for his country. Everyone's a victim in war. 408 offers a tribute to artist Shelly Mayer. A soldier called Scribbly joins Easy Co and illustrates some of scenes he has witnessed. Mayer, of course, invented the 1940s character, the cartoonist called Scribbly.

412 has guest appearances by Mlle Marie and the Haunted Tank, while 413 is a Jews and Gentiles tale, where the Judaic and Christian faiths are explored in relationship to one another. 417 and 418 are illustrated by Andy Kubert and deal with a possible future featuring the offspring of the Easy Co

soldiers. Sam Glanzman draws the lead story in 420, while the three Kuberts contribute to the final issue.

On the whole the series is extremely well produced, and it never glorifies war. Of course, there's the occasional bout of Ramboism, but that only serves to accentuate the day-to-day heroics performed by ordinary humans living under a pressure we can't comprehend. The constant high quality of Kanigher's scripts is amazing, and it extends to the back-ups, among which there are many gems. Alex Toth illustrates a tale set in Ancient Egypt in 385, but on the whole the back-ups were reserved as a training-ground for students of Joe Kubert's School of Cartoon Art such as Tom Yeates, Jan Duursema, Tom Mandrake and Ron Randall. And look out for early work by Steve Bissette (323, 346), Rick Veitch (332-334) and Tim Truman (357, 363, 367, 371, 376). Sam Glanzman's 'USS Stevens' can be found in 304, 308 and 384.

Almost immediately after cancellation *Sgt Rock* returned for a reprint run, initially titled *Sgt Rock Special;* it later became plain *Sgt Rock.* It continued the numbering from the 1977 *Sgt Rock Special* and offered many choice items. Illustrators included the likes of Alex Toth (2, 8, 11), Wally Wood (4), Frank Miller (6), Krigstein (4, 8), Howard Chaykin (9), Jack Kirby (7) and Neal Adams (8); and of course there were many classics from Joe Kubert and Heath. There were two more specials in 1992 and 1994. This time they feature new stories illustrated by a stellar line-up. Kubert, P. Craig Russell, Matt Wagner, George Pratt, Mike Golden and Tim Truman draw the first issue, and in 2 you have Eduardo Barreto, Howard Chaykin, Russ Heath and Graham Nolan. With the exception of a previously unused story in 1, none are by Kanigher, so the subtlety usually associated with Rock is missed, replaced by more action-oriented scripts from the likes of Chuck Dixon. All in all, though, they're not bad efforts, and the Heath story in 2 was marvellous to look at.

For more classic Sgt Rock tales, plus many other DC war heroes, look no further than *Sgt Rock's Prize Battle Tales* in 1964 and the digest-sized 1979 edition, the early 1970s 100- Page Super Spectacular, and a *Sgt Rock Spectacular* in 1978. Despite any views you may have on war and violence, they are a fact of history. In *Sgt Rock,* these experiences aren't glorified, and you might be surprised how much you enjoy them. The high standard of artwork throughout is undeniable.~HY

Savage Combat Tales Featuring SGT STRYKER'S DEATH SQUAD

Atlas: *3 issues 1975*

It's a shame that ten years after writing one of the best war comics ever in *Blazing Combat,* Archie Goodwin was turning out this formula material, which took its cue from *The Dirty Dozen.* A bunch of convicts are welded into an élite strike force by Sgt Stryker, who isn't ranked at all, but has a strong personality. To Goodwin's credit he also focuses on the Germans, and there's decent art from Al McWilliams throughout, but the highlight is 2's back-up strip, drawn by Alex Toth.~WJ

The SHADE

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1997*

The occasionally-reformed villain from the pages of *Starman* reminisces about incidents from his exceedingly long life, focussing on vignettes from his decades-long feud with the Ludlow family. All issues are worth a look (particularly the exquisite Gene Ha artwork on 1), but the best is 3, with a genuinely inventive revelation about a 1940's super-hero, and very nice Lee Elias-pastiche art from Bret Blevins. The Shade also appears solo in *Showcase* 95 12.~HS

THE SHADE SPECIAL

AC: *1 issue 1984*

The Shade meets FemForce's Tara on Jungle Island in a tale of voodoo and zombies. A second story, also by Rik Levins, features a super-evolved ape. The final strip is The Latigo Kid by Bill Black. All are competent but really nothing more than that.~NF

SHADE THE CHANGING MAN

DC: *Series one 8 issues 1977-1978, series two 32 issues 1990-1993*
DC/Vertigo: *38 issues (33-70) 1993-1996*

It's a rare comic that can be labelled 'unique', yet in both incarnations *Shade* earns the distinction. It began as a downright weird concept and became stranger. As introduced by Steve Ditko in particularly capricious mode, Rac Shade is an other-dimensional humanoid accused of crimes he didn't commit, who manifests gruesome distortions of himself by means of his M-vest. It's technobabble, of course, but works surprisingly well, with Ditko's contorted figures having a memorably disturbing quality and his art in general at a 1970s peak. Ditko created a complex scenario with a fully realised background that unfolds in stages, and Michael Fleisher's scripts add to the complicated and subtle plots. At every attempt to clear his name Shade is thwarted and manipulated into seeming ever more a criminal, and his former fiancée proves a merciless tracker. The origin of Shade's miraculous M-vest is detailed in 7 and 8, but regretfully the series is prematurely cancelled without conclusion. Shade reappears over a decade later in the pages of *Suicide Squad,* but even among the misfits of that title he's distinctly out of place.

The revived *Shade* is a different experience, being primarily reality-based. He's still Rac Shade, on the run from Meta, merged with his M-vest (rechristened the 'madness vest') and able to manipulate atoms to change reality, but not fully in control. He's also the vehicle for a skewed road movie-style look at the USA through the eyes of British writer Peter Milligan. Although initially strained, and continued too long, Milligan's innovative approach, offbeat ideas and thoughtful prose more than compensate for weak plots and obvious pop-culture targets (Hollywood, psychedelia, Elvis Presley, serial killers etc). Ironically, it's only these weaker issues of a generally excellent series that have been made available in book form. The better issues of *Shade* drag one through a unique and thought-provoking journey. As evinced by later issues, Milligan's ideas require an adaptable artist, and for 1-50 the work of Chris Bachalo, inked by Mark Pennington or Rick Bryant, is astounding. Bachalo's layouts, characters and scenarios have an admirable fluid consistency, and he's able to switch from tenderness to horror with ease.

More than Shade's escapades, though, the appeal of the title concerns the excellently drawn cast and their interaction. The body Shade originally inhabits is that of the man who murdered Cathy George's parents, Shade having transferred at the moment of his execution. Disturbed and vulnerable, Cathy grows during the series, and certainly not in predictable fashion. This is due in no small part to the influence of the worldly-wise Lenny and her distinctly individual outlook, seemingly based on Madonna's character in *Desperately Seeking Susan.* She's a deliberate contrast to the self-absorbed and self-doubting Shade, plagued by aspects of his personality and unconsciously manifesting his abilities at awkward times.

Having purged America from his system, Milligan rather thrashes around for a while. In between the disjointed character explorations of 'The Road' in 20-25, and the idea of *Shade the Changing Woman,* which isn't nearly as interesting as it sounds, there's the marvellous 26, giving further insight into Lenny. Everything pulls together again in the mid-30s, with Shade switching to the Vertigo imprint with 33. Therein Shade, Kathy and Lenny occupy a deserted hotel that's a magnet for weirdness, inheriting the odd inhabitants and odd problems. These include angels given human form, the reincarnation of Pandora, Milligan's self-parody, and a visit to the Salem witch trials accompanied by John Constantine in 42-44. Between 36 and 50 there's not a bad issue, and the guest pencillers who help Bachalo maintain a monthly schedule, notably Philip Bond, Glyn Dillon and Steve Yeowell, merge seamlessly.

50 is a turning point. It's Bachalo's final issue, and concludes the six-part 'A Season In Hell', the highlight of the run. Kathy is pregnant and determined to have the child, while Shade is being blackmailed into killing it. Lenny entertains two vastly different new guests while the hotel is collapsing around everyone. Reducing the plot to soap-opera

précis does it no favours. Milligan has created a dense and squirming character study, putting his cast through the emotional wringer to a far greater degree than previously, leaving them shell-shocked and, to use the comic cliché, forever changed. It's a masterpiece. A selection of new characters is introduced in following issues, initially Shade's son George, growing at an accelerated rate until 57, a burning angel given human form, a nutty inventor and a single-minded and ambitious journalist investigating Shade. They're mixed, and swap bodies after an experiment gone wrong, in the most effective story arc for the remainder of the run, 'Nasty Infections' in 58-63, wherein five polaroid photographs lead into the most viscerally horrific tale offered here. Mark Buckingham pencils most issues to 60 (with 51-53 by the underrated Sean Phillips), but 'Nasty Infections' introduces the dreadful pencils of Richard Case. His poor foreshortening, figurework and proportions are deficiencies that constantly draw attention away from otherwise excellent stories. Milligan sets up an effective plot leading to the final story arc in 68-70, in which Shade attempts to rectify the events of 50. By that point, though, the shoddy art is so at odds with the story it's no wonder the series was cancelled.

Overall both runs of *Shade* bring a stream of new ideas to comics, stretching conventions and toying with preconceptions. While not everything gels perfectly, and the series certainly won't be to all tastes, the innovation and experimentation are a joy to see in a medium where adult content rarely refers to anything other than gratuitous nudity and violence.~FP

Recommended: Series one 3-8, series two 1, 5, 16-18, 26, 36-39, 42-50, 54, 58-61

SHADES OF BLUE

Amp Comics: *9 issues + 1999 to date*

Having recently moved to small town, Harrington, from Chicago, Heidi Paige wakes up one morning with blue hair and electrical powers, quickly gaining a sidekick in the lovelorn Marcus (whose comic version of Heidi causes some embarrassment in 6). With help as well from her friend K. T. O'Hara, Heidi battles a diamond-hard villain (1-2), stand-in teacher, Ms. White, a.k.a. Silence, who tries to recruit her against some future problem (3-5), and Ilsa Daniel, an ice skater with freezing powers (7-9). Written by James S. Harris and Rachel Nacion, this is an undemanding, fun, comedy superhero series, with some intelligent comments about growing up thrown in for good measure. The simple, animation-based artwork is by Greg Grucel (1-2), Scott Story for the comic book pages in 6 and Cal Slayton.~NF

SHADES OF GREY

Lady Luck: *12 issues 1993-1996**

Tapestry: *4 issues 1996-1997**

This a high school buddy comic about changing relationships as friends grow older and realise the problems life throws up. As entries in this genre go it's near the upper end, with creator Jimmy Gownley an artist with a likeable naturalistic style, although there are some very shaky figures and faces in earlier issues. As a writer he's able to stay the right side of saccharine while keeping his cast appealing. The strip has the feel of autobiographical recollection in places, but creating believable and sympathetic adult characters, in one case a pensioner, marks superior insight. He also makes blocks of text and illustration work within a comic format, a surprisingly rare talent. That said, there are elements of mythologising the mundane, and with five main characters in the Lady Luck series, attention is spread a little thin on occasion. Most issues can be read individually, although 1-4 are most easily found collected. With 10 Gownley pulls together threads that began with 1, and, a decent character study of a secondary cast member in 12 apart, the comic never quite has the same focus again. There's a distinct feeling of treading water in the Tapestry issues, and when the move didn't work Gownley directed his attentions elsewhere.~WJ

SHADO: Song of the Dragon

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1991-1992*

Although not everyone's idea of a dream team, the creative forces behind *Shado* seem curiously suited to each other. Mike Grell writes an exceptionally terse script, which keeps the tension levels high, beginning with a well-handled, almost wordless attack on Shado and her child by a group of masked commandos. Michael Davis Lawrence is not the most detailed colourist, but his rough use of simple tones, without much concern for whether he's within the boundary of his own huge panels, and light pencils works, except where the whole page is drenched with a single colour for atmosphere. Gray Morrow inks his pencils with the lightest of touches, alternating between heavy blacks and spatter effects, and large panels bisected by a few, carefully weighted lines. There are few new ideas, but the prose is carefully modulated and the art striking.~FJ

The SHADOW

Archie: *8 issues 1964-1965*

This travesty of a superhero comic was concocted due to publisher Louis Silberkleit having the licence for *Shadow* paperbacks in the mid-1960s. The Shadow is businessman Lamont Cranston whose secretary, Margo Lane, is in love with him. When he's not battling evil in his blue and green longjohns, which we don't see until 3, admittedly, the stories devolve into the farce of Cranston battling to keep his secret identity from Margo. Jerry Siegel writes, and the art is by Paul Reinman, apart from 1 where John Rosenberger interprets this Shadow in a more sober fashion. The stories are so ridiculous that this could be considered a parody if it wasn't such utter rubbish.~SW

THE SHADOW

DC: *Series one 12 issues 1973-1975, 4 issue miniseries 1986*, series two 19 issues, 2 Annuals 1987-1988*

For the 1970s series Denny O'Neil's writing apes the pulp style that introduced the Shadow in the 1930s, with basic mystery plots and terse dialogue. There's a galaxy of difference between the artists, but all offer a legitimate take on the 1930s setting. Mike Kaluta (1-4, 6*) opts for moody and atmospheric scenes, and is most fondly remembered by fans, while Frank Robbins (5, 7-9) has an all-action cinematic style. E.R. Cruz (10-12) manages a successful amalgam of the two approaches as another pulp hero, The Avenger, stops by in 11. O'Neil and Kaluta later reprised on a Marvel graphic novel.

As the 1986 miniseries opens it's been thirty-five years since the Shadow was last seen, yet someone's murdering his former agents. When the Shadow returns he's not aged since the 1940s, although he is a little more verbose. Howard Chaykin's mixture of sex and violence didn't sit well with older fans, but he clarifies the Shadow's origin, talents and longevity in 2 and reworks the character for a contemporary audience while remaining faithful to the essence of the Shadow. The major supporting players from the novels are present, and Chaykin's new characters are engaging. Harry Vincent's daughter Mavis is a reluctant 1980s foil to the Shadow, deploring his methods, and the Shadow's two sons, Chang and Hsu, revel in New York after a lifetime spent in a remote Himalayan settlement.

The second ongoing title is a continuing series of individual stories (labelled as chapters on the cover). 'Shadows and Light' (1-6) is initially impenetrable, but rewards careful reading. Artist Bill Sienkiewicz is on top form, but Kyle Baker's simpler and more expressive artwork (8-19) better conveys the broad streak of humour underscoring the feature. That's well exemplified by the only single issue story of the run (7), with Marshall Rogers illustrating the tale of a ghastly child on the loose in Washington. Andy Helfer's scripts concentrate on the rich supporting cast and their eccentricities more than the Shadow, who is an unpleasant manipulative figure. The assorted villains also get their share of the spotlight in very dense scripts. 'Seven Deadly Finns' (8-13) is a masterpiece, named after the Finn brothers who control New York's crime without having accumulated a criminal record. In addition to using all the Shadow's agents seen in the series to date and the well-characterised Finns, Helfer adds an Arab terrorist, five deadly lunatics, Dick Magnet and Private Eye; he even throws gorillas in the mix, without the story ever seeming crowded. The second annual is better than the first, bridging 13 and 14, taking its cue from *Citizen Kane* and revealing how the primary agents first met the Shadow.

For 'Body and Soul' (14-19) the Shadow is largely a background presence as the New York agents operate without him, and Chang and Hsu work their way back to Shamballa. Although not quite matching the previous story, it still contains more wit and entertainment than almost any other title you'd care to name. The tragic premature cancellation of *The Shadow* was apparently due to objections from the licensers, borne out by the rapid launch of the more conventional *The Shadow Strikes*. It's a shame, as the highlights of this series rank alongside the best comics of the 1980s.~FP

Recommended: Series one 3-6, 10, miniseries 1-4, series two 7-19, Annual 2

The SHADOW

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries ('In The Coils of the Leviathan') 1993-1994*, 2 issue microseries 1994, 3 issue miniseries ('Hell's Heat Wave') 1995**

This Shadow is very reminiscent of the 1970s DC version and the Marvel graphic novel, which isn't surprising, as Mike Kaluta has a heavy hand in the series for all publishers. He writes 'In The Coils of the Leviathan' with Joel Goss and it's illustrated by Gary Gianni, which if Kaluta couldn't illustrate is the next best thing. He certainly does an excellent job setting up the mood and atmosphere required for these period pieces. The story is intricate, with the occasional twist, involving ritual slayings, strange rings, evangelists and a new war weapon. The second series adapts the *Shadow* movie. Again written by Kaluta and Goss, but this time illustrated by Kaluta himself. The result is, of course, beautiful. Shame about the story, which really didn't have that much going for it. Gianni once more joins Kaluta and Goss for 'Hell's Heat Wave'. This time there's a severed finger found in a dead man's mouth, gangland wars involving the Chinese and the Irish, and a strange spectre, to say the least. It's another good effort. If you like a mystery then look no further than the first and third series.~HY

THE SHADOW AND DOC SAVAGE

Dark Horse: *2 issue microseries 1995*

Though the plot about Nazis kidnapping a scientist's daughter in order to persuade him to return to Germany and continue work on his supersoldier serum is rather predictable, there are enough twists and turns to keep the action coming. The comparison of Savage's humanitarian ideals with the Shadow's bloodthirsty attitude is nicely handled by writer Steve Vance. Artists Stan Manoukian and Vince Roucher use some odd angles that seem to be repeated more than necessary but overall it's not unattractive.~NF

SHADOW AND LIGHT

Amerotica: *4 volumes 1998-2002*

In realistic and detailed, grey-toned artwork, Parris Quinn has produced some highly charged erotic stories. Each volume contains several short stories dealing with a variety of sexual situations, but usually involving some form of submission. 1 has a man as slave to his girlfriend, a woman who dares her boyfriend to watch her with a group of men and a woman on a leash for her boyfriend's camera – the start of 'The Arrangement', which runs to 3. A woman gives in to submission, while another spies on and then blackmails her female neighbour into a sexual relationship (2). In 3, a mature woman gives herself to a bike-riding stranger and his friends, and in 4, there are two stories of female dominance over male submissives and one dealing with a married woman's encounters with multiple partners.~NF

SHADOW CABINET

DC/Milestone: *18 issues (0-17) 1994-1995*

Under the guidance of the mysterious Dharma, teams of superhuman operatives are sent out on missions to serve a political agenda, in a cross between *Mission Impossible* and *The Secret Six*. Needless to say, it's not long before several of the 'core team' – the agents we see most frequently – start questioning Dharma's actions, and striking out on their own initiative. Robert L. Washington and John Paul Leon start the comic, with Matt Wayne taking over the writing from 5. The action is kept brisk and entertaining enough that it takes a while for the obvious questions to occur. Questions like, "Why haven't people as smart and conscientious as these folks asserted themselves before now?", or "What sort of hold does Dharma have over them?" Unfortunately, the cancellation of the series meant none of these questions were adequately answered, but several of the more likeable protagonists – Iota, Donner and Blitzen – went on to form part of the Heroes team, in the miniseries of the same name. Despite the inevitable nagging questions, the series was generally enjoyable.~HS

SHADOW EMPIRES: Faith Conquers

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1994*

A complex saga mixing religious and political manoeuvring and space war. Christopher Moeller's plot hinges on alien worms that can possess humans, with the result that one is never sure of the allegiances of any of the cast members at any given time. He's also constructed a working theocratic empire and spent a long time laying out battle sequences. This would work magnificently in a film, but sadly the extraneous detail only serves to render an already difficult-to-follow story even more awkward. In some ways Moeller draws his inspiration from Masamune Shirow's similarly detailed works, and like Shirow he sometimes loses the wood for the trees. Overall, though it's an admirable effort.~FP

SHADOW HOUSE

Shadow House Press: *5 issues 1997-1998*

Intelligent horror anthology with two regular strips, introduced by a third, 'Autumn' in two-page segments written by James Chambers and drawn by Kirk Van Wormer. 'The Revenant', by Chambers and Pat Broderick, features a zombie-like creature summoned to wreak vengeance on various miscreants in a small town near the Everglades. In 'Nightmark', by Christopher Mills and Fred Harper, Gideon King is a hard-boiled private eye mixed up with a demonic cult. With covers by Dan Brereton (1, 2), John Estes (3, 4) and Harper (5), it's a well-produced title but with its premature cancellation, the stories remain unfinished.~NF

Masakazu Katsura's SHADOW LADY

Dark Horse: *7 issue limited series ('Dangerous Love') 1998-1999*, 5 issue miniseries ('The Eyes of a Stranger') 1999*, 12 issues (13-24) 1999-2000* 1 Special 2000*

By day eighteen year old Aimi is an extremely shy teenager, but when she applies her magical make-up at night she's transformed into perky cat burglar Shadow Lady, complete with an all purpose set of talents according to which eye shadow she applies. As Aimi she loves Bright, the policeman who lives in the apartment above her, but Bright loves Shadow Lady and is determined to capture and reform her. Matters are complicated by a rival for Bright's love and a superheroine in the second series. *Shadow Lady* is initially the comics equivalent of cotton candy, well drawn light and fluffy stuff, which was originally aimed at young teenage girls. With the third storyline ('The Awakening') Dark Horse start cover numbering the series as a whole as well as story arcs, and from this point there's a marginally darker tone. Other-worldly demons threaten both Shadow Lady and humanity, and in 'Sudden Death' (20-24) Aimi's make-up is running out. The special features an alternative version of the cast and stands alone.~WJ

SHADOW OF THE BAT

DC: *96 issues (1-95, 0), 5 Annuals 1992-2000*

Written mainly by Alan Grant, this series focuses on the darker, psychological side of Batman's adventures, starting with 'The Last Arkham' (1-4), in which he is committed as part of a plan to catch a serial killer, Zsasz. Leavened with a characteristic black humour, Grant's stories stay just the right side of too tongue-in-cheek, as in 'The Misfits' (7-9), in which Catman, Killer Moth and Calendar Man team up to break their losing streak. 'The Nobody' (13) deals with Batman's motivations when his secret identity is threatened, and 'The God Of Fear' (16-18) is a 'Knightfall' tie-in featuring The Scarecrow. 19-25 are 'Knightquest' tie-ins while 29 and 30 are part of 'Knightsend' in which Azrael is Batman and Bruce Wayne must recover his confidence. 31 is a comedy *Zero Hour* issue in which an alternate-world Alfred (the fat one with a desire to be a detective) turns up to keep house, which eloquently expresses Grant's feelings about such tie-ins.

35 is part two of 'Troika' (the return of the KGBeast, featuring Batman's new costume) and then Black Canary (36), The Joker (37-38) and Solomon Grundy (39) guest before Grant brings back his favourite anarchist Anarky, a disillusioned, bored youth whose motives seem pure but whose actions are criminal. 43 and 44 crossover with Catwoman 26 as the pair face Catman in 'The Secret of the Universe'. The pace changes for 45, a murder mystery set in Wayne Manor after a skeleton is found in the cellar and proves to belong to Joshua Wayne, who was involved in helping slaves escape from the South during the American Civil War. For a while, the series is characterised by the variety of Grant's scripts. There are appearances by regular villains like Poison Ivy and the Fluoronic Man (56-58), Scarface (59-60), Two-Face (62-63), Mr. Freeze and Clayface (75), the Mad-Hatter (78-79) and the Joker (80-82). One-shots like 71's whodunit and supernatural tales (of which Grant seems too fond) like 69-70, guest-staring Fate, are mixed with the introduction of new villains – Narcosis (50-52) and the two small-time conmen who almost succeed in making Gotham's authorities turn on themselves (65-67). The 'Contagion' crossover takes up 48 and 49, and its sequel, 'Legacy', is covered in 53 and 54. 73-74 are crossovers with 'Cataclysm', 75-79 cover the 'Aftershock' of that series and 80-82 begin the 'No Man's Land' crossover (note that 80 is a flip-comic with Azrael 47).

Artwork started well with Norm Breyfogle (1-5,13, 65-67, 75) but swiftly became inconsistent as different artists guested. Exceptions include Tim Sale (7-9), Kevin Walker (39), John Paul Leon (40-41), Barry Kitson (43-44 in a departure from his normal style) and Jim Aparo (61, 68). Other issues were drawn by Vince Giarrano or Bret Blevins until, from 51, a semi-regular was finally introduced, giving the title the consistency it had lacked. Dave Taylor's supple figures and detailed backgrounds are sometimes let down by his stiff faces, but his work counterpoints Grant's edgy scripts well. An artistic high point is reached with 69 when Mark Buckingham became the new regular penciller, inked by Wayne Faucher (Robert Campanella's inks in 80-82 are fussier and less attractive).

82 is Grant's finale, after which individual issues are usually episodes of the many crossover stories comprising the better than expected 'No Man's Land'. Writers of note include Bob Gale (83), Ian Edginton (85, 89), Devin Grayson (84, 92), Lisa Klink (86) and Greg Rucka (87, 88, 93, 94) and there's good artwork from Alex Maleev (83), D'Israeli (85), Guy Davis (86) and Paul Gulacy (90). An issue 0 (1994) follows *Zero Hour*, and all annuals were written by Grant. 1993's is part of the 'Bloodlines' crossover, introducing Joe Public, not seen since, and the 1994 annual is an Elseworlds story where Bruce Wayne controls Gotham and Anarky helps free the city from his tyranny. An excellent recap of Poison Ivy's first year as a criminal is drawn by Brian Apthorp for the 1995 annual, 1996's is one of the 'Legends of the Dead Earth', featuring the legacy of Batman again by Apthorp while 1997's Annual is a 'Pulp Heroes' story starring private eye, Joe Potato joining Batman against Poison Ivy.~NF

Recommended: 7-9, 39, 43-44, 71, 75, 86 Annual 3, 5

SHADOW REAVERS

Black Bull: *5 issue miniseries 2001-2002*

Claire and Jesse Vala are the last of the witches, fated to defend the Earth against the Warlocks, who are now ready to return from exile. Unfortunately, when Claire is killed by werebeasts, Jesse must rely for help on her sister's ghost and the mysterious Helen, Exile and Golem (the Shadow Reavers). This routine, end-of-the-world, supernatural thriller is gorily written, though the effects are lessened by the polished artwork of Nelson (similar in style to John Byrne). Ending on a cliffhanger, the next chapter has not yet been scheduled.~NF

Horus SHADOW REIGNS

AIX.C.C.: *One-shot ('Renegade Soul') 1997, 3 issues ('Interregnum') 1998*

An ambitious and well-crafted fantasy devoid of the cloying constituents characterising most fantasy in comics. There are elements of *Highlander*'s urban settings, and, seemingly of Roger Zelazny's *Amber* series, as an innocent is caught in events beyond his control, discovers he has a destiny, and has to learn to cope pretty damn quick. It's occasionally over-written, which is understandable since German creator Horus isn't working in his first language, and there's a stiffness to the art (reminiscent in its detail to Glenn Fabry), although these are both minor concerns. The series remained unfinished, at least in English. In Germany it was completed as *Schattenreich* to considerable acclaim and awards.~WJ

SHADOW RIDERS

Marvel UK: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

Astonishingly unappealing artwork and a plethora of macho men characterise this introduction of new forces combating the evil Mys-Tech corporation.~FP

SHADOW STATE

Broadway: *6 issues 1995-1996*

After the first two issues featured Fatale short stories, the title was given over entirely to co-feature *Till Death Us Do Part*. Troy and Wendi Hickenbottom, two none-too-bright, none-too- scrupulous people gain super powers and physiology courtesy of images taken from Troy's favourite comic. Troy is chuffed; Wendi is appalled. None of her clothes fit, and she feels like a freak! Troy attempts to teach Wendi 'proper' superheroic behaviour via his favourite comic *Team BloodS.C.R.E.A.M*, pages from which are wittily interpolated into the main story. Their wildly differing attitudes result in their previous domestic battles being escalated to the megaton level, with disastrous results for all around them. A gripping, if exasperating, read.~HS

Recommended: 1-6

THE SHADOW STRIKES

DC: *31 issues, 1 Annual 1989-1992*

This was DC's third and longest-running attempt at presenting the Shadow. Gerard Jones and Eduardo Barreto put together a coherent cast and authentic pulp atmosphere without making the whole thing seem dated. Jones quickly established the Shadow's best-known supporting cast members (Margo Lane, Harry Vincent, Shrevvie and Inspector Cardona) as central to the plot and used known Shadow history as a basis for adventures, without rewriting it. He sets the series firmly in the 1930s, and also does much to establish Margo and Harry as interesting and important parts of the storylines, rather than just being foot-soldiers following orders. Barreto's artwork, though still developing, is suitably dark, reminiscent of Kubert or Toth, giving the scripts the period feel required.

The first story-line (1-4) involves Anastasia, Rasputin and a series of headless murders, hinting again at secrets in the Shadow's past. 5 and 6 were part of a Doc Savage crossover, the first time these two heroes had met, and 7 features a plot revolving around a Shadow radio show with a young entrepreneur not dissimilar to Orson Welles. 8-10 feature Shiwan Khan, the Shadow's arch enemy, followed by a four-parter involving butchers and Chicago's underworld. It provides a look both at the semi-mystical nature of the Shadow's powers and at the often dark and seedy side of his adversaries. Unfortunately, 15 was the last by Barreto, and though Rod Whigham worked hard to maintain the style already established, the artwork is too hard-edged.

16 and 17 'introduce' the real Lamont Cranston as guest penciller Mark Badger drew the Shadow involved in union activity. The epic seven-part 21-27 pits him against Shiwan Khan again, in China, preceding the series' final storyline, a

retelling of the Shadow's origin. Jones tells a good story; in concentrating on the supporting cast, he enables the Shadow to be used effectively but mysteriously while hinting rather than coming right out with revelations about the character. The annual has the Shadow visiting Hollywood, written by Jones and drawn by Dan Spiegle (another artist with a good period feel), plus a short story about Margo Lane chunkily and unattractively drawn by Luke McDonnell.~NF

SHADOWDRAGON

DC: *One-shot 1995*

Attempt to make a hi-tech martial artist, a supporting character from *Superman,* into a solo star. Lacklustre and predictable.~HS

SHADOWGEAR

Antarctic: *3 issue miniseries 1999*

A girl wakes up with an artificial intelligence chip in her head, and sets out to avenge the death of her father. The singularly named Locke concocts an intriguing concept, placing back history in large chunks of footnotes, and pacing it manga style. His drawing puzzles, varying from woefully slapdash at times, to stunningly detailed cityscapes, but noticeably improving over the issues.~WJ

SHADOWHAWK

Image: *4 issue miniseries 1992-1993*, 3 issue miniseries 1993, 4 issue miniseries 1993-1994, series one 8 issues (0, 12-18) 1994-1995, 3 issue miniseries ('Images of Shadowhawk') 1994, one-shot (Shadowhawks of Tomorrow) 1995, one-shot (Shadowhawk Gallery) 1995, series two ('The New') 7 issues 1995-1996*

Although a commercial success when released it's hard to see why, as the mysterious vigilante called Shadowhawk prowls the big city breaking the spines of any nasty old thugs he finds. The big gimmick was that the reader was not privy to the identity of the protagonist. As with all such stunts, it's only effective for as long as it lasts, then it has to be followed up, preferably with some quality writing, but usually by another gimmick. In this case we find that Shadowhawk is dying of aids, but in a move that can only be called exploitative, creator Jim Valentino didn't have the guts to have him contract it in an honest way. Our hero was deliberately injected by a nasty street punk wielding a syringe, which lead him to revenge himself on the dregs of society. After the *Images of Shadowhawk* by Alan Grant and Keith Giffen and featuring Trencher, the latter run of the series outlines a quest for a cure, guest starring a bunch of Image superheroes, before Shadowhawk finally dies. A couple of specials with contributions from the likes of Alan Moore and Stan Sakai, try to incorporate some form of Shadowhawk into the entire Image continuity before the new series begins. Although it's confused and repetitious it's not as tasteless as its predecessor.~WW

SHADOWLAND

Fantagraphics: *2 issues 1989*

Kim Deitch tells the story of Molly O'Dare from her upbringing in a convent and escape from a life of servitude in Lady Wyndham's whorehouse to her becoming an actress in the early days of cinema. Deitch creates his own skewed and distinctive fantasy world. His drawing may seem rather stiff but his characters are never static. A little cold in tone for some, and certainly not likely to provoke any debates on the meaning of life, Deitch's comics remain oddly compulsive.~NF

Recommended: 1-2

SHADOWMAN

Valiant: *44 issues (0-43), 1 Yearbook 1992-1995*

Acclaim: *20 issues (Shadow Man) 1997-1998, 6 issue miniseries 1999*

New Orleans jazz saxophonist Jack Boniface takes home a woman who turns out to be a vampire, and once the bite's been put on him he's compelled to go out and fight crime at night. There's a little more to it, but it's a slim and illogical premise that doesn't gel in the first few issues, despite some atmospheric art from David Lapham (1, 2, 4, 5). All-purpose Valiant evil tattooed mystic Master Darque is introduced in 8 to beef things up considerably. Bob Hall writes from 6, and pencils from 10, and gradually develops *Shadowman* into a gloomy corner of the Valiant Universe. His plots are slim, but he instils a mood through pacing and characterisation, and while he's no stylist Hall's storytelling works. Not every issue is a success, but by 12 *Shadowman* is a decent adventure title. 14's story of a hick town with its share of secrets and bully boys is okay, and in 17-18 Jack learns more about what he's become in the company of Archer and Armstrong, who're well worked into the story, with a purpose beyond simple sales boosting. The same can't be said of 19's Aerosmith appearance. Hall's other strength is the design skill he brings into play on the covers. Almost every one after 10 is striking and imaginative, with little repetition occurring. These wordless illustrations are excellent attention-grabbers, but Valiant's redesigned cover template from 30 reduces their effectiveness.

21-23 send Jack back in time to meet a previous incarnation, and lead into the zero issue, which clarifies once and for all what Shadowman is, who his predecessor was, and throws in the early days of Master Darque to boot. It's the best of the run to that point and propels Hall to step up a gear. Several previously introduced characters return, along with a deadly new foe, the assassin Ishmael in 26, and Shadowman and Jack begin to diverge into separate personalities. 'The Chaos Effect' crossover (29) has the effect of powering up Shadowman to the point where he's a match for Master Darque, but from then on he's not nearly as interesting. The human-interest stories that had fired the book disappeared into a welter of less than absorbing fights, with Hall modifying his style to include more pin-up action pages. Anyone who finds Ann Rice's vampire writing tiresome should check out 40. The series ends with the police and crimelords uniting to bust Jack.

For a new incarnation the title is split into two words, and the opening four issues from Garth Ennis and Ashley Wood set the tone for the series, being relentlessly unpleasant and remorselessly downbeat. The old Shadowman is replaced by a grittier version, but it's Ennis on autopilot. Jamie Delano and Charlie Adlard continue the depressing tone, until 16, with Adlard's art the highlight of the run. The final creative team of Serge Clermont and Klayton Krain diminish the voodoo theme, and mix what's left with technology for an uneasy concoction that was enough to kill the title. Revived for a video game, everyone involved with the accompanying miniseries should have been ashamed at cashing their pay cheques.~FP

Recommended: Series one 0, 17, 18, 24, 26-28

SHADOWMASTERS

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1989-1990*

Carl Potts, Dan Lawlis, Russ Heath and Todd Smith relate the history of a Ninja who teams up with a US soldier during the American Occupation of Japan to frustrate the plans of Imperialists dedicated to the reconquest of Japan and, eventually, the World. However their success drives their foes underground, with tragic repercussions, for themselves and their Ninja trained children. Spanning forty years, this taut thriller is a prequel to events in *Punisher* 24-25.~WW

Recommended: 1-4

SHADOWMEN

Trident: *2 issues 1990*

Originally intended as a six-issue miniseries but never completed, this is early work from Mark Millar. Some men in black beat up a woman to prevent her repeating her story about a supernatural experience. The artwork by Andrew Hope is very atmospheric – lots and lots of black ink – but there's not a lot to get excited about.~NF

SHADOWS AND LIGHT

Marvel: *3 issues 1998*

In the wake of DC's successful *Batman: Black & White* this is a similarly monochromatic anthology with much to commend it. With stories drawn from any period in Marvel's

history, the title's creative teams are freed from the restrictions of current continuity, resulting in stories that by and large strike to the heart of what made Marvel great in the past. Each issue so far has at least one great strip: Black Widow by Gerard Jones and Gene Ha in 1, The Thing by Lee Weeks in 2 and The Hulk by Roger Stern and John Buscema in 3. With beautiful covers and nice pin-ups rounding out each issue this is a lovely package that is very much Marvel's best title in years.~DAR
Recommended: 1-3

SHADOWS FALL

DC/Vertigo: *6 issue miniseries 1994-1995*

Separated from his soul by instigating an act of violence costing an innocent life, Warren Gale wanders the world an empty shell while his soul is the cause of innumerable suicides. Confronted by incidents from his past, Gale realises he must deal with his inhuman predator. Ludicrously pretentious twaddle, further compromised by ridiculous cut-and-paste art.~FP

SHADOWS FROM BEYOND

Charlton: *1 issue (50) 1966*

An anthology comic with horror and supernatural stories, usually involving the operation of cosmic justice. No masterpieces maybe, but they all make their point, and the artwork is usually very effective. Worth a look, if not a systematic hunt. In the peculiarly unique Charlton fashion, the numbering continued from *Unusual Tales*.~FC

SHADOWS FROM THE GRAVE

Renegade: *2 issues 1987-1988*

Horror series, written by Kevin McConnell and illustrated by David and Dan Day. Worth looking at for the detailed rendering, reminiscent of Steranko and Gulacy. The stories pale by comparison.~NF

Star Wars SHADOWS OF THE EMPIRE

Dark Horse: *6 issue miniseries 1996*, 5 issues miniseries ('Evolution') 1998**

Shadows of the Empire was released in every format but film as 1996's big Star Wars event and is set between *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*. This placing renders Han Solo off limits, and the remainder of the primary heroes are sparsely used, turning the title over to Boba Fett, escaping from one fellow bounty hunter after another, and the machinations of Darth Vader and a new foe. As a film it may well have worked, but the lack of plot is very evident, writer John Wagner is on autopilot, and the art team of Kilian Plunkett and P. Craig Russell is ill matched. 'Evolution' promotes some of the previous series' secondary cast, weighs in more heavily with the big guns and is written by Steve Perry, who wrote the 1996 *Shadows* novel. It's altogether more enjoyable, if similarly light on plot, and Ron Randall provides far better cast likenesses.~WJ

SHADOWTOWN

Iconografix: *1 issue 1992*

Poor artwork and one-dimensional characters ensure that this well-intentioned attempt to produce a story about an independent Afro-American nation within the USA fails.~WJ

SHAMAN

Continuity: *1 issue (0) 1994*

A by-the-numbers sword-and-sorcery title, intended as a comic-dealers-only incentive, and lifted from the mundane by quite extraordinary artwork by Alex Niño. A comic best read by not reading the dialogue or captions. Trust me.~DAR

SHAMAN'S TEARS

Image: *13 issues (0-12) 1994-1996*

Joshua Brand is empowered to assume the attributes of the animal kingdom in a Native American ceremony. Stories take place over four issues, and Brand initially becomes involved with corporate, genetically engineered, human/animal hybrids, later to star in *Bar Sinister*. While never bad, Mike Grell's spartan storytelling and illustrative page composition disappoint in comparison with previous work, such as that of 5-8's guest star Jon Sable, and trivialities such as stupid names (Regus Patoff and Pat Pending) detract from what's occurring.~WJ

SHANNA THE SHE-DEVIL

Marvel: *5 issues 1972-1973*

One of Marvel's several ill-fated attempts to produce Women's Lib comics written by women. Better than its counterparts. But not much. Shanna O'Hara, a normal American woman disillusioned with man's cruelty to man and beast, divorced herself from the trappings of civilisation (apart from make-up and an offstage hair salon) and did her Tarzan thing in the African jungle. Carole Seuling only lasted for three stereotyped issues. Steve Gerber effected a partial rescue from 4, launching the Mandrill/Nekra storyline that blossomed into full glory in *Daredevil* 108-112. Shanna later became a major supporting character in *Ka-Zar*.~APS

SHAR-PEI

Caliber: *3 issue miniseries (Swords of Shar-Pei) 1991, 3 issue miniseries (Guns of Shar-Pei) 1991*

Muddled and confusing mixture of monster comic and oriental musings as a dog in human form seeks some truths. Tom Sniegoski, or Thomas E. Sniegoski as he is here, would go on to write *Vampirella* and *Buffy*, but there's no evidence of writing talent here.~FP

SHARKY

Image: *4 issues 1998*

This one's a little complicated, perhaps, but there's enough fun that it doesn't matter. The opening few pages of each issue are painted, and feature our hero Sharky fighting guest stars such as The Mask and Savage Dragon. These represent pages from fictitious comics being read by characters in the rest of the strip. The witty story, by Dave Elliott, features kids, purple people eaters, manipulative Norse and Greek gods, and a great many ladies more than half-naked, which leads one to believe that it might be aimed more, on the whole, at boys than girls. Alberto Ponticelli and Alex Horley's slick art is superbly computer coloured by BAD@$$!.~GK

SHATTER

First: *Special 1985, 14 issues 1985-1988*

"The First Computerised Comic!" it says on the cover of the first issue. It looks so grainy you can count the pixels, especially in the lettering, and you think, "Oh no, a gimmick." Or "Another sad case who wants to marry his Apple Mac. This is going to be hideous." Well...no, and then yes for a while, and then no-ish. The Special was written by Peter Gillis, with art by Michael Saenz, and they make magic with the story of an independent tough-guy (Shatter) on a freelance project for the police in a Blade Runner setting. It's a strong story with some truly clever plotting, and Saenz' storytelling is so effective that you're absorbed within pages, with no time to count pixels. After this, Shatter had eight pages in *Jon Sable, Freelance* 25-31, and when he came back with his own title, he no longer had Gillis as writer, and it certainly showed. It's yet another corporate conspiracy yarn, and it's hard for Saenz to demonstrate his story-telling skills when there is no story. By 3, Saenz had left, and any craftsmanship in the artwork left with him. Gillis returned as writer with 5, and the story instantly improved, although with perfunctory artwork there was never any danger of recapturing the excitement of that first special.~FC
Recommended: Special

SHATTERED IMAGE

Image: *4 issue miniseries 1996*

Image crossover that sees Savant (from *WildC.A.T.S*) trying to put together a cross-section of heroes to prevent the splitting of the Image Universe into six separate ones. Only Spawn seems content to let the crisis continue to its logical conclusion (on the basis that his murderer won't exist if the split takes place). In any case, the real world has made this whole plot redundant. Since it's written by Kurt Busiek and Barbara Kesel there's some good characterisation, but it's an utterly contrived crossover that barely holds the reader's interest. Michael Ryan's artwork is from the Manga-influenced school of big eyes and the Liefeld school of overly muscled anatomy but it's not that bad in context.~NF

SHAZAM!

DC: *35 issues 1973-1978, 4 issue miniseries ('The New Beginning') 1987, Graphic novel (Power of Shazam!) 1994, 47 issues (Power of Shazam!), 1 Annual 1995-1999, one-shot ('Power of Hope') 2000, one-shot ('Shazam! and the Shazam Family! Annual') 2002*

Originally published by Fawcett from 1940, most prominently *Whiz Comics* and *Captain Marvel Adventures*, and a once universally known character, Captain Marvel was the subject of a lawsuit over his supposed similarities to Superman that eventually forcing publication to cease in 1953. It's ironic, then, that by the time of the DC revival Marvel were publishing a different Captain Marvel, meaning the more famous character had to appear in *Shazam!* For the same reason DC's hardbound reprint editions of 1940s material are titled *The Shazam! Archives*, three volumes of which are now available.

When young Billy Batson speaks the name of the wizard, Shazam, he becomes the adult superhero, Captain Marvel, the World's Mightiest Mortal. This aspect of the character was ignored when his 'family' expanded, as neither Mary Marvel, nor Captain Marvel Jr are adults in their superhero identities. DC's first series begins well, by returning original artist C.C. Beck to the character, with a re-telling of the origin and a reprint from the Fawcett comics. From the start, favourite characters reappeared, whether villains like Dr Sivana and Mr Mind (an alien worm) or friends like Tawky Tawny (a talking Tiger) and Uncle Dudley. Denny O'Neil, Elliot Maggin and E. Nelson Bridwell (from 10) provide one or two new short stories in each issue until Bridwell becomes sole writer of full-length stories in 26. Some issues were all (8, 21-24), or mostly reprint (12-17, one-hundred page issues, as was 8). Unsatisfied with the scripts not conforming to his idea of Captain Marvel stories, Beck's last issue was 10, after which Bob Oksner and Kurt Schaffenberger alternated on the new stories. One-off artists included Dave Cockrum (on a Captain Marvel Jr strip in 9), Dick Giordano (introducing Isis in 25, when both Captain Marvel and Isis had TV shows) and Alan Weiss (34). Bridwell's issues sent Captain Marvel on a tour of America, defeating agents of Sivana in each location. Highlights include the return of Kid Eternity (27), Minute Man (31), Captain Nazi (34) and King Kull (35). This last issue was significant in introducing the artwork of Don Newton to the series and subplots other than whether the villain would return in the next issue (in this case the sale of the radio station where Billy works as a broadcaster). After cancellation this creative team followed the strip into *World's Finest*. Beck's artwork is wonderfully simple and effective, and his clean-line style was perpetuated by Schaffenberger (who also worked on the original series). Giordano and Weiss' more realistic style seems unsuitable to the character, but Newton, though much less cartoony than Beck, nevertheless offered a modern interpretation that showed an understanding of Beck's original vision.

'The New Beginning', by Roy and Dann Thomas and Tom Mandrake, introduces Captain Marvel to the main DC Universe after the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* series. It provides character tweaks, like increasing Billy's age and establishing more past, but much of the sense of fun and wonder is lost in this clash with Sivana and Black Adam. Mandrake's artwork is in a realistic style that lacks clarity in its definition.

The Power of Shazam! hardback is another new start, attempting to combine the best of a modern approach with some of the look of the past. Writing and drawing, Jerry Ordway re-tells Captain Marvel's origin, explaining how Billy's parents were killed in Egypt by his father's assistant who would become Black Adam, leaving Billy as an orphan with his sister being brought up by Black Adam's sister. The regular series picks up from this in Fawcett City, with Mary Marvel (4) and then Captain Marvel Jr being re-introduced (6-7, a re-telling of his origin with Captain Nazi). Billy has problems at school because he lives without an adult and keeps disappearing, and villainous uncle, Ebenezer Batson lurks in the background. 1-12 effectively tell a single story as Superman villain, Blaze, attempts to capture Captain Marvel's soul, while 15-18 feature one of Mr Mind's plots to conquer the Earth. In keeping with its closer integration into the DC Universe, 20 is a *Final Night* and 31 a *Genesis* crossover, whilst guest appearances include Plastic Man (21), Batman (22) and Starman (35-36). The original series is not forgotten, as many other characters are reintroduced, including Ibis the Invincible, Bulletman and, thankfully, Hoppy the Marvel Bunny (in 29, though it might be a dream). The Mr Mind-led Monster Society of Evil start an atomic war (38-41), whilst Black Adam's attempt to clear himself of murder dominates 42-47 with appearances from the JLA and the Three Faces of Evil. Jerry Ordway's scripts respect the source material, whilst still providing a fresh view of the Marvel Family, though some elements are more successful than others (Captain Marvel Jr's decision to rename himself 'CM3' to name one). The main pencil artist is Peter Krause (to 41), who largely avoids negative comparisons with the past through his own, clear storytelling. Ordway himself completes the series with inks from Giordano, who is also responsible for a Mary Marvel solo story in 28. Of note also is Gil Kane's issue length Captain Marvel Jr clash with Captain Nazi (14). The 1996 Annual is a 'Legends of Dead Earth' story by Ordway and Mike Manley. Paul Dini and Alex Ross' 'Power of Hope' is one of several treasury-sized comics with painted artwork and morally uplifting tales. Here, Captain Marvel offers inspiration to children suffering in a hospital by spending time with them and telling tales of his exploits. *The Shazam Family* one-shot is also reprints (as if in an annual from 1953), but well selected. With all stories written by Otto Binder, it features the introduction of Mary Marvel, drawn by Marc Swayze, a Captain Marvel Jr battle with Captain Nazi, by Mac Raboy, the first appearance of Black Adam, and the Marvel Family versus the Sivana Family, both by C. C. Beck.~NF

Recommended: Shazam! 1-17, 21-24, 27, 35, *The Power of Shazam!*, *The Power of Shazam!* 38-47, *'Shazam! and the Shazam Family! Annual'*

SHE-CAT

AC: *One-shot ('Curse of the She-Cat') 1989, 5 issues 1990-1994, 1 "alternate edition" (5) 1995*

In 1937, Jessica White is assisting her archaeologist father in Egypt when a cave-in traps her in the tomb of Sehkmet, the Cat Goddess. To save her father from the inevitable tomb-robbers she merges with the spirit of Sehkmet and becomes an immortal, savage, punisher of the wicked. The series continues in the same clichéd manner as She-Cat finds herself framed for murder and on the run from her Fem Force team mates. Due to a clerical mix-up most copies of issue 5 were destroyed before distribution, necessitating the production of an alternate edition with the same interiors (part of a crossover with *Fem Force* 78-84) but a different cover. Derivative, but not without charm.~WW

SHE-HULK

Marvel: *Series one 25 issues 1980-1982, Graphic Novel 1985, series two 60 issues 1989-1994, 2 issue microseries ('Ceremony') 1990*

Mild-mannered lawyer Jennifer Walters, injured in an attack by criminals, is brought back from the brink of death by a transfusion of blood from her cousin, the only candidate on the scene at the time. Unfortunately, her cousin is Bruce Banner, aka the Incredible Hulk, and his gamma-irradiated blood causes her to swell up and turn green from time to time. No doubt to the disappointment of horny pubescent readers, she never quite burst out of her shirt the way her cousin was noted for doing. The first issue, written by Stan Lee and drawn by John Buscema, is competent, but after that, David Anthony Kraft and Mike Vosburg take over, and it becomes clear that nobody cares what they're doing on this. Our monosyllabic heroine fights villains like the Man-Elephant, meets Hellcat, Man-Thing and Morbius as her title rapidly becomes a halfway house for homeless heroes, and is romanced by the ludicrous Zapper. The series stumbled on for longer than logic and reason would have us believe, before finally collapsing. This series was titled *Savage She-Hulk*, as opposed to the second series, by which time she'd become "Sensational".

She-Hulk herself became a popular and established supporting player in *Avengers* and *Fantastic Four*, which led to a graphic novel, written and drawn by John Byrne. Lightweight, fun and cheesecakey (rather too much so in one offensive sequence that enables Byrne to explicitly condemn sexist attitudes while displaying them), it ushers in a significant development. It's confirmed that Jennifer Walters' physiology has adjusted to her gamma-irradiated state to the extent that she can no longer return to human form. Refreshingly, this isn't a cue for the usual overplayed angst. She enjoys the hell out of her seven-foot-tall green persona, and is happy to stay that way!

"Okay, this is your second chance. If you don't buy my book this time, I'm gonna have to come to your house and rip up all your *X-Men*." Writer/artist John Byrne thus establishes, on the cover of the second series' first issue, that the She-Hulk knows that she's in a comic, and exploits that knowledge. She crosses panel borders to get around faster, uses the break between pictures to change outfits, and breaks the fourth wall to address the readers on the idiocy of her villains, and so on. This comedy routine is subverted to poignant effect when a supporting character, Louise Mason, is introduced in 4. As Louise Grant, she was the Blonde Phantom, a crimefighter of the 1940s, and possessed the same awareness as She-Hulk. Long retired, she discovers – at the cost of her husband's life, in a movingly told sequence – that the ageing process is suspended when you're in a currently published comic. This supporting-character gig is her way of fending off the ravages of time. 1-7* are quirky and imaginative, a highly enjoyable read, with She-Hulk triumphing in her own insouciant style over such insidious villains as the Terrible Toad Men, the Headmen, Stilt-Man and Dr. Bong. The eighth issue, co-starring Father Christmas, is a bit over-sentimental, but still readable. Following 'creative disagreements', Byrne quit after 8, and fill-ins along the same lines, but less entertaining and imaginative, were the order of the day. Even though big names like Peter David and Steve Gerber worked on She Hulk, it never quite gelled. Better than the average was 21-23's 'Return of the Blonde Phantom', involving a time-trip to the 1940s, a guest appearance by the All-Winners Squad, and a new second-generation superheroine.

Byrne returned with 31, on good form initially with the return of Spragg the Living Hill, leading into a confrontation with the Mole Man and the rejuvenation of Louise. A parade of third-rate bad guys swaggered through the pages, and were despatched with fine style, including the zombie master Black Talon, the Living Eraser and the malevolent Mahkizmo, excellent in 38-39. Sadly, Byrne's attention began to wander, and more space was given to gimmicks than to story. 40 had Shulkie spend seven pages purportedly nude rope-jumping, and 45 scattered the main storytelling in tiny panels around (admittedly well-executed) pin-up shots. 50 had several artists auditioning to replace Byrne. Dave Gibbons, Walt Simonson, Howard Chaykin, Terry Austin, Wendy Pini and Adam Hughes drew their interpretations of the Emerald Amazon. Together with a coherent, if low-key, story, and a foil-enhanced cover that was actually attractive, this was an enjoyable and memorable send-off for Byrne. The 'regular' new artist, Todd Britton, lasted all of an issue and a half, but writer Michael Eury struggled on until the end of the run with a succession of less and less interested illustrators.~HS

Recommended: Series two 1-7, 31-33, 38, 39, 50

SHEILA'S DIARY

RedLight Manga: *3 Volumes 2002*

Sheila is a dominatrix witch from the spirit world, who, tired of her slave, Chacha, decides to find a virgin on Earth to enslave. Unluckily for Ayaka, she bumps into Sheila on the street and is forced into an ever more submissive relationship with her. Things become complicated when Ayaka falls in love with new guy, Shinobu, who seems just as dominating as Sheila. Then her classmate, Hiromi, discovering the depths to which Ayaka has sunk, attracts the attention of Sheila to herself. This is a well thought out series from Yuuki Ryo with a few surprises along the way, simply, but attractively, drawn and offering far more than a simple series of hardcore episodes.~NF

Recommended: 1-3

SHERLOCK HOLMES

DC: *1 issue 1975*

Fresh from their excellent work on the recently revived *Shadow*, Denny O'Neil and E.R. Cruz produced this interesting curio. It had the same look and feel as the *Shadow*, and is suitably reverential to the Arthur Conan-Doyle writing, but it somehow just doesn't convince. The decision to base the story on Holmes' final battle with his nemesis Moriarty means we are left with the feeling of being in the middle of something. The whole enterprise would have worked better as an ongoing series, but that, sadly, was not to be.~DAR

SHERLOCK HOLMES

Eternity: *23 issues 1988-1990*

Collecting the *Sherlock Holmes* newspaper strips of the 1950s. Never heard of them, you say? And your parents or grandparents don't remember them? That's because they're resolutely mundane, although Frank Giacoia's art, while never poor, sometimes transcends the material he's given. The landscape presentation permits larger, but muddier reproduction of the daily tiers, and the inclusion of Sunday re-cap pages consistently breaks up the story.~WJ

SHERLOCK HOLMES

Caliber: *2 issue microseries ('Adventure of the Opera Ghost') 1994, one-shot ('The Sussex Vampire') 1995*

The 'Opera Ghost' by Steven Jones and Aldin Baroza is an original adventure that gives the usually sidelined Dr. John Watson a chance to shine when the detectives are called abroad to investigate a Phantom that is terrorising the Paris Opera house, seemingly causing a rash of suicides. Although Watson works well as protagonist the dubious addition of his own dead wife muddles the intriguing combination of Holmes and the Phantom of the Opera. 'The Sussex Vampire' is a creditable adaptation by Warren Ellis and Craig Gilmore of one of Sir Arthur Conan-Doyle's more chilling tales. The consulting detective is called to the country to solve the mystery of a prominent businessman whose foreign wife seems to be sucking blood from the neck of their child. Holmes is a perennial favourite and fans won't be disappointed, but mainstream comics readers might find the proceedings a little slow and dry. Caliber also produced several text-based comics adapting *Holmes* stories, largely illustrated by Dan Day.~WW

Cases of SHERLOCK HOLMES

Renegade: *15 issues 1986-1988*
Northstar: *5 issues (16-20) 1989-1990, one-shot 1992*

Something of an oddity in that each issue contains the text of one of Arthur Conan Doyle's original short stories with accompanying illustrations by Dan Day. His black-and-white drawings are in the same ornate style used by his brother Gene, with likenesses based on Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce. Overall, though sometimes stiff, the illustrations do add to the period atmosphere and enhance the reading experience.~NF

SHERLOCK HOLMES CASEBOOK

Eternity: *2 issue miniseries 1989*

One must concede that some readers will require a cheap reprint, reproduced in black, grey and white, of Dell's 1961 brace of colour *New Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, especially as Mike Sekowsky is involved on the art side. 1 includes a story about a Professor Moriarty bankjob under cover of an England/France cross-channel tunnel, but the stories are otherwise rather too elementary: Plenty of violin, no trace of cocaine.~GK

SHERLOCK HOLMES In The Curious Case of the Vanishing Villain

Tundra: *One-shot 1993*

Gordon Rennie and Woodrow Phoenix concoct an offbeat case for the classic detective and companion. He's approached by Dr Jekyll to locate the missing Mr Hyde; it transpires that he's escaped into the next book on the shelf, a decidedly rum affair. It's clever and stylish-looking, with Phoenix's sparing use of colour particularly effective.~FP

SHERLOCK HOLMES:Tales of Mystery and Suspense

Northstar: *2 issues 1992*

Nonsensical and offensive adventure as Holmes and Watson become embroiled in a case of incest and child abuse. Tawdry, exploitative rubbish from Joe Gentile and Phil Rittenhouse delivered with a staggering lack of sensitivity to the characters and the issues.~WW

SHERLOCK JR.

Eternity: *3 issue miniseries 1989*

In the 1930s Sidney Smith became the first cartoonist awarded a contract for $1,000,000, the price paid to retain the creator of *The Gumps*, then the most popular newspaper strip in the USA. In 1912, however, his feature was the inept and unlucky detective Sherlock Jr. Smith was neither a great cartoonist nor a great writer, but with *The Gumps* he hit on the then original idea of portraying life as it actually was for millions of Americans, thus creating the first soap opera. Devoid of that extra level, *Sherlock Jr.* has dated very badly, and it's difficult to conceive that it was ever riotous stuff. Filling six panels to the strip, Smith rarely departs from a formula that has Sherlock discovering a reward for criminals in the first panel, adopting a disguise or secreting himself in the second, and fluffing the capture by the sixth. So bland and predictable, Sherlock Jr. doesn't even qualify as a historical footnote. Buster Keaton made a great film with the same title, mind.~FP

SHERMAN'S MARCH

The Heritage Collection: *One-shot 1995*

A telling of Major General Sherman's march through Atlanta during the second half of 1864. This account of one of the most destructive campaigns of the American Civil War is careful to date events and battles as well as providing historical detail. Woven into this is the fictional account of a slave named Luther and his woman Leah and their fortunes during the hostilities. Probably aimed at giving the reader a protagonist to follow, these unfortunate characters remain ciphers next to the carefully portrayed historical accuracy. Educational but amateurish work from writer Ethan Krash and artist/collaborator Wayne Vansant.~SW

SHEVA'S WAR

DC/Helix: *5 issue miniseries 1998-1999*

On the planet, Taramai, when Captain Ahmi Sheva and her militiamen discover a remote village destroyed by unknown creatures, she finds herself on the frontline of an invasion by the worms of the Vaylen Empire. An episode from writer and artist, Christopher Moeller's own Iron Empires saga, this is a well-written science fiction adventure with attractive painted artwork (reminiscent of a less-angular Howard Chaykin), though it's a little stiff in the action scenes.~NF

SHI

Crusade: *12 issues ('The Way Of The Warrior') 1994-1997, 3 issues ('Senryaku') 1995, One-shot ('Shi/Cyblade: The Battle for Independents') 1995, 2 issue microseries ('Grifter/Shi') 1996, 1 issue ('Shi vs. Tomoe Special') 1996, 1 issue ('Kaidon') 1996, 3 issues ('Blood of Saints') 1996, one-shot ('Manga Shi: Shiseiji') 1996, 3 issue miniseries (0-2) ('Horseman/Shi') 1996-1997, 3 issue miniseries ('Manga Shi 2000') 1997, one-shot ('Shi/Daredevil: Honor The Mother') 1997, one-shot ('Shi/Vampirella') 1997, 2 issue microseries ('Black, White And Red') 1997-1998, one-shot ('Nightstalkers') 1997, 2 issues ('Rekishi') 1997, 4 issues 'Heaven and Earth' 1997-1998, 2 issues ('East Wind Rain') 1997-1998, 13 issues ('The Series') 1997-1998, one-shot ('Masquerade') 1998, one-shot ('5th Anniversary Special') 1999, 1 issue 'Warrior Gallery' 2000, one-shot ('Shi/Wolverine: Dark Night of Judgement') 2000, 3 issues ('Year of the Dragon') 2000-2001, one-shot ('Through The Ashes') 2001, 4 issue miniseries ('The Illustrated Warrior') 2002*
Avatar: *4 issues ('Poisoned Paradise') (Preview, 1/2-2) 2002*

Hugely popular 'bad girl' comic featuring an oriental avenging angel killing various lowlifes while agonising over her Christian principles. When it first came out many a wag pondered "Is it pronounced Shi, as it shit, or Shi as in shite?" Because she's tough and slaughters rapists, few people seem to worry that God-fearing creator William Tucci (who actually thanks Jehovah in the first issue for inspiration!) slavers over his heroine. Sensible creators do not come to the conclusion that skimpy leather knickers are the best outfit for crime fighting although Tucci protests his innocence vigorously. He even goes so far as to create a manga-style version of the first story arc written from the point of view of a low-life observer and pontificates how from this narrator's point of view the story appears to be just fights, exactly like those critics who don't read his work properly before condemning it ('Shiseiji', the story's title, means bastard in Japanese). Of course, all the time he's pontificating he's able to draw a cut-down version of his own work with all the waffle gone and just the violence left for readers to buy...

The comic's a heady cocktail of blood-dripping swords, Eastern mysticism and crotch shots destined to delight adolescents of all ages for many years to come. As the franchise expands, there is a weird range of products available. As well as the manga version, Chris Golden and Caesar do twelve issues where Shi's ranged against the ancient demon Oni to save modern Japan while Tucci's taking care of business on the bewildering array of miniseries and crossovers. Almost every miniseries comes with variant covers, limited edition covers, ashcan editions and ½ editions distributed with *Wizard*. Half a dozen different covers and 'antiqued' versions at $100 a pop are not unusual. *The Cyblade*, *Daredevil* and *Vampirella* crossovers each start in issues with the titles reversed.

There's a Battlebook (with a gorgeous Alex Ross cover) where you can play at being Shi by choosing options and rolling dice, the *Warrior Gallery* which is designed to be taken apart and turned into posters, and even a Sept 11 tribute (1000 copies only) featuring a pencil story and reminiscences by various witnesses. For Tucci at his not terribly coherent best, try the *Shi vs Tomoe Special*, full of bright colours, bold design on the one figure per page panels without too much twiddly detail to get in the way, and a foil cover to boot.~FJ

SHIDIMA

Image: *5 issues (0-4) 2001**
Dreamwave: *3 issues (5-7) 2002*

In this spin-off from *Warlands*, Aldaran, remembering Kameko and their part in the rebellion of the Adashi Clan against the empire, visits the smuggler Minako, only to find himself once again opposing Emperor Gurakai. This is a straightforward enough story about vengeance and a struggle against tyranny, but the work of three separate artists over the seven issues is buried under some dreadful computer colouring.~NF

The Legend of the SHIELD

!mpact: *16 issues, 1 Annual 1991-1992*

One of the few !mpact titles that sticks closely to the premise of the character as previously established, and none the worse for it. As the title implies, the series deals with more than one wearer of the army-developed superpowered force-field costume, and explores concepts of patriotism and duty. Writer/artist Grant Miehm handled similar topics in *The American*, and the culmination of these plots in 15 is truly shocking in displaying the moral redundancy of decision-makers; and it's unimpaired by the subtlety necessarily employed because this was a comic aimed at the younger end of the market. There's not a dud issue, with the best samplers being 7's teaming with the Fly or 14's surprisingly suspenseful attempt to waylay the detonation of nuclear warheads. The annual, though, is to be avoided, with stupid Shield and Web stories barely redeemed by an atmospheric Black Hood tale.~WJ

Recommended: 6, 7, 15

The Original SHIELD

Red Circle: *2 issues 1984*

The Shield was the first of the patriotic superheroes, débuting in 1940 and phased out in 1947 – transformed into an iron statue, which meant he could be revived at any time and still be as young as before! In this brief revival, he spends most of his time reminiscing about his 1940s origins. The stories are convoluted and weak, and the artwork variable, but as a character the Shield is refreshingly gentle, and full of melancholy for his former life. He was then usurped in his own title by Steel Sterling and not seen again until the !mpact title.~FC

SHILOH The Devil's Own Day

The Heritage Collection: *One-shot 1996*

An admirable attempt to convey the intricacies of a decisive battle during the American Civil War. Wayne Vansant's research and art are excellent, but he's stymied by comics being a far from ideal medium for presenting the various facets of a battle. What should be action-packed and exciting is rendered dry. There are memorable moments, though, particularly a Confederate soldier being showered by peach flower petals loosened by flying bullets. This is part of a series; the next is *Covered In Glory*.~FP

SHINOBI

Dark Horse: *One-shot 2002*

Produced to promote a video game, it's competently turned out, but totally soul-less in every respect, as if reflecting the circumstances of its genesis.~WJ

SHIP OF FOOLS

Caliber: *5 issues, 1 Special ('Bon Voyage') 1996-1997**

Image: *4 issues (0-3) 1997-1998**

In this jolly and violent series by Bryan J. L. Glass and Michael Avon Oeming, Puerto Rican reform school girl Mala, her Chewbacca-like sidekick Shiro, a schizophrenic chainsaw-loving poetess called Atlanta, Darius the shrewd manipulator, and a damaged robot ship's captain make up Section Eight. This is a team of outlaws thrown together while escaping from a prison spaceship. They battle agents of ruthless rulers the Jet Black Illuminati, who in turn serve the mysterious Powers That Be, who appear as monoliths. Oeming's art is clear and vigorous. The dialogue is lively too, and sometimes witty, although the captions tend to be a bit purple.~GK

SHOCK SUSPENSTORIES

EC: *18 issues 1952-1954**

Gemstone: *18 issues 1992-1996**

Originally a sort of sampler for EC's other titles – each issue to have a crime, horror, war and science-fiction suspenstory – with the second issue it started to earn its title. 'The Patriots', drawn by Jack Davis, combined two elements that at once raised the series above 'kiddie stories' and caused a controversy amongst its readers: relevance and violence. It tells the tale of a man who attends a parade but seems to sneer at the troops in the parade and doesn't lift his hat as the flag goes by. The crowd around him get angry and beat him to death before discovering that he was a blind veteran with a paralysed face. While the rest of the stories in each issue are of the generally high quality that continues to bring people back to EC's titles, the Shock SuspenStories in this series helped consolidate the publisher's reputation. These stories of mob violence and social relevance were hard-hitting, and if they seem tame or unnecessary today, at the time they could provoke such reader reactions as "'Hate" is the worst example of a story I have ever read... I hope somebody does something about stories like that."

Al Feldstein wrote all the scripts until the last four issues. 'The Patriots' was followed by other classics like 'The Guilty' (3), 'Confession' (4 – a policeman gets away with murder by beating a confession out of an innocent man), Hate (5, about anti-Semitism), 'The Assault' (8), '...So Shall Ye Reap!' (10 – parents and their lack of understanding of their children), 'In Gratitude' (11, a superb tale about a Korean veteran who tries to bury the dead friend who saved his life in his home town, only to find that the townspeople's racism prevents it) and the later cynicism of 'A Kind of Justice' (16), as characters, more than before, are seen to be getting away with their crimes. Most of the Shock SuspenStories were drawn by Wally Wood (3-11,13-15) and they brought out the best in him. '...So Shall Ye Reap!' and 'In Gratitude' in particular are finely controlled, emotionally telling pieces.

Other strips of note include: 'The Neat Job' (by Jack Kamen) in 1, a famous tale of obsessive neatness that results in a murderous wife bottling her dismembered husband; 'The October Game' (9, by Kamen), an adaptation of the Ray Bradbury story that ends "Then...some idiot turned on the lights..."; 'The Monkey' (12, by Joe Orlando), another classic, detailing the disastrous (and supposedly inevitable) effects of drug-taking; 'The Small Assassin' (7, by George Evans), a Bradbury tale, like several others, that feeds on the idea that children are monsters (see also 'The Orphan' in 14); while 'Seep No More' (18, by Evans) and 'For Cryin' Out Loud!' (15, by Reed Crandall) both re-write Poe's *The Telltale Heart*. 'In the Bag' (18, by Bernie Krigstein) has seventy-seven panels in six pages, none of them wasted.

Jack Kamen is the only artist to be in every issue but Wood's in most (2-15) and others have good runs: Joe Orlando (1, 3-7, 9, 10, 12, 16, 17), mostly on science-fiction stories, George Evans (7, 8, 14-18) and Reed Crandall (9-13, 15-18), an excellent artist who set a high standard with his first story, 'Carrion Death', an atmospheric desert tale. Other artists drew odd stories. Al Williamson produced a funny-animal science-fiction story in 8, Johnny Craig worked on 'Tryst' in 11, Frank Frazetta on 'Squeeze Play' in 13 and Bernie Krigstein on 'You, Murderer' (14) and the aforementioned 'In the Bag'.

Just before the stringent terms of the Comics Code Authority were applied, new writers were introduced, including Jack Oleck, Carl Wessler and Gardner Fox. While not much is known about exactly who did what, Wessler definitely wrote some stories for this title, and in particular all of 18. The stories were a bit hit-and-miss but there are some notable high points, backed up by the customary high-quality artwork. The Gemstone issues are reprinted facsimiles, and a boxed set reprints the entire series in hardbound volumes.~NF

Recommended: 1-5, 7-12, 14, 18

SHOCK THE MONKEY

Millennium/Expand: *2 issue microseries 1995-1996*

Each issue starts and ends with part of 'Shock the Monkey', in which an amnesiac suspect in a murder case is given shock treatment to try to stimulate his memories. The stories in between are meant to be these memories or, possibly, hallucinations. Franz Henkel and Omaha Perez provide this framing sequence. However, 1 is largely incoherent, despite contributions from Ted Naifeh and Reuben Rude. 2 has two good strips, an encounter on the subway by Leslie T. Parker and Brian Horton, which seems to be completely out of place, and an unhealthy obsession with books portrayed by Leif Jones.~NF

SHOCKROCKETS

Image/Gorilla: *6 issue miniseries 2000*

One of writer Kurt Busiek's less imaginative works. A poor Mexican-American boy by chance joins an elite squadron of smart aircraft defending the world from a renegade general after a foiled alien invasion. Both people and big machines are drawn to a high standard by Stuart Immonen, but this owes too much to *Star Wars*, *An Officer and a Gentleman*, and *Top Gun* to be anything but corny all the way to the surprise conspiracy ending. Each issue is narrated by a different member of the cast but the voices are hard to distinguish. Prequels to Gorilla titles *Empire* and *Superstar* are in 1 and 6 respectively.~GK

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* Available in a collected edition

SHOGUN WARRIORS

Marvel: *20 issues 1979-1980*

Astoundingly, ahead of its time in featuring giant Japanese-style robots. It's pedestrian stuff, but if you must have them you'll want to know that the story concludes in *Fantastic Four* 226.~FP

SHORT ORDER Comix

Head Press: *1 issue 1973*
Family Feud: *1 issue (2) 1974*

The first anthology comic edited by Bill Griffith and Art Spiegelman, it was very much a dry run for the highly regarded *Arcade* and remains criminally overlooked. Griffith contributes his usual incise dissections of culture and society, but it's Spiegelman who particularly shines with the autobiographical 'Prisoner on Hell Planet' in 1 and the cubist 'Ace Hole, Midget Detective' in 2. Strips by Joe Schenkman, Jay Kinney and Rory Hayes amongst others only serve to make this an even more impressive title.~DAR

Recommended: 1, 2

SHORT PROGRAM

Viz: *1 volume 2000*

This collects eight short stories that appeared in *Animerica Extra* Volume II, 2-11. These are primarily offbeat romantic tales with a bittersweet edge, each having a twist in the tail that turns on the characters' discovery of something. As an idea of the content, in 'Take Off', athlete Satori Nakata appears to be jumping the height of her tall, ever-growing friend Nagashima. 'Short Program' has a protective neighbour come to the rescue of Naomi, but he knows more about her than he should. In 'The Current State of Affairs', a high school reunion brings best friends Kasuhiko and the now successful, Toshio, together, but between them is their attraction to Asako. Creator, Mitsuru Adachi experiments with storytelling and narrative to maintain a sense of surprise and the artwork is simple yet captivating.~NF

Recommended

Pat Kelly's SHORTS

Antarctic: *One-shot 1997*

Short skit humour title in which Pat Kelly discusses topics that interest him, such as B-movies and cloning. Cute art, but only mildly amusing.~DB

SHOT CALLERZ

Oni Press: *4 issue miniseries 2002-2003*

Nea, boyfriend Philip, Willie and Christian have pulled of a successful heist, but Philip wants it all. Leaving the others for dead, he invests the proceeds in a club and the financial markets, but Nea isn't going to die easy, and sets off looking for vengeance. Novelist, Gary Phillips' crime fiction is hard-boiled and streetwise, but Brett Weldele's loose, impressionistic artwork is often crude and unconvincing.~NF

SHOTGUN MARY

Antarctic: *3 issue miniseries 1996, one-shot ('Deviltown') 1997, one-shot ('Son of the Beast') 1997, 4 issue miniseries ('Blood Lore') 1997, 3 issues 1998*

Another *Warrior Nun* spin-off this is one of the better ones. At least Mary has left the order, so it's a lot less heavy on the habits. Her swordplay is substandard, but she is a great shot with her trademark shotgun, so this is the techno end of the genre. Kelsey Shannon, who draws and co-colours the new ongoing series, is talented. He was wasted inking the hapless Neil Googe's pencils on the 'Blood Lore'.~GK

SHOWCASE

DC: *Series one 104 issues 1956-1970 (1-93), 1977-1978 (94-104), 12 issue limited series (Showcase '93) 1993, 12 issue limited series (Showcase '94) 1994, 12 issue limited series (Showcase '95) 1995, 12 issue limited series (Showcase '96) 1996*

This begins as an adventure title with tales of firefighters by Arnold Drake and John Prentice and frogmen; however, the fourth issue is one of the most important comics ever in terms of what it spawned, being the origin and first appearance of the new look Flash. Editor Julie Schwartz and writer Robert Kanigher took the concept of the 1940s DC hero The Flash, applied it to a new character with a new costume, and relaunched the idea with only the name the same. The dynamic art of Carmine Infantino and Joe Kubert completed a healthy package, and the comic was the starting-point for the revival of costumed superheroes. Flash reappeared in 8, 13 and 14, and superheroes have remained ever since.

Flash was the first to graduate from *Showcase* into his own title, but he began a run of similarly successful features. Next were Jack Kirby's adventurers The Challengers Of The Unknown (6, 7, 11, 12), Lois Lane, after years as a supporting character (9, 10), space adventurer Adam Strange (17-19), Rip Hunter, Time Master (20, 21, 23, 24). In fact it's not until Tommy Tomorrow in 41-42 that a *Showcase* presentation fails to graduate to lead strip status or their own title. Another 1940s character re-tooled for the new audience was Green Lantern (22-24), recreated by John Broome and Gil Kane, and the succeeding successes were underwater heroes the Sea Devils, beautifully drawn by Russ Heath in 27-29, with the underwater theme continued for Aquaman (30-33). The Atom, another 1940s name, was appropriated for a new character in 34-36, and the quirky Metal Men débuted in 37-40. Once the run stopped, though, the successes were few and far between, with only the Teen Titans (59), who'd already appeared in *The Brave and the Bold*, going on to anything approaching lasting success.

Still, despite the title's not generating any long-running new features, it did have short-term successes and plenty of worthwhile material. Russ Heath illustrates G. I. Joe in 51-53, and in 55 and 56 Gardner Fox and Murphy Anderson produced two nice stories teaming 1940s heroes Dr Fate and Hourman. Following that there was Enemy Ace, a World War I German fighter pilot, beautifully illustrated by Joe Kubert in 57 and 58. Another try at reviving a 1940s hero was in 60, 61 and 64, with the near-omnipotent supernatural Spectre, illustrated by Murphy Anderson. This did spawn a title, but it was a short run, as was the title of *Showcase*'s next characters, parody superhero group The Inferior Five in 62, 63 and 65, with the latter's X-Men parody a real treat. From 72, reprinting the Alex Toth-illustrated Western 'Top Gun', to 82, *Showcase* only gave new ideas a one-issue chance at stardom. Steve Ditko immediately launched two concepts destined for their own series, The Creeper (73) and The Hawk and the Dove (75), spliced by Howie Post's equally successful caveman Anthro, and followed by charming Western rogue Bat Lash (76) and oddball detective duo Angel and the Ape (77). The mysterious Phantom Stranger in 80 was the last successful graduate of the first run, although there's other noteworthy material, including romance artist J. Scott Pike's silent and enigmatic underwater heroine Dolphin in 79.

82-84 introduced sword-and-sorcery to comics in the form of Nightmaster, written and illustrated by Jerry Grandenetti in 82, with new young artists Howard Chaykin, Jeff Jones and Mike Kaluta illustrating thereafter. 85-87 featured the adventures of Joe Kubert's Firehair, a white child raised by Native Americans. The first run came to a close with Manhunter 2070, ironically set in the future, when there was no future for the title. Until, that is, 1977, when it was revived with a reworking of The Doom Patrol, with only one of the old cast remaining; but it failed to pull in an audience until these stories were long forgotten. Power Girl, an alternate version of Supergirl, appeared in 97-99, cleavage very much to the fore, and 100 was an action-packed epic starring every character ever to have appeared in *Showcase*. Given the diversity, it wasn't too successful, and obviously didn't impress the audience, as the title was cancelled four issues afterwards. The final run was a Hawkman story guest-starring Adam Strange, and the final issue highlighted World War II US agents operating behind enemy lines. The overall percentage of features progressing from *Showcase* into their own titles is astonishingly high, with the quality rarely slipping below decent.

The series was revived in 1993 for an annual run. Rather than showcasing new features, these oversize issues concentrate on existing characters, and the showcase aspect is more likely to refer to new creative staff. *Showcase '93* offers Catwoman, Blue Devil, The Creeper and The Huntress, but the highlight was in 7 and 8, as chapters of the *Batman* 'Knightfall' saga. These issues focus on old enemy Two-Face, written by Doug Moench and very nicely illustrated by Klaus Janson. *Showcase '94* was even more Batman-oriented, with every issue featuring solo appearances from his supporting cast or adversaries. Two-Face was back, along with The Joker and The Riddler, and 7 was again notable, spotlighting The Penguin, with Peter David writing and art by P. Craig Russell and Michael Gilbert. This run's highpoints are 8 and 9, with a solo for the best Batman villain to be created for many a year, the murderous ventriloquist's dummy Scarface. Scarface's creators Alan Grant and John Wagner chronicle his origin in the course of a gruesome tale, with art from Teddy Kristiansen.

1995 saw a new Supergirl strip, the Metal Men, continuing from their miniseries in 2, and the very welcome return of The Question in 3, by Denny O'Neil and Rick Burchett. 7 and 8 feature Mongul, catalyst for the downfall of Green Lantern, and *Showcase '96* kicks off with the new look Aqualad, while 8 is a prelude to the new Supergirl series. 11 and 12 are the most impressive issues, featuring 30th-century superteam The Legion of Super-Heroes battling it out with Superman's old foe Brainiac. The revived series has featured a fine diversity, and there's something in most issues for any reader to enjoy, but the short-story formats often hinder development. Nevertheless, pick and choose at your leisure.~HY

Recommended: 6, 7, 11, 12, 55-58, 62, 63, 65, 73-76, 79

SHPILKES

Frederick Noland: *1 issue 2001*

Most people wouldn't put the title of their comic on the back cover, but then most people wouldn't call it *Shpilkes* either. And most of all, most people wouldn't fritter away a grant from the Xeric Foundation, presumably on the basis of promising cartooning, on these nonsensical snippets.~FP

THE SHROUD

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1994*

Created as a surrogate Batman in *Super-Villain Team-Up*, the Shroud had a longevity that surpassed the pastiche, guest-starring in assorted titles over fifteen years before his own miniseries. Even then Marvel weren't confident enough not to plaster Spider-Man all over the covers. The Shroud fights gangsters by masquerading as one of them and using money obtained from defunct criminal organisations to finance further exploits. This time a heist has unforeseen complications tying into the Shroud's origins. No masterpiece, but a solid enough superhero adventure.~WJ

SHUCK Comics

Rick Smith: *4 issues + 2002 to date*

Shuck is a benign demon of sorts who conceals his true face from the little girl next door by means of a mask that wouldn't fool anybody. It's all part of the charm of a series that mixes the wonderment of the unknown with pre-Christian sensibilities. It's funny and very nicely drawn by Rick Smith, but this is a comic where you have to float with the flow rather than pick at it logically. The phonetically spelled dialogue takes some getting used to, but it ensures the comic is read rather than skimmed, and that brings its own rewards. It's Halloween in 1, Shuck has to gather some lost souls in 2, the story of his birth is in 3 and 4 has Shuck attempting to reunite with his true love as he's hunted by a short-sighted cherub. This won't be for everybody, but its worth anyone with an interest in comics beyond superheroes trying an issue.~FP

SHUGGA

Eros: *2 issue microseries 1992*

Shugga is a well-hung barbarian looking for a little action from Princess Catamenia, but having to butcher his way through the Queen's guards on his way. The Queen tries to delay him with sex and an aged demon, but this doesn't work until the demon summons Ofuk the Slayer who gives Shugga a good beating. Just in time, Shugga is spirited out of harm's way, but for a task that needs performed. There's a surprising amount of plot to go with the liberal amounts of sex and violence in this irreverent parody by Bob Fingerman, whose Wolverton-esque distorted artwork adds to the fun. Not for the faint-hearted or politically correct, however.~NF

SHURIKEN

Victory: *8 issues 1985-1987*

An early attempt at bringing the sensibilities and themes of Japanese crime comics to a US audience, and as such it deserves some acknowledgement. Unfortunately, though, by and large Reggie Byers and his successors aren't the artists up to the job. There is an exception in the final issues with Michi Okamura's loose style a great improvement.~FP

SHUT UP AND DIE

Image: *3 issues 1998*

In each issue of this hard-boiled series, the lead character succumbs to fate, sometimes as a result of conscious but misguided decisions, at other times simply by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. In 1, a man appropriates some money from the mob but can't escape to enjoy it. In 2 a murderer is branded a racist by the media and in violently trying to correct this judgement just further condemns himself. In 3, the chief suspect in the disappearance of his wife is forced to investigate until he cements the case against himself. If there's a lesson being given it seems to be that some people are incapable of dealing with fortune, good or bad. James Hudnall's grim scripts are leavened somewhat by dashes of humour, but this isn't intended to be anything other than brutally ironic. Kevin Stokes' artwork is spare and functional, not detracting much from the script but not really enhancing it either. Still, it's worth a look.~NF

SHUTTERBUG FOLLIES

Doubleday: *Graphic Novel 2002*

Bee works developing photos, and when she processes some disturbing crime-scene images she investigates the photographer, at first suspecting him of manipulating the crime scene, then of murder. Along the way she sucks others into her speculations thus broadening her enclosed world. Jason Little provides some adult window dressing, but Tintin is very much the influence here, as he appropriates the theme of the tenacious investigator and the simple ligne claire art in bold colours. It's a clever pastiche, and certainly very readable, but it remains doggedly attached to its influences.~FP

SICK

Feature/Headline/Crestwood/Hewfred/Pyramid: *108 issues, 15 Annuals 1960-1976*

Charlton: *26 issues (109-134) 1976-1980*

This was a relatively late entry into the humour magazine market, but to its credit it always had an identity of its own. Editor Joe Simon had picked up on the success of Lenny Bruce and the burgeoning comedy record scene, and as a result Sick was more sophisticated and cutting edge than *Mad*, *Cracked* or any other competitors. Much of the credit must go to writers Dee Carusso and Bill Levine, who also produced material for New York stand-up comedians. Their preoccupations with politics, beatniks, and psychiatrists marked *Sick* out as something quite different.

Leo Morey and Jack Davis produced the covers for most of the first forty issues, while throughout the early 1960s Joe Simon, Bob Powell, Morey and Angelo Torres were the most prolific interior artists. They were joined as the decade progressed by workhorses Jack Sparling (from 35) and George Tuska. More notably Davis contributed interior strips to 16-27, 42, 72 and 87, while Gray Morrow can be found in 30 and 32. Nobody disgraced themselves, but there was a rough look to the art exacerbated by poor production values.

While never a massive seller, *Sick* was popular enough to inspire reprint spin-offs and even several records. The staff, including Paul Laikin and Jay Lynch, were sharper than their contemporaries at picking up on new trends, starting by repeatedly spotlighting JFK and Marilyn Monroe, then the likes of Richard Nixon (paper dolls in 88!), John Lennon and Yoko Ono and even Abbie Hoffman were spoofed. *Sick* also championed photo strips from early on, a notorious one featuring Hitler in 3, and ran profiles of their creators.

One issue of particular interest to comic fans is 42, which features a Simon and Kirby Fighting American cover and a lengthy superhero spoof section, occupying approximately half the comic with contributions from Davis, Simon, Sparling and Tuska, and 74 featured celebrities as superheroes. As the years went on, however, the title undeniably lost some of its bite. The assorted companies listed as publishers were all affiliations of the company best known to comic fans as Crestwood, but when acquired by Pyramid Books there was little idea of what to do with the comic, and it quickly passed to Charlton. Here Joe Simon's long association ended, although artists he'd brought to later issues like Dick Ayers and Jerry Grandenetti continued under the Charlton imprint. Don Heck even contributed a few strips, but by this point *Sick* had degenerated into just another humour mag, with extra nudity to disguise the poor content. Copies are now surprisingly thin on the ground, but sample a few early copies and stay away from anything from the 1970s on.~DAR

SIDEKICKS

Fanboy Entertainment: *3 issue miniseries 2000*
Oni Press: *One-shot ('The Substitute') 2002*

In the miniseries Terry is the new student at Shuster Academy where kids with superpowers are trained in their use. The story would work just as well, however, without the superpowers, which are just a hook writer J. Torres has used to draw in readers who might otherwise ignore the title. This is a well-plotted high school comic, with Terry the nervous outsider seeing through her first term over the course of the miniseries. After an accident at the start she has to face her demons, while trying to discover the identity of three teenage superheroes operating against school rules. Torres has created a diverse cast, well illustrated by Takeshi Miyazawa, and the series is most easily found as an Oni Press collection. The one-shot concerns a new teacher, formerly a super-villain, and the divisions that causes. There's a great charm throughout, and *Sidekicks* should have across the board appeal.~WJ
Recommended: 1-3

SIDESHOW COMICS

Pan Graphics: *8 issues 1989-1990*

Brave shot at a British underground/anthology title, unfortunately saddled with crap lead strip 'Hearts of Gold'. It's notable for bringing us Si Spencer, who would go on to edit *Deadline*, and for containing Nick Abadzis' first comic tales, in which the glimmerings of 'Hugo Tate' can be detected. Issue one has a justly obscure Bryan Talbot collaboration in it.~FJ

SIDNEY MELLON'S THUNDERSKULL

Slave Labor: *One-shot 1989*

Gerard Jones wrote a spoof column in *Amazing Heroes* using the persona of Sidney Mellon, a monumentally self-important fourteen-year-old. In the column, Mellon kept mentioning his own graphic novel 'Thunderskull' – naturally, the most important work in the history of the genre – and Jones was eventually persuaded to produce the beast. It stars Simon Medley, who appears to be a frail intellectual, with his time as a comics critic as his only experience of power, but see that retractable biro in his breast pocket? One click, and he transforms into Thunderskull, creature of myth. As a spoof, it gets steadily funnier. The fight scenes are classics: at least 50% speech-balloon, allowing room only for the odd glimpse of a heel or fist. The high-point, however, is Mellon's Afterword, where he frankly acknowledges his own genius and thanks his artists, "who helped me to the best of their abilities". Hilarious.~FC
Recommended

SIEGE

Homage: *4 issue miniseries 1997*

The reptilian Zontarians are invading Earth and it's up to a secret 'black ops' team, The Omega Squad to stop them. Though the first skirmish ends in victory, the aliens have already managed to build a massive base under New York City from which to mastermind their invasion. Siege was meant to be published concurrently with an interactive computer game of the same name but when that didn't appear, the title was dropped. A pity, as this isn't bad. Jonathan Peterson introduces a disparate team of heroes with some convincing dialogue and injects some humour into their camaraderie while Robert Teranishi and Al Vey produce some polished artwork that's very easy on the eye, despite some similarities in places to Neal Adams.~NF

SIGHT UNSEEN

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1997*

A surreal, dreamlike piece by James Sturm, with much to say about the experience of religious (or ideological) revelation and its possible side-effects: a need to evangelise, intolerance produced by an absolute certainty, a contempt for daily 'unenlightened' existence, and doubts and disillusion. The return-to-high-school sequence is puzzling, though – maybe it's a reminder of the disappointments and defeats in life that make any escape seem attractive.~FC

SIGIL

CrossGen: *30+ issues 2000 to date*

The Planetary Union is at war with Saurian forces from the planet Tcharun. Samdahl Rey and the beautiful Roiya Sintor come to the neutral planet of Tanipal looking for work as mercenaries. Sam's old Saurian enemy Tchlusarud ambushes him and in the ensuing battle Sam and Roiya pick up new allies in the shady JeMerik Meer and spy Zanniati who needs to escape the Sultan's hareem. Unfortunately Roiya is mortally wounded in 1 but her essence is uploaded by their ship's computer where she reappears in 7. JeMerik spends the entire series in love with a hologram, and a mysterious sigil is etched on Sam's chest by a saurian stranger, giving him unimaginable power. Barbara Kesel writes 1-11 and 20 handing over to Mark Waid for 12-19 before current scripter Chuck Dixon comes aboard with 21. Plenty of artists work on the series, but the most frequent from 10 onwards are Scot Eaton and inker Andrew Hennessy. This is a space war comic where the men wear leather and fatigues, whilst the chicks are well-endowed, perfectly made-up and wear as little as possible. If this sounds a little like *Conan* in space, Sam visits a barbarian world in 17-19 just to confirm what boneheaded macho cobblers this comic is. CrossGen are issuing collections as they go along.~SW

SIGMA

Image/WildStorm: *3 issues 1996*

Strictly speaking this isn't a series in its own right as it's actually three chapters of the 'Fire From Heaven' crossover. The title character's body contains the genetic information that was used to introduce the Gen-Factor into the WildStorm Universe, and though the issues concentrate on his introduction and background, they do not tell a self-contained story. Written by Brandon Choi, they each have separate artists of whom Kevin Lau in 3 is the most interesting, using manga effects and tight inking to give the issue a visual flair.~NF

Ikkou Sahara's SILBUSTER

Antarctic: *19 issues 1994-1997*

In common with much other translated Japanese comics, action scenes are lovingly rendered over several pages, leaving no space for trifles such as explanations. It boils down to cute chicks, often semi or completely naked, fighting monsters and aliens. If you need anything more, this isn't the comic for you.~WJ

SILENCERS

Caliber: *4 issue miniseries 1991**

Canadian espionage title that's subtle, understated and stylised. The story sometimes slows to a plod, but there's a lot of thought behind *Silencers*, and careful reading pays off.~FP

THE SILENT INVASION

Renegade: *12 issue limited series 1986-1988*
Caliber: *6 issues 1996-1997*

Long before *X-Files*, Larry Hancock and Michael Cherkas plotted this complex tale of 1950s paranoia. Matt Sinkage encounters a UFO and his search for answers involves him with the FBI, aliens, Communist agents and The Council, a secret government organisation. How much of this is in his head or is really happening is something you have to decide for yourself. It's well written by Hancock and drawn in a European style by Cherkas, owing much to the clear line of, for instance, Serge Clerc. 'Suburban Nightmares' (5, 7-9), with John Van Bruggen, is a back-up in much the same vein, but concentrating on more domestic fears. It later spun off into its own series and collection. The Caliber series is reprinted from the modified pages used in four still in print NBM collections, though includes preparatory material and in 1, the little seen three page story originally published in *Quest For Dreams Lost*.~NF

Recommended: 1-12

SILENT MOBIUS

Viz: *Series one 6 issues 1991*, series two 5 issues 1992*, series three 5 issues 1992-1993*, series four 5 issues 1993-1994*, 6 issue miniseries ('Into The Labyrinth') 1999*, 7 issue miniseries ('Karma') 1999-2000*, 6 issue miniseries ('Catastrophe') 2000, 7 issue limited series ('Love and Chaos') 2000-2001*, 6 issue miniseries ('Advent') 2001*, 6 issue miniseries ('Turnabout') 2002, 5 issue miniseries ('Blood') 2002, 2 issues + ('Hell') 2002 to date*

A squad of eccentrically named psychic policewomen, the A.M.P., protect 21st-century Tokyo from supernatural beings intent on destroying the city in this series by Kia Asamiya. The backgrounds of all but one of the squad members are revealed over the first four series as the entities remain a constant threat. The best of them is the second. Katsumi Liquer discovers her mystical heritage and the youngest squad member, Yuki Saiko, is revealed to be something other than she assumed. The third series switches from colour to black and white, and in the fourth team leader Rally Cheyenne is revealed to have a past linked with the supernatural entities. Much championed by some as being among the best of Japanese girl-gang comics, it's not without charm, but not sufficient charm to have dragged the slim story over four series without concluding it. Neither is the peculiar title explained anywhere.

When Viz resume publication the entities are known as Lucifer Hawks (and retroactively named thus in collections), and the A.M.P. has an aggressive new second in command. The plot, though, remains the same with a new variety of Lucifer Hawk causing problems, and the A.M.P. pulling the fat out of the fire in the final issue. As the cast are almost interchangeable apart from powers and hairstyle, this doesn't make for a very satisfying read. 'Catastrophe' earns higher marks simply by virtue of a different plot, with the cyborg Kiddy Phenil under suspicion of murder. 'Advent' finally moves the plot forward slightly with Katsumi having disappeared and the lack of Lucifer Hawk activity resulting in the A.M.P. being disbanded. When Katsumi returns, she's a changed person, and there's a new team member introduced in 'Turnabout'.~FP

The SILENT PULSE

Bearded Baby Publications: 2 *issues + 2002 to date*

While her friends, Vivian and Jove are on honeymoon, the Apostle, Peter, shoots Elise Daventry dead for a ring. He is working for Guardians International, apparently some sort of Internet Service Provider, amongst other things, together with Umbra, an ex-lover of Elise's, who could be a man or a woman (it's difficult to tell). The mix of computer and hand-generated artwork is better in 2, and there's even a sense of narrative, but though creator, John Stephens clearly has something he wants to say about religion, the connection between text and drawing is often obscure.~NF

SILKE

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 2001**

Sandra Silke, government agent, is picked to join a gene project designed to increase human immunities. She discovers the experiments have also given her shape-shifting powers and have killed or deformed others, so she escapes and, helped by another escaped guinea pig, tries to expose the project whilst being hunted by its backers. Creator, Tony Daniel, tries hard, but lack of attention to character motivation causes some plot confusions. On the plus side, his artwork, still very angular, is less exaggerated than usual in depicting the human body.~NF

SILLY DADDY

Joe Chiappetta: *20 issues 1994-2000, one-shot (Silly Cat) 1998*

When Joe Chiappetta fathered a daughter he began detailing his apprehension and the changes to his life in minicomics. What most autobiographical comics do best is reveal the essentially selfish and self-obsessed nature of their creator, concerned with trivialities such as disagreements with friends, or locating indulgences like comics and music. From the start Chiapetta's over-riding concern is the responsibility for another life; that he'll not be a decent father. Discovering he's not compatible with Maria's mother is a further jolt. 1-7 are best located in collected form as 'The Long Goodbye'. Also collected is 'Death in the Family' (10-12 with a coda in 16), a road trip story set first in 2004 and concluded in 2014, as Chiappetta is accompanied by his now teenage daughter through a corporate controlled America. Thankfully, his paranoia isn't overwhelming, and the story is as much an idealised projection of how Maria will progress as anything else. Other issues reveal the horrible truth about what men want (13), comic conventions (19) and police ruining a family picnic (9). People who'd certainly enjoy these comics may at first be deterred by Chiappetta's chosen style of art, which has a solid foundation, but is drawn as if by a child, with elastic figures wrapped by words. Get over it. It's a correct part of Chiappetta's ethic that his work should primarily satisfy him, but the meandering and often bitty nature of the comics precludes wholehearted recommendation. 17 is a good single issue sample, as Joe mulls over where his friends went, offers his guide to living right, and provides plenty of amusing quotes from his daughter. Issue 8 and *Silly Cat* are fifty percent Chiappetta and fifty percent John Porcellino's quiet observations on life and surroundings.~FP

THE SILVER AGE

DC: *1 issue 2000, 10 one-shots 2000*

This homage to DC's past began in *Silver Age* 1, by Mark Waid and Terry Dodson. The members of the classic Justice League of America have their minds exchanged with those of their arch-enemies. It's a fine opening providing a dilemma such as Gardner Fox might have conceived. In an attempt to discredit the bogus heroes and get their own bodies back, the League involves other heroes from the period in the confusion, leading to a series of one-shots in which the title heroes confront the bad guys. The reading order for the series (all numbered 1) is: *Silver Age, Justice League of America, Challengers of the Unknown, Teen Titans, Dial H for Hero, Flash, Doom Patrol, The Brave and the Bold, Green Lantern, Showcase* and *80-Page Giant*, with *Secret Files* supplemental. In the Flash issue, Ty Templeton manages a nifty period tribute unrelated to the main plot, and the best one-shot is *The Brave and the Bold*. Writer Bob Haney turns in a Batman and Metal Men team-up redolent of his former looney masterpieces, ably assisted by Kevin Maguire's art. Otherwise the stories vary from merely dull to inept and inappropriate, with the normally skillful Mark Millar in the Justice League issue having the villains perform acts of sadism and mass murder way out of character for the era the project is supposed to evoke. The covers on most issues, by veteran artists such as Joe Kubert, Carmine Infantino, Ramona Fradon, Nick Cardy and Gil Kane (his last work), are a joy, but when the most entertainment is provided by three fake Silver Age stories in the back of the 80 Page Giant, you know the show's in trouble.~HS

Ben Dunn's SILVER CROSS

Antarctic: *3 issue miniseries 1997-1998*

Tying into the *Warrior Nun* series, the Silver Cross are a group of children in training to combat the world domination threat of the Nazis, still very active in this world. Ben Dunn's story has some fine moments, particularly the motivation for the Nazi leader starting the second issue, but they're undermined by too many characters whose only purpose is to pad out fight scenes, and the numerous fight scenes detracting from the story. A shame.~WJ

SILVER FAWN

Caliber: *One-shot 1989*

Cheesy spin-off as Elfin princess Silverfawn endures all the indignities of slavery in the days before *The Realm*. Sordid and vicarious.~WW

SILVER SABLE & The Wild Pack

Marvel: *35 issues 1992-1995*

Operating from embassy premises, glamorous, lethal Silver Sable was introduced as a mercenary in *Amazing Spider-Man* 265. The Wild Pack, most prominently, consist of former villain Sandman, sadistic hard man Crippler, trainee flag-waver Battlestar, and the racist Powell, with Paladin an additional regular throughout. What makes the title work is that few are likeable, but all are strong characters that interact well. Fast-paced and inventive writing from Greg Wright and slick action-oriented art from Steven Butler (1-22, 25), often inked by James Sanders, and then Gordon Purcell and Pam Eklund, mean that most issues are better than average adventure fare. A bonus is few sub-plots, making it easy for new readers to pick up. Astute marketing sense ensures that the team are augmented with a cover-featured guest star for most issues, but these appearances are well considered and rarely detract from the title squad. Best samplers are 3, a rare issue with no guest star, and 30, with Silver Sable incarcerated.~WJ

SILVER STAR

Pacific: *6 issues 1983-1984*
Topps: *4 issue miniseries 1993-1994*

Call yourself a comic fan? If you're a serious one then you probably don't need to be told about this comic. Silver Star is Morgan Miller of the new breed of humans, Homo Geneticus, who were born of mothers implanted by a cowboy scientist determined to preserve life after atomic war. Homo Geneticus "plays with atoms like we do with erector sets". Silver Star, for instance, builds himself a chair ten times bigger than he would seem to need!

Each issue introduces a new "super-normal" Homo Geneticus: Norma Richmond, a stuntwoman girl-friend for Silver Star, Big Masai, goliath of the ghetto, and Albie Rheinhart, who spins a fairground carousel on his chest. Best of all, twisted and evil Darius Drumm, first recipient of the genetic package, who wants to be king of the hill and sends atomic giants and monsters to threaten Silver Star and his pals. All this is told of with liberal use of Jack Kirby's trademark powerful high-contrast single- and double-page spreads of exploding machinery and his equally distinctive, indeed unique dialogue. Drumm, sucking bizarrely on a malt and a popsicle, describes his creator as a "builder of classic lives that tear up the brain – like vehicles of pain!" It's Kirby's last work at the top of his form so it's the last Golden Age comic as well as being the first and so far only satisfying "visual novel" (this seems to be Kirby's term. They're usually called graphic novels). The structure is epic, dragging the reader from a lengthy prologue set in Vietnam (featuring a song written by Susan Kirby and sung by a little girl with an acoustic guitar reminiscent of the Dilly Sisters from *The Banana Splits Show*) to the disturbing climax, featuring the Angel of Death and lakes of fire and evokes some racier biblical passages.

Beware the dismal formula back-up strips drawn by Kirby's regular late inkers D. Bruce Berry and Michael Thibodeaux, but make an exception for Steve Ditko's The Mocker (in 2). He's a suit-and-hat vigilante in the tradition of The Question and Mr A, drawn in 1981 and featuring some of Ditko's best late artwork, which rivals the standard of his classic Spider-Man stories. Old school madness all the way! There's no Jack anywhere near the Topps series. Stay away.~GK

SILVER SURFER

Marvel: *Series one 18 issues 1968-1970*, 2 issue microseries 1988*, series two 146 issues, 8 Annuals 1987-1998, 2 issue microseries (Higher than Mortals')*

Introduced in *Fantastic Four* 48-50 where the team met planet-eating god Galactus, The Silver Surfer's instant appeal allowed writer Stan Lee and his creator Jack Kirby to return Galactus' former herald in several further *Fantastic Four* plots. He also met the Hulk in *Tales to Astonish* 92-93. Formerly a citizen of the neutral planet Zenn-La, Norrin Radd's life changed forever when Galactus announced to the populace that he would be dining on their planet's life-energy. Leaving his beloved Shalla Bal behind and prostrating himself before the space god, Norrin Radd pleaded for his planet, offering to become his herald for eternity. Galactus agreed, transforming him into the Surfer complete with obedient floating surfboard as transport through space. Innumerable solar systems later, Galactus announced identical plans for another populated planet called Earth. His herald rebelled, standing with The Fantastic Four. Angry at his hunger being spurned, Galactus imprisoned The Surfer on Earth via an impenetrable barrier surrounding the planet.

Lee scripted the original series, which ran as sixty-eight pagers for 1-7, with the lead story length averaging thirty-eight to forty pages. The back-up was 'Tales of the Watcher' which re-used some of Lee's scripts from the early 1960s, most of which were reinterpreted by Howard Purcell. Under Lee every negative aspect of human nature is experienced by the beleaguered alien, but it was outsider angst being exploited as opposed to the sacrilege of a Christ-like figure as some claimed. The Surfer meets Mephisto in 3 in a 1960s classic and the prince of lies and temptation is his major recurrent foe, appearing in 8, 9, 16 and 17 too. Other adversaries include the lizard-like Badoon scout party in 2, Loki misleading the gods of Asgard once more in 4, The Stranger in 5, a latter-day Frankenstein in 7, The Abomination in 12, feeble meetings with Spider Man and The Human Torch in 14 and 15 respectively and The Inhumans in 18. John Buscema really lets go with his pencilling in 1-17, which has a suitably melodramatic flair, but his fling appears to have been flung by 12. There were good ink jobs from Joe Sinnott in 1-3, Sal Buscema in 4-7, great work from Dan Adkins in 8-15 with Chic Stone inking 16 and 17. The last issue, drawn by Kirby, is inked by Herb Trimpe, announced at the time as the next penciller on the series – as evidenced by the ugly cover to 17. The entire series has been collected in both two lavish *Marvel Masterworks* volumes, and the far more affordable black and white *Essential Silver Surfer*.

After a merciful cancellation in 1970 The Surfer became a member of the loose-knit superteam The Defenders as well as being occasional guest-star material. His appearance in *Tomb of Dracula* 50 in 1976 is a good example (reprinted in 1994 as *Silver Surfer Meets Dracula*), but despite calls for a revival Lee's determination that only he would write it, coupled with his lack of time ensured little solo Surfer material emerged. Lee and Kirby did produce the 1978 graphic novel (see below). The 1988 microseries is another retelling of Galactus' coming to Earth with the munchies. Drawn by Moebius with the aim of being printed on absorbent pulp paper, Marvel couldn't resist collecting and reprinting it as a graphic novel called 'Parable' in a deluxe, recoloured format. At Moebius' request the dialogue was written by Lee.

By 1987, though Lee had conceded he'd never find the time to write a regular series, and the Silver Surfer was relaunched by Steve Englehart with artist Marshall Rogers cruising somewhat in 1-10 and 21. Freed from Earth, the Surfer journeys for another meaningful interface with Shalla Bal on Zenn-La, from where he begins to search for Galactus, which involves him in the latest Kree-Skrull War. In 8 he becomes a prisoner inside the mind of a Kree amalgam of thousands of personalities, also their ruler: The Supreme Intelligence. What follows is a very entertaining series of dreamlike tableaux. Another aspect of this early story arc is The Elders, ancient spacegods who include The Stranger, Eternity, The Collector and the errant Galactus, revealed as the only soul in the universe from before the Big Bang. Englehart really excels on The Surfer and his stay is in many ways a defining one for the character. Joe Staton follows Rogers in 11-13 before Ron Lim and inker Tom Christopher become the regular art team, sticking with the title from 1989 to 1993. There are still notable fill-ins like Alan Grant and Jim Sherman's in 39 or Colleen Doran's in 89.

The increasingly gassy Englehart wraps up the war in 31 and Jim Starlin takes over the writing from 34. He immediately co-opts the title as a vehicle for Adam Warlock, Thanos and the cast of characters he developed in the 1970s *Warlock* series, with the earliest issues reprinted in a collection entitled 'The Return of Thanos'. Starlin's run culminates in a double-sized 50 in 1991 and seven more issues crossing over with *Infinity Gauntlet*. Starlin write-alike Ron Marz assumes the scripting chores with 51 showing a grueling propensity for recycled ideas during a period when several issues were semi-monthly (there are 16 issues in 1991 and 15 in 1992). The mundanity of Lim's artwork also makes the title eminently avoidable after Starlin has left for *Infinity Watch* and its tedious array of prequels, sequels and spinoffs. The Defenders attempt a comeback in 58 and 'The Collection Agency' arc then commences featuring The Collector, Captain Marvel and a "dark" Surfer in 64 thanks to an alien virus. We also hear from Reptyl and meet Princess Alaysa and the bizarre Mistress Love and Master Hate in 66. The following issues with Eros, The Magus, Khoon, Nebula and Doctor Strange lead into *The Infinity War*. We then experience 'The Herald Ordeal' in 70-75, which must have taken a good ten minutes to plot, starring all of Galactus' heralds to that point: Firelord, Air Walker, Terrax, Nebula and tragic earthgirl Nova battling the latest, Morg. In the aftermath Jack of Hearts, Firelord, Nebula and Morg are still around, as is the villainous Chancellor. Tyrant's return in 79-82 leads into Cosmic Powers and features Gladiator, Captain Atlas and Doctor Minerva as well as Beta Ray Bill; Terrax, Morg and the slinky Ganymede join the party too.

Cully Hamner draws 83, which crosses over with *Infinity Crusade* and we meet The Surfer's parents in 84. Andy Smith draws 86-88 and, as parts 2, 6 and 10 of 'Blood and Thunder', they cross over with *Warlock and the Infinity Watch* and *Thor*. New Warrior Avatar features in 90-92 before a guided tour through early Marvel continuity in 93-97. Towards the end of 1994, 98-99 build up to a big showdown with Mephisto in 100 and Marz's swansong. Many poor scripts and duff visualisers follow with 107 featuring Dr Doom and 110 making a cheesy visit to a pleasure planet. George Pérez scripts from 111 and is responsible for the unexpected dismantling of the Surfer as if he were a modular statue in 114 to be sold in bits in 115. After 120-121's round against Uni Lord, Perez takes The Surfer back to Zenn-La and hatches his revisionary concept of the planet being illusory and dead for centuries. New writer J. M. DeMatteis then steps in for Norrin Radd's new start back on Earth. The Surfer meets Kymaera of The New Warriors in 124 and battles The Hulk in 125. Puzzlingly, these issue are collected as 'Inner Demons'. Another evil double turns up in 127 who meets Daredevil and Spider-Man in 128. 'Destination 1942' in 129-131 features some plot-driven time travel and ushers in notable new artist Ron Garney. We then have a disturbing false echo of that 1960s concern that The Surfer was a suffering Christ turning the other cosmic cheek with Wrath of the Cosmic Messiah in 132, followed by a vision of Hell in 134. Mephisto's return in 136 is hardly a surprise and is followed by Resurrection in 137 where we also witness Agatha Harkness versus The Scrier. The Surfer then briefly moves in with Alicia Masters in 138. Artwise, after Garney leaves in 133 there's a succession of pedestrian triers before 140-142, 144 and 145, an interesting experiment by the usually highly rendered, illustrational John J. Muth who is then succeeded by Denys Cowan. This story again has The Surfer back yet again on Zenn-La completely untroubled by Galactus, but "is it all too good to be true?" a tired voice asks. The final issue, bashed out by Tom DeFalco, features Firelord and The Avengers.

Annual 1 by Englehart and Staton features The Super Skrull and Ikaris and the Eternals as it crosses over with the Evolutionary Wars theme in Marvel's 1988 Annuals. Annual 2 by Englehart and Lim has a cover swiped from the original first issue and The Surfer fights Ghaur and Llyra. Annual 3 from 1990 by Starlin, Marz and Lim guest stars Reed Richards, Captain America and Nick Fury. Annual 4 by Marz and Lim features a retelling of The Surfer's origin as well as a 26th Century meeting with The Guardians of the Galaxy where they face Korvac. 1992's Annual 5 features The Defenders and Annual 6 co-stars the latest cosmic guardian in the Captain Marvel/Quasar mold: Legacy. Annual 7 in 1994 has heralds Surfer and Morg in contention. 1997's unnumbered Annual by DeMatteis and Val Simeiks is a meeting with The True Scrier who bears no resemblance to the character the Surfer previously fought.

The 'Higher than Mortals' microseries is drawn superbly by Italian artist Sal Velluto with decent accompaniment from television writer Michael Jan Friedman. Velluto's lyricism, high finish and dynamic figurework are so thoroughly apropos that he must have been born to draw The Surfer. More's the pity, then, that these issues are yet another retelling of Galactus' first visit to Earth.

Like The Hulk, The Silver Surfer is a great visual concept that wasn't capitalised on editorially, perhaps because he was commandeered by Lee in 1968. The Surfer remained a misunderstood innocent for two decades before Englehart took on the task of making the character and his world make more than superficial sense. Sadly, very little consolidation has followed resulting in the title becoming a sandpit for everyone from the misguided to the downright untalented to play in.~SW

Recommended: Series one: 3, 8, 9, series two, 8, 39

SILVER SURFER Graphic Novels and one-Shots

Firestone Books: *1 Graphic Novel 1978*

Marvel: *One-shot 1982, Graphic Novel ('Judgement Day') 1988, Graphic Novel ('Parable') 1988, Graphic Novel ('The Enslavers') 1990, Graphic Novel ('Homecoming') 1991, one-shot (Silver Surfer Rune) 1995, one-shot ('Dangerous Artefacts') 1996*

The Silver Surfer is the most irritatingly refined symbol of teenage pseudo-alienation in all superhero comics, but that can be blamed on Stan Lee's scripts as a rule. It's less of a problem than usual in the first graphic novel, which is a firmly Jack Kirby-run retelling of the introduction of the Surfer and his master Galactus' intention to eat an Earth populated by ordinary humans but no Fantastic Four etc. Kirby is on his best mature form in this most impressive version of the story. The art actually conveys a sense of the power that so much of the story is about, which scarcely happens with other Silver Surfer artists, and there is little room for Lee to spoil it. A recoloured version was reprinted at comic size in 1997.

The 1982 one-shot is cute hippy balls plotted and drawn by John Byrne, and scripted by Lee. Very nice. It's hard to understand why all the best artists want to draw this flop character again and again, but John Buscema's drawings, one panel to a page, in 1988's 'Judgement Day', make it worth looking at least once. Stan Lee just couldn't leave the Surfer alone, and in 1988 he penned the deluxe hardcover graphic novel 'Parable', also published in a more modest, less fancy two issue comic book format. This collaboration with the reputedly great French comics artist Moebius wasn't quite the labour of love that one might have hoped for from either creator. Lee's perfunctory script gave us yet another re-run of the eternal Surfer/Galactus battle, just with extra added agonising, moping, and theological speculation, while Moebius clearly had little feel for the characters, drawing a especially effete, extruded Surfer. Lee persisted with the feeble 'The Enslavers' in 1990, drawn by hopeless I-can't-copy-Kirbyist Keith Pollard.

Jim Starlin's 'Homecoming', in 1991, prompts thought on the difficulty of distinguishing madness from rank stupidity sometimes. A giant brain turns a planet into thought, and the

Surfer's poor girlfriend dies. Again. John Buscema adds undeserved dignity to the appalling teaming with Rune. Flip it over, and there's a Barry Smith cover to another story, but, oh dear, what a mistake it would be to open the comic. The 1996 one shot 'Dangerous Artefacts', written by Ron Marz and drawn by Claudio Castellini, teamed the Surfer and Galactus against the evil Thanos and his top heavy female bounty hunter White Raven. It's a very average comic, with exceptionally confusing artwork, and, like all these items, it added absolutely nothing of interest to the Surfer's cosmic career.~GK

Recommended: Firestone graphic novel

SILVERBACK

Comico: *3 issue miniseries 1989*

Plotted by Matt Wagner and based on his character Argent (the wolf) from the original *Grendel* series, *Silverback* sees William Messner-Loebs return to the genre in which he began with *Journey*. It's a very different frontier, however, as the spirit of death, Maslun, empowers an Algonquin brave with inhuman savagery, turning him into an immortal wolf.

It's not a tale for the squeamish, and Loebs creates a tragic, downbeat atmosphere that leaves little room for humour, while the artwork by Loebs and John Peck is minimalist but effective.~NF

SILVERBLADE

DC: *12 issue limited series 1987-1988*

Former silver screen heartthrob Jonathan Lord lives an embittered and reclusive life until rejuvenated and given the ability to transform himself into characters from his years of celluloid glory. One was Silverblade, hence the title. Lord's Hollywood mansion is populated with a former child star employed as a butler, the talking bird responsible for his new state and a fellow actor's ghost. Writer Cary Bates obviously enjoyed himself stringing everyone along with a romp resembling the 1930s action films he cheerfully parodies throughout, and the art team of Gene Colan and Steve Mitchell is also having a good time. A stunning, yet simple, revelation occurs well into the series, and once you've come to terms with it you can almost hear Bates chuckling in the background as everything's up-ended. The final issue rather falls to pieces, with unconvincing mystical mumbo-jumbo the order of the day. That shouldn't put you off sampling the remainder, but start with issue 1.~FP

SILVERHAWKS

Star: *6 issue miniseries 1987-1988*

Based on a kids' cartoon series, these galactic policemen pilot hawk-shaped spaceships. Neither the cartoon nor the comic lasted very long, with good reason. Sending the cute character the kids identify with along to a casino in 4 probably required a few parental explanations.~FP

SILVERHEELS

Pacific: *3 issues 1983-1984**

Introducing Scott Hampton's generally fine art, and Bruce Jones' hacked-out story about a Native American in a dystopian future challenging for the position of Earth's representative to a galactic council alongside his Aryan counterparts. Beyond the natural antipathy the leads have for each other, the story is complicated by a fawning female and Hampton's inability to keep to even a bi-monthly schedule. By the third issue there's only nine pages of the title feature, leaving Ken Steacy's whimsical transforming-robot back-up itself needing a back-up (provided by Jaime Hernandez). The *Silverheels* collection reprints the portions previously published and concludes the story.~WJ

SILVERSTORM

Aircel: *4 issue miniseries 1990*

Woefully inadequate tale of a young millionaire who has just inherited a billion-dollar company and a suit of super-armour. He meets a supermodel who just happens to be a world-famous geologist with the power to control the weather. As they sit around drinking cocktails and being wonderful, an evil scientist decides to conquer the world but, of course, has reckoned without the determination of our sterling duo. No redeeming features.~WW

SIMPSONS COMICS

Welsh Publishing: *One-shot 1993*
Bongo Comics: *77 issues + 1994 to date*

The Welsh Publishing tryout and 1-4 written and laid out by James and Cindy Vance and pencilled by Bill Morrison are as close to the TV's animated dysfunctional family as can be attained in comics. Well plotted and illustrated, they're laugh-a-panel stuff collected as *Simpsons Comics Extravaganza*. Thereafter the comic never again consistently reaches this peak, and with an army of writers, the quality varies, although Ian Boothby's scripts, first in 36 and regularly from 60, are generally joke packed. Try his Shakespeare pastiches in 76. The art always captures the authentic look of the Simpsons, which isn't as easy it may seem. Most issues also feature a short back-up strip about one of the characters from the TV show, with standouts starring Police Chief Wiggum (6), Barney Gumble (9), and Cletus (51), while 19-22 feature Bill Morrison's 1950s movie pastiche Roswell, before it progressed to its own series. 26 (written by Rob Hammersley and Todd Greenwald) and 27 (written by Doug Tuber and Tim Maile) match the TV show for gag ratio, characterisation and even the visual asides that add to already fully rounded stories. 33's switching of personalities and occupations among Springfield's inhabitants, is among the better issues, and Chuck Dixon, better known for his action comics, adapts *The Truman Show* to the Simpsons in 42. It's the best of too many movie parodies between 40 and 49. 50 is an eighty page special also featuring Radioactive Man, Krusty, Bartman and Lisa solos and a wry look at how Bongo Comics are made. A more recent highlight is 69, in which Mr Burns buys Springfield's church. Whether in ironic fashion or otherwise, in the Disney manner, all *Simpsons* comics covers prominently feature the name of Matt Groening, who created the TV family. His actual contribution to the comics, though, doesn't extend beyond the odd editorial. Bongo in the USA and Titan in the UK have an ongoing series of collections reprinting all issues but 50.~FP

Recommended: Welsh Publishing 1, Bongo 1-4, 6, 7, 9, 16, 17, 20, 26, 27, 33, 36, 42, 52, 55, 62, 69, 70

SIN

Tragedy Strikes: *5 issues 1992-1993*
Black Eye: *2 issues 1994*

Jason (later Jay) Stephens single-handedly produced a confusing but often amusing comic wherein many different kinds of characters read or dream about each other amid cranky cut-up old adverts and demented tributes to *Mad Magazine* tricks. There's Nod (from the land of Nod), who looks a bit like a devil-cat, the 'Young Violence' trio of Nice Kid, Knife Girl and Gun Boy, and the superhero-parodying Sinister Horde. It would probably hold most appeal for the habitual LSD user, but any switched-on reader should find something quirky to laugh at. Much of the material is reprinted in *The Land Of Nod Treasury*.~GK

SIN CITY

Cozmic: *1 issue 1973*

British underground whose most notable creator is Angus McKie. His early '2001 A Haze Odyssey' is an eco-warning in which London is an open sewer with the rich living at least two miles above the gas-masked majority. Wyndham Raine (!) has a similar style to *Zap*'s Moscoso, while Bill Sanderson's woodcut effects enhance another tale from the grim city. Subtitled "Tales of Urban Paranoia", the overall mix of satire and cruel humour doesn't quite give the title the coherence that it needs.~NF

SIN CITY

Dark Horse: *6 issue miniseries ('A Dame To Kill For') 1993-1994*, one-shot ('The Babe Wore Red and Other Stories') 1994, 5 issue miniseries ('The Big Fat Kill') 1994-1995*, one-shot ('Silent Night') 1995, 6 issue miniseries ('That Yellow Bastard') 1996*, one-shot ('Lost, Lonely and Lethal') 1996, one-shot ('Sex & Violence') 1997, one-shot ('Family Values') 1997, one-shot ('Just Another Saturday Night') 1998, 9 issue limited series ('Hell and Back') 1999-2000**

Frank Miller's *Sin City* first appeared in *Dark Horse Presents* 51-62* before these stories. Each series is intended to stand alone, published when ready rather than on a strict schedule. Sin City itself is the setting, unnamed but seemingly rotten to the core. The characters all converge on Old Town, a no-go area for cops where the law is the law of the fist, gun or, in some cases, arrow and sword. At the heart of Old Town is a bar where strippers dress as cowboys and money will buy you almost anything. The women of the bar are also the area's enforcers; if you cross them, you won't live to regret it. However, underlying all the tales is something like the Japanese code of Bushido, where honour means everything, especially if it's all you've got.

'A Dame To Kill For' is the story of Dwight and Ava, the latter an extremely manipulative woman who uses men to get what she wants and then dumps them, or at least tries to. Having set Dwight up for murder and seduced the investigating detective, it seems she's committed a perfect crime, but Dwight's still on the loose and wants revenge. 'The Babe Wore Red' sees Dwight investigating the death of a friend and running from a pair of hitmen with the lady of the title. It comes with two short stories, the first about a killer meeting his match in the Old Town 'girls', Miho and Gail, the second about a killer just doing his job. 'Lost, Lonely and Lethal' is a later collection of short stories, the longest tale introducing the colour blue to Miller's coded series with the deadly Blue Eyes.

'The Big Fat Kill' is the extremely violent story of a dead cop and the threat of a war in the Old Town if Dwight and the girls can't stop the cop's head from falling into the hands of a crime lord. 'Silent Night' is equally bloody, the story of a young girl's rescue from her kidnappers, told in single-page panels. The controversial, 'That Yellow Bastard', features a senator's son whose perverted desire for young girls almost gets him killed by policeman John Hartigan, who is betrayed and framed for the crimes. Only his correspondence with Nancy, the girl he rescued, keeps him alive in prison. When she's endangered as the senator's son recovers from Hartigan's bullet all hell breaks loose.

'Sex and Violence' features more blue as assassin Delia torments her prey before killing them. 'Just Another Saturday Night' sees Marv on the loose in the Projects. 'Family Values' is a slow-burning tale of revenge as Dwight and Miho take on a mafia family. Painter and ex-soldier, Wallace saves Esther from suicide in 'Hell and Back', and when she's kidnapped he determines to rescue her, but must first survive an encounter with Delia. *Sin City*'s only use of full colour appears in 7, when Wallace's hallucinations take some very familiar forms.

Miller's hard-boiled prose is perfectly matched by his brutal black and white artwork, where everything is defined by the shadow it casts. Miller uses gimmicks sparingly but effectively, such as spot colour red for the 'Babe Wore Red' and yellow for 'That Yellow Bastard' The series doesn't offer any great insights into the human condition but it's intense, absorbing storytelling that's constantly daring.~NF

Recommended: 'The Big Fat Kill', 'A Dame To Kill For', 'That Yellow Bastard', 'Sex & Violence', 'Family Values', 'Hell and Back'

SIN TUTULO

Horse Press: *One-shot 1993*

An untitled notebook, dated 1915, has brought Billy Rael to Mexico. He believes it to be the journal of Ambrose Bierce whose mysterious disappearance in 1913 has never been solved. Accompanied by girlfriend Lilac and her brother Fernando, he sets off to find Bierce's grave so that he can write a dissertation proving Bierce's Marxist beliefs. The tensions between Billy and Fernando and between Billy and Lilac finally split the party leaving Billy alone in a world he can't understand, not speaking Spanish. Paul Pope has written and drawn an intriguing tale that works on several levels. It's a road trip and a philosophical enquiry, a love story and an adventure, a dream and a bad trip. The elaborate rendering of his later work is not as much in evidence but there's a very European feel to the artwork.~NF

Recommended

SINERGY

Caliber: *5 issue miniseries 1993-1994**

Writer Kyle Garrett reworks Dante's *Inferno* for comics with a traveller taken on a tour of the different levels of hell, with short pieces illustrating them by most Caliber mainstays of the early 1990s. So you've got art by Brian Michael Bendis (2), Dave Cooper (1), Guy Davis (2), Troy Nixey (5), Mark Ricketts (5), and Kevin Thomas (3) among others. Beyond updating the roster of the guilty and their crimes, Garrett has little original to bring to the project, which becomes a lecture rather than a story, and ultimately very boring. The last page revelation of the journey's purpose isn't worth the slog. Each issue comes in standard format and an expensive variant with shiny logo and a print by Galen Showman, who draws the framing sequences each issue.~FP

SINISTER HOUSE OF SECRET LOVE

DC: *4 issues 1971-1972*

Behind some of the finest covers ever to grace a comic, courtesy of Jeff Jones among others, this title offered up a number of lengthy Gothic-romance strips. The marriage of love and horror was an uneasy one, and despite the best attempts of Michael Fleisher and Len Wein, the attraction was its artwork. While Don Heck's efforts in 1 were far from inspired, Tony DeZuniga's 2 and 4 are quite gorgeous. The exception to the title's directionless feel was provided by 3's 'Bride of the Falcon', written by Frank Robbins, which brilliantly concentrated on psychological tension rather than the half-hearted haunted-house milieu found elsewhere. Better yet, the thirty-six-page story was drawn by Alex Toth, with inking from Doug Wildey and Frank Giacoia, who revelled in its Venetian setting and claustrophobic atmosphere.~DAR

Recommended: 3

SINISTER ROMANCE

Harrier: *4 issues 1988-1989*

By turns poignant, amusing and just plain silly, but never boring, as B-movie stories of superheroines, mermaids, aliens and gangsters abound. The different art styles of the contributors work well, with Trevs (later to be Woodrow) Phoenix's graphic Infantino-style dynamism contrasting with the sketchy impressionism of Glenn Dakin and the solid black and white work of Warren Pleece. Bob Lynch brings a more traditional cartoon approach to the final two issues. The artists are having a good time, and so should you.~FP

SINNER

Fantagraphics: *6 issues 1988-1990*

Depressing episodes from the life of Alack Sinner, an out-of-place P.I. in the slums of New York, created by Argentinian duo José Muñoz (artist) and Carlos Sampayo (writer). Over the years they've woven stories around all aspects of Sinner's life, using him as one of a cast of characters for their Joe's Bar series. This selects from the many *Sinner* stories, starting with some early pieces which, while you can see the seeds of greatness in them, stick quite firmly to a hard-boiled detective formula. 4 reprints a much later story, 'Viet Blues', an extraordinary piece of writing in which Alack keeps slipping into walking nightmares of his time in Vietnam, which are contrasted with the present. The shift from plot to characterisation is quite marked, as is the reduction of the Muñoz style from fine line to heavy black and white expressionism. 5 gives us the opportunity to read the first 'radical' *Sinner* story, created before 'Viet Blues', where the first breaks from noir tradition are being made. It's a great sadness that more *Sinner* strips have not been translated, as the sequence of stories adds up to a greater whole.~FJ

Recommended: 1-6

Young Justice: SINS OF YOUTH

DC: *2 issue microseries, 9 one-shots (JLA Jr., Aquaboy/Lagoon Man, Batboy and Robin, Starwoman and the Junior Justice Society of America, Kid Flash/Impulse, Superman Jr./Superboy Sr., Wondergirls, The Secret/ Deadboy, Secret Files and Origins) 2000*

The machinations of Klarion the Witch Boy and the accidental discharge of a vagrant raygun combine to switch adults to children and vice-versa in this crossover. Effectively playing for laughs on the hoary theme of teen rebellion, Peter David and Todd Nauck don't add much to the debate, but do say it quite entertainingly. The one-shots are mostly unremarkable but Geoff Johns and Drew Johnson produce a good old fashioned romp as the geriatric JSA, new average age 5, fly to the planet Myrg to recover the raygun that partially caused all the fuss (*Starwoman and the Junior Justice Society of America* 1).~WW

Recommended: *Starwoman and the Junior Justice Society of America* 1

SIREN

Malibu: *4 issue miniseries (∞, 1-3) 1995-1996, One-shot 1996*

Pasty-faced cute female alleged assassin seeks guest stars for putative miniseries. Only second-stringers like War Machine, Diamondback and Whizzer showed up. Numbering the first issue with an infinity symbol was a joke so hilarious that hospitals are still regularly visited by *Siren* readers requiring their sides to be stitched back up. The one-shot guest starred Shuriken and was a parsimonious twenty-eight pages.~WJ

SIREN

Image: *3 issue miniseries 1998*

An instantly likeable title combining a little of *Astro City*'s ambience with a soupcon of paranormal activities as private eye Zara Rush is hired to find a shapeshifter. Penciller Tim Levins maintains a fine cartoon style that nonetheless perfectly conveys the necessary dingy atmosphere. Writer J. Torres holds his end up with enough witty touches and surprises to ensure what might have been a run of the mill plot transcends its origins. Siren, by the way, is the city in which the above occurs.~WJ

SISTERHOOD OF STEEL

Marvel/Epic: *8 issues 1984-1986*
Eclipse: *Graphic Novel 1987*

The covers of 1 and 2 make it look like another babes-in-chainmail story, but they lie. Yes, it's the standard sword-and-fantasy setting, and yes, it's about a band of women warriors, but these women are startlingly different in that they fight with all their clothes on! The story centres on Böronwe, starting as she moves from Novice to Cadet, and following her through her first combat, her first night on the town, her first serious love affair... Not a babe-in-chainmail story at all, but a coming-of-age story about a young soldier who happens to be a woman. Christy Marx's writing gets more absorbing with each issue, and while Mike Vosburg's artwork is never appealing, it does differentiate the characters, and you soon get used to it. The storyline was cut short, to be concluded in the graphic novel. There should be more, though. Much more.~FC

Recommended: 1-8

SISTERS OF MERCY

No Mercy: *5 issue miniseries 1995-1996, 4 issue miniseries ('Paradise Lost') 1996*

Utterly dreadful 'Bad Girl' title set in a post-apocalyptic future. Two sisters, one a martial artist and the other a cyborg, live on an animal refuge/tropical island having the sort of adventures that involve fighting with sweaty men, conversing with animals and tearing already skimpy garments. Sordid and poorly executed~WW

THE 6

Virtual: *3 issue miniseries 1996*

The U.S. Government's Trouble Response and Acquisitions (TRAC) program recruits three youngsters (Manstaar, Ion and Slammer) with newfound powers, caused by the release of the Blast's immortal energies. In searching for Fyre, they come across another two youngsters (Psyanide and Axle), and after a battle with the anarchists known as The Disorder, become a team. It's written by Fabian Nicieza (1-2) and Louise Simonson (2-3), but this is hopelessly hackneyed, with uninspiring artwork to boot.~NF

SIX DEGREES

High Heels: *5 issues 1996-1997*

Very sensitive territory is staked out by *six degrees* (to use the correct lower case title), but thankfully it's responsibly handled. In 1994 the UK was shocked to hear the fate of missing toddler Jamie Bulger, abducted from a shopping mall and later found murdered. Tragic enough as it stood, it later transpired the killers were two pre-teenage boys. *Six degrees* examines a scarcely disguised version of the case, studying the circumstances of all involved parties, including the local police and journalists. The entire affair is then contrasted with similar events occurring in the 19th century. While writer Martin Shipp and artist Marc Laming – working in a very traditional British black and white style – have produced a distinctive and worthwhile title, there's a distancing emotional detachment throughout, and at times it's a very dry piece. There's a need for intelligent comics tackling adult topics, and those who read Vertigo titles are likely to enjoy this as well. The conclusion appears in *Gyre* from 2.~WJ

SIX FROM SIRIUS

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1984*, 4 issue miniseries 1986*

In the future humanity has spread across the stars to encounter numerous alien races, most of which are biped humanoids. The first series requires a team of government-connected agents to stop an escalating inter-planetary war, and in the second an inter-dimensional gateway is cause for concern. *Six From Sirius* is old fashioned sci-fi adventure, ably handled by writer Doug Moench and artist Paul Gulacy.~FP

SIX MILLION DOLLAR MAN

Charlton: *9 issues 1976-1978*

Unremarkable tie-in to the TV show with a selection of top creators including Joe Gill, Nick Cuti, Joe Staton, Fred Himes and Pat Boyette churning out tepid and derivative adventure thrillers. Fanatics only.~WW

THE SIX MILLION DOLLAR MAN

Charlton: *7 issues 1976-1977*

Lovers of Proust or Becket, look away now! Inevitably, a TV character whose sole raison d'être is moving fast and breaking things is going to lose something in the more static pages of a comic, and it is no surprise that this black and white magazine companion to the colour comic is a tepid affair. Writers Joe Gill and Nicola Cuti line up all manner of spy networks and murderous backwoods hicks but never once press the button marked 'excitement'. On the plus side, there is art from Neal Adams, Dick Giordano and friends to various degrees in 1-3, although Jack Sparling's prescience is felt from 2 on and by 4 the comic is his to do with as he pleases. Heaven help us all!~DAR

666 The Mark Of The Beast

Fleetway/Quality: *21 issues 1990-1991*

1-18 are an exercise in barrel scraping; appalling strips with a vaguely demonic theme culled from Fleetway's British adventure comics. Matters improve with 19, when *Night Walker* becomes the prominent title, and the comic reprints Luke Kirby strips from *2000AD*. Pre-Harry Potter and Tim Hunter, Luke is a magician in training. It's a slow-paced story relying on mood and building tension, but the charming illustrations by John Ridgway are worth seeing.~FP

SIX STRING SAMURAI

Awesome: *1 issue 1998*

A project to promote a potential film that's so sloppily produced it probably killed any movie deal dead. An Elvis-obsessed loner stalks the badlands with his guitar and sword, seeking no trouble, but ready to handle it. It's an interesting twist on the road movie, but this does it no favours.~WJ

6.10 BY THE SCHOOLYARD

Aeon: *One shot 1995*

Graham Higgins' artwork portrays impressions of a past and present that involves war, implied espionage and a society that resembles a soviet version of our own. Susan Catherine's script is a carefully paced interview that begins in a very formal, untrusting way before reluctantly building to the moment of betrayal that's also the reason behind the interview. Higgins wears his influences on his sleeve, particularly Jose Muñoz and Ian Gibson, but this just adds to the foreign feel of the piece. Exquisite.~SW

SIZZLE

NBM: *16 issues + 1999 to date*

Sizzle is a showcase anthology for NBM's Eurotica and Amerotica, sex comic imprints. As such, many of the strips are reprinted as albums after serialisation and are usually better read in that form (if at all). Sometimes the strips only serve as teasers for albums, with gags from the *Grin and Bare It* albums, episodes (in 6) from Massimo Rotundo's *Ex Libris Eroticis* and Julius Zimmerman's *Blind Squirrel*, and photos from Eric Kroll (7 and 8). Apart from these, of the subsequent collections, the better examples include *Emily's Secret* by Marcus Gray (1-5), *Retreat* by Kiki Kjaer (2-4), Quinn's *Shadow and Light* (12), and Jack Munroe's *Ada Lee* (9, 11, 16). Generally more interesting are the short stories by creators like Petra Waldron and Jennifer Finch (1), Richard Moore (9) and Milo Manara (10). Moore also contributes text and pinups of his *Far West* character in 15. In later issues, Cornnell Clarke (12-16) and Nebular (14-16), suggest a more offbeat approach to the subject in hand. Prize for worst strip, however, must go to Kevin Taylor. His work is littered throughout the series, but he can't even be bothered finishing the early episodes of the *Girl* strip in 13-16, turning in just his thumbnail sketches instead – guess we're all meant to buy the album for the full effect.~NF

SIZZLE THEATRE

Slave Labor: *1 issue 1991*

The largely unsavoury characters who hang out at the *Sizzle Theatre* strip bar are deftly characterised in short strokes by Andy Garcia amid a very silly plot concerning a man attacking strippers, shaving them and painting them black. Funny in places, and done either so well or so poorly that one never knows if Garcia is being knowingly ironic or plain bad.~WJ

SKATEMAN

Pacific: *1 issue 1983*

What was Neal Adams thinking? Roller Derby star Billy Moon's best chum and girlfriend are murdered, so after a bout of self-pity he ties a bandanna round his face and gets his skates on to avenge them as Skateman. Without a hint of irony, it's laughter on wheels, with Neal Adams throwing in fads like roller discos and halter-neck tops willy-nilly, all of which were five years past their sell-by date in 1983. In the back is an even sillier character (although knowingly so), Paul Power's Rock Warrior, who destroys spaceships with power chords.~WJ

SKELEBUNNIES

Slave Labor: *1 issue 2000, 1 special ('Spanktacular') 2002*

Spinning off from *Stitch*, these are more madcap adventures of two undead bunnies as they carry out their demon-lord's imperative to torment cute, fluffy things. Silly, grotesque, baroque and tasteless, so a darn good time from Tommy Kovac, and if you missed the original strips from Stitch they're available in the 'Spanktacular' with some additional material and lots of pin-ups.~WW

SKELETON KEY

Amaze Ink: *30 issues, 1 Special 1995-1998*, 4 issue miniseries 1999*

Written and drawn by Andi Watson. Tamsin is a high-school student, bored stupid by her Canadian hometown. One Halloween, she buys a skeleton costume from a mysterious shop, discovers she's also taken home a strange key, and soon finds out that any door opened with the key leads to other worlds. Her first journey liberates Kitsune, a Japanese fox spirit that takes the form of a teenage girl, and soon she's battling against witches and monsters in her closet and a possessed toy racoon, and also dealing with the usual high-school hassles. The first storyline (1-6) was messy, with action sequences that were almost incomprehensible, but the comic soon settled down and revealed its humour, intelligence, and charm. The characters become steadily more absorbing, especially as the friendship develops between Tamsin and Kitsune, and 28-30 is a fitting tribute to that friendship. The special collects short stories featuring the cast from minicomics and anthologies, and the miniseries shows the characters stepping towards adult responsibilities and the troubles that causes. The comic is cute in a funny-animal/feisty-kids style, and it may well show you that you have a larger appetite for cute than you realised.~FC

SKELETON KEY/ SUGAR KAT SK2 HALLOWEEN SPECIAL

Slave Labor: *One-shot 1998*

Tamsin Mary Cates, a high school student, accidentally obtains the Skeleton Key, a mystical artefact that opens doors to other dimension, and on her travels, befriends Kitsune, an ancient Japanese fox spirit who disguises herself as a teenage girl. Sugar Kat, media darling and the most popular girl in the world, teams up with her over-achieving and under-appreciated sister Rebecca to form a detective agency investigating supernatural hijinx and acrimonious divorces.

When the Kat sisters visit Tamsin's Canadian hometown of Garfield to look into a wave of hauntings, a hangover plotline from the *Skeleton Key* series precipitates all four girls into a bizarre (and funny) adventure which manages to showcase the best points of both series. Delicious.~HS

Recommended

SKIDMARKS

Tundra: *3 issue miniseries 1994*

Reprints Ed (Ilya) Hillyer's self-published title *Bic. Skidmarks* is a fluidly-drawn, downbeat tale of moral choices. Bike-obsessed Bic finds the loot dropped when his local shop is robbed. Should he give it back, or buy the bike of his dreams to impress the girls? Ilya writes sensitively about the wild enthusiasms of youth in this convincing slice-of-life tale.~FJ

Recommended: 1-3

SKIN GRAFT: The Adventures of a Tattooed Man

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

John Oakes, petty criminal, falls in with Abel Tarrant, former supervillain The Tattooed Man, when in prison. The pair forge an unusual relationship, Tarrant using Oakes as a living canvas for his obsession, forgetting that Oakes might develop an agenda of his own. Striking art from Warren Pleece adds to the disturbing and off-balance feel of this miniseries, but ultimately Jerry Prosser's script fails to deliver what it promises.~HS

Voodoo & Zealot SKIN TRADE

Image/WildStorm: *One-shot 1995*

Underneath artwork which Michael Lopez has swiped too obviously from soft-porn mags is a half-decent story as *WildC.A.T.S.* heroines Voodoo and Zealot rescue orphans from an East European country which is Bosnia in all but name. One for the boys, but not as dismissible as the first glance would have you believe.~JC

SKINHEADS IN LOVE

Eros: *One-shot 1992*

Roy and Simone are our eponymous shaven-headed sweethearts, too busy being 'cool' and 'tuff' to admit the tenderness of their feelings for each other, until a booze-fuelled three-way gone disastrously wrong prompts their reluctant admissions of their mutual affection. Artist/writer Bob Fingerman can't bring himself to let go of plot and personalities even in an ostensibly 'wanky' comic, so this comes across as an endearing, funny story only somewhat more explicit than the antics of his protagonists in *Minimum Wage*. A second issue was promised, but sadly never appeared.~HS

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* Available in a collected edition

SKINNERS

Image: *1 issue 2000*

Few recent Image comics have been as relentlessly awful as those sponsored or created by Rob Liefeld in the company's early days, so Mat Broome requires some recognition here. An unexplained title, portentous dialogue, pin-up pages, distorted figurework.. this is wretched stuff. Had Broome concentrated more on providing a story rather than attempting to stiff the fans with a variety of covers this may have run to a second issue.~WJ

SKINWALKER

Oni Press: *4 issue miniseries 2002**

An ambitious FBI profiling agent is teamed with a Native American law enforcement officer as both investigate a Navajo thug who believes himself a Skinwalker. This is a local legend for a rogue practitioner of witchcraft, whose alleged talents include an ability to possess others, and to inherit the knowledge and abilities of any living thing whose skin they wear. Both officials are abrasive characters, and although some elements play out predictably, there are enough surprises and tension to mark this as a superior crime drama. The script by Nunzio DeFillipis and Christina Weir was originally conceived for film, but the attraction of it being seen through without compromise resulted in the comic. It's excellently illustrated by Brian Hurtt and Arthur Dela Cruz, who concentrate on telling the story and have the basics down well enough to disguise the fact that talking heads often predominate. They're also to be commended for a sensitive treatment of horrific events.~FP

Recommended: 1-4

SKIZZ

Fleetway/Quality: *2 issue microseries 1990**
Mandarin: *1 Graphic Novel ('Alien Cultures') 1993*

Given the brief of producing a British version of the movie *E.T.* for *2000AD*, Alan Moore had his wallaby-like alien interpreter Skizz land in Birmingham. He poked a bit of fun at the regional accents, incorporated a realistic attitude of official behaviour should an alien land, and made a few comments on the state of Britain under Margaret Thatcher. Otherwise this was a very traditional work from Moore, an impression heightened by the solid storytelling of Jim Baikie. Eight years later Skizz returned under the hands of Baikie alone, and it's a rare case of the sequel topping the original. Unrestricted by editorial dictates, Baikie deals with what happens once Skizz returns home, turning-in inventive elements of science-fiction such as the low fat yoghurt Skizz ate on Earth being considered a biological contaminant at home. He also follows up on the Earth cast amid a good suspenseful plot. He should try writing more often.~FP

SKREEMER

DC: *6 issue miniseries 1989**

In the days before their Vertigo imprint DC issued adult-oriented series on better quality paper, but otherwise marketed alongside their standard titles. It meant the like of *Skreemer* was foisted on a superhero audience, who scratched their heads at this complex fusion of James Joyce with *The Godfather* and didn't bother with any further issues. It was their loss. Pete Milligan produces an appalling, cruel story the subtlety of which is belied by the simple blocky art of Brett Ewins and Steve Dillon. Spanning forty years, on one level it's the story of gang boss Vito Skreemer, a man cursed with a terrible ability, making a major power play. As he literally stands on the precipice he broods on his past and his rise to power. His career is contrasted with that of the tragic Finnegan family, permanently downtrodden residents in poverty, struggling to survive and live a more honest life. *Skreemer* has allegorical references to *Finnegan's Wake*, both song and novel, and to the life of Jesus, alongside musings about the validity of predestination. It's a brutal masterpiece.~FP

Recommended: 1-6

SKROG

Comico: *1 issue 1984*
Crystal: *1 Special ('Yip Yip Yay') 1987*

Skrog is very much a prototype Mask, with the same mixture of madcap whimsy and parody, which makes the title sound far more interesting than it is. Unfortunately the wacky action and stream of consciousness dialogue is hung on a two page plot stretched to twenty. By the special the art has improved, but it's still a waste of paper.~WJ

SKRULL KILL KREW

Marvel: *5 issues 1995-1996*

Mad Cow Disease meets the *X-Files*, in this thinly disguised 'Reds under the bed' romp by Grant Morrison and Mark Millar, in the company of pencilling pal Steve Yeowell. Printed under the 'Marvel Edge' banner, which generally designated lots of gratuitous violence, no time is wasted in inaugurating a bloodbath.

Skrull Kill Krew hinges on a very old story (*Fantastic Four* 2) in which a small group of green alien shapeshifters, the Skrulls, attack Earth. Defeated, they're turned into cattle and left to graze happily, until, after an escape, they're executed by the US government and become part of the human food chain as hamburgers. The 'Skrullburgers' killed some people that ate them, but others got shapeshifting powers and the ability to see any Skrulls on Earth despite their disguises. This is just as well, since Skrulls have now successfully infiltrated all levels of society. To redress the balance a psychotic shapeshifter, Ryder, assembles the Skrull Kill Krew to execute all Skrulls they come across. What an unpleasant bunch the SKK are. Besides Ryder, you have an English fascist skinhead, a pseudo-punk lesbian, a spoilt superstar model and a whimpering beach bum. Quite honestly you find yourself rooting for the aliens.

Originally intended as an ongoing title, the truncated run splits awkwardly into two parts. 1-3 have the SKK on a recruiting drive at an airport while Captain America is there to greet the president of a Baltic state. Putative world ruler Baron Strucker, head of evil organisation Hydra, and the Baltic president being a Skrull complicate matters further. This plot is discarded for 4 and 5, in which the SKK stumble on a small town where everyone has been replaced by a Skrull. It's then gung-ho all the way as the aliens are slaughtered. This series didn't live up to expectations, being rather dry, considering the absurd scenario. Only 3 fulfils the humour quotient with an excellent portrayal of Baron Strucker ("Why should a neo-liberal like Victor Von Doom rule a country and not Baron Strucker? I demand our own Baltic state"). What would McDonald's and Burger King make of all this?~HY

Recommended: 3

Nick Ryan, THE SKULL

Antarctic: *3 issues 1994-1995*

This begins with the tale of a dead lawyer and District Attorney, and a judge due to be the next target of a visiting hitman, while Nick Ryan speeds to reach the potential victim first. David Watkins' pulp-style comedy about a masked crime fighter with a very surly butler/assistant, Jake, (who gets his own tale in 3) is fun but slight, the artwork never really achieving the right atmosphere.~NF

They Call Me THE SKULL

Virtual: *1 issue 1996*

Danny Fingeroth and Ron Lim are given the chance to create their own character, and turn out a teenage superhero that wouldn't even have passed the slack 1990s editorial standards at Marvel. With no hint of irony the first chapter is titled 'From the Depths'. Indeed.~FP

SKULL Comics

Rip Off: *1 issue 1970*
Last Gasp: *5 issues (2-6) 1970 -1972*

This was one of several underground comics conceived very much in the tradition of EC's horror line, and after a slightly slippery start it grew into one of the best. Jack Jaxon, Dave Sheridan and Spain all contributed good material, but it was Richard Corben (2, 3, 5, 6) and Greg Irons (1-3, 6) who best captured the EC spirit in a series of astonishingly shocking strips. Irons' frequent collaborator Tom Veitch was responsible, with Irons and Corben, for the run's best (and most stomach-churning) tale, the full length "A Gothic Tale" in 6. The Veitch/Irons gore-a-thon "The Clean-Up Crew" from 3 was later turned into a notorious German underground film, albeit without their permission.~DAR
Recommended: 2, 3, 6

SKULL & BONES

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1992*

Excellently constructed thriller set in the disintegrating Soviet Union of the early 1990s. Ed Hannigan's plot takes advantage of how technology has outdistanced the state's ability to control it. Three loose cannons combat the resigned remnants of the Politburo, but one KGB controller has a grim agenda of his own. The focal point of the series is Andrian, a grim, single-minded and resourceful former special soldier, who began his anti-state activities by switching sides to join the rebels in Afghanistan. Returning to Moscow to begin a one-man war on the home front, he reluctantly accepts allies in order to actuate a grander plan. Rarely for a prestige-format title, this is actually a long read. Hannigan's art is admirably dark and his plotting dense and diligent, with not a page wasted. A true graphic novel.~FP
Recommended: 1-3

The SKULL MAN

Tokyopop: *5 issue miniseries 2001-2002*, 4 volumes + 2002 to date*

This is Kazuhiko Shimamoto's re-invention of original creator, Shotaro Ishinomori's famous character, initially under his guidance. The Skull Man is Tatsuo, an agent from the land of the dead, an anti-hero seeking revenge for the death of his parents. They were responsible, with their genetic experiments, for giving Tatsuo's only friend, Garo, his powers of transformation, but were killed when Tatsuo's grandfather began to fear that they had become too dangerous. Now Tatsuo, in the identity of his father, Ryusei Chisato, is attempting to destroy the syndicate, apparently led by another survivor from his parents' laboratory, which is attempting to build an army of mutant warriors, including the Spider Man. Other supporting characters are assassin Maria, reporter Satsuki and police detective Hioka, all hunting Tatsuo for different reasons, and all coming to question whose side they should be taking. Shimamoto's artwork is dark and moody, but still exhibits a great deal of flair, and the script, while occasionally repetitive, works hard to keep the reader's attention. A total of seven volumes are planned.~NF

SKULL THE SLAYER

Marvel: *8 issues 1975-1976*

Bonkers example of Marvel at its hippy best. Marv 'equal opportunities' Wolfman starts off with a radical black physicist, a peace-loving young girl and an insecure teenager crash-landing while flying over the Bermuda Triangle, along with a ex-'Nam vet being taken home for trial for killing his brother. Cue ideological quarrels in the Land That Time Forgot. But, even better, Skully and friends discover a sort of Time Ziggurat with a different age on each step. Steve Englehart has them fight aliens in ancient Egypt, then Bill Mantlo whisks them away to the time of Arthurian legend, whenever that is. The series, drawn initially by Steve Gan and then by Sal Buscema with help from Gan and Sonny Trinidad, ended with Skull the Slayer about to be sacrificed to an Aztec god, unless the readers made their voice heard. The best they could do was request a conclusion in *Marvel Two-In-One* 35-36.~FJ

SKY APE (les aventures)

Slave Labor: *4 issue miniseries 1997-1998**
AIT/Planet Lar: *One-shot ('Waiting For Crime') 2001*

An intelligent millionaire crime-fighting gorilla, but played just straight enough to be funny. Written by Phil Amara and Tim McCarney, surreal elements obviously influenced by Grant Morrison's *Doom Patrol* seem uneasily shoehorned into this story, particularly dominating and padding 3. Sky Ape and his eccentric cast investigate his origin by means of the Suspense Jacket, an artefact permitting the wearer to see into the past. The writing is promising, but not yet fully realised, so it's the art of Richard Jenkins that's of note. Quite apart from knocking out the best gorilla seen in comics for some while, he proves very adaptable with a variety of scenarios. The stylish mixture of black and white ape on colour cover is also worthy of note. Plenty to praise, but all creators had improved by the time of the one-shot, which provides a more linear plot, and is funnier all round. The AIT/Planet Lar collection of the first series includes a few pages not found in the Slave Labor collection.~FP
Recommended: 'Waiting For Crime'

SKY GAL

Americomics: *3 issues 1993-1994*

Selected reprints of the Sky Girl strip from Fiction Houses' *Jumbo Comics* anthology. Waitress Ginger MacGuire, known as Sky Girl nowhere except in the title, was an aviatrix and adventuress in World War II, and longs to get up in the air again, but is repeatedly forced to settle for her poorly-paid waitress job. Enjoyable slices of slapstick comedy, illustrated by the dean of 1940s Good Girl art, Matt Baker. New covers, and one new story per issue, are provided by Bradford Gorby, who does a creditable homage. Undemanding fun.~HS.

SKY WOLF

Eclipse: *3 issue miniseries 1988*

Spin-off from *Airboy*, where Sky Wolf had been a regular companion and back-up strip. Sky Wolf is a pilot (all right, no surprises there) whose brash attitude and recklessness involve him in various scrapes. In this case, having recently become estranged from his wife, in 1954, he goes treasure hunting with his friend Bald Eagle in Vietnam. It's forgettably told by Chuck Dixon and Tom Lyle.~NF

SKYE BLUE

Mu Press: *3 issue miniseries 1992*

This is run-of-the-mill stuff. A teenage girl discovers her father is a retired superhero, and she has inherited his powers. The art has a slight Manga feel, but is amateurish.~DB

SLACKER COMICS

Slave Labor: *18 issues 1994-1998*

Occupying the majority of all but 14, Randy is the festering, resentful high school outsider unable to get his life together in any fashion. Having zoned into the 1990s zeitgeist, Doug Slack exploited his name and turned out more and more Randy. Even at it's best, as in 11's well-worked comedy of Randy's radio show, this is never more than *Hate* lite, rarely avoiding the obvious, and Slack's sketchy cartooning is off-putting. The shorter back-ups, though, often autobiographical, are better. 14 reprints many of them, including a classic chicken and monkey conversation, with the Randy strips from 1-5 collected as *Randy Sells Out*.~FP

SLAINE the Berserker

Quality: *28 issues 1987-1989*

Slaine, the barbarian warrior strip he created for *2000AD*, was undoubtedly Pat Mills' finest hour. It's an ironic, knowing tale of a violent but enduringly cheeky warrior, set in a mythical Britain before cataclysms separated it from Continental Europe. The narration is by Slaine's companion on his adventures, a malevolent and malodorous dwarf, Ukko. In his old age Ukko is being alternatively cajoled and threatened into recording his memoirs.

Slaine is evicted from his tribe at an early age despite being a prodigious warrior when gripped by a berserker-like fury, the Warp Spasm. Contrary to his best intentions to look out for

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* Available in a collected edition

himself, shag anything that moves and have fun, Slaine continually finds his destiny entwined with that of the decaying sorcerers who worship death and seek to destroy humanity. Many of the early episodes (written for a weekly comic and therefore requiring a climax every four or six pages) are little more than segments of protracted fights. But what fights. In the hands of Mike McMahon, one of the most underrated comic artists ever, Slaine is bloody, inventive and twisted. The artists who followed never captured the wildness of McMahon's drawing, until, in Simon Bisley, a maturer Mills found someone who could match the mellower, more humorous tone of the later stories. Before that Glen Fabry's ultra-detailed and relatively fluid artwork was the polar opposite to McMahon, but David Pugh flooded his pages with ink until, as Slaine was elected king, he looked like a Mattel toy ascending the sacred mound. From 21 the title is *Slaine the King*, referring to his new-found status.

As the strip evolves Slaine goes from simple battle-lover to Sun King who unites the rival Celtic tribes through cunning and diplomacy to fight their greatest battle against the dread Slough Fegg. In phantasmagorical sequences he meets the Goddess herself and finds her a gurning, lusty maiden with whom he can happily flirt. Mills' humour evolves too, moving from straightforward contrast between the events depicted and Ukko's account of them to a broad parody of political and religious ineptitude. It's not subtle, but the characters are rich and the plotting clever. The McMahon and Fabry stories were collected by Titan, and the Bisley along with those of copyist Dermot Power, by Mandarin, and the whole series is highly readable, but forget the dull Blackhawk back-ups.~FJ

Recommended: 1-4, 25-28

SLAPSTICK

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1992-1993*

Good-hearted troublemaker Steve Harmon, out to spoil a carnival for a school rival, falls into Dimension X while wearing a clown outfit (it works in the story. Honestly). His choice of costume is fortuitous, as Dimension X is inhabited by evil clowns (okay, alien entities who coincidentally resemble clowns. Does that sound any better?), and he blends right in. Or he would, but interdimensional travel has taken its toll and reduced him to, well, a puddle of goo. Fortunately, a good clown scientist, trying to prevent the evil clowns' invasion of Earth, reconstructs Steve in a spiffy new form, giving him the indestructible properties of an animated cartoon and sending him back to Earth to wreak havoc on the Marvel Universe. Oh, yes, this is supposed to be a superhero comic, and it's a very funny, likeable one too, written with flair and wit by Len Kaminski, and drawn by James Fry, who is unequalled among his contemporaries in his ability to fuse comedy and drama. Needless to say, *Slapstick* was relentlessly panned by the legions of humourless Marvelites who wanted to see their heroes suffer, goddammit!~HS

Recommended: 1-4

SLASH MARAUD

DC: *6 issue miniseries 1987-1988*

Doug Moench does his best to incorporate scenes from every film genre into this story about an Earth occupied by aliens who are five years from making the planet uninhabitable for humans. Hero Slash and a small group of survivors are aided by one alien who's begun to regret what his fellows are doing. It's an interesting idea and Moench packs a lot of action and character into the six issues. As drawn by Paul Gulacy, Slash looks remarkably like Clint Eastwood and behaves as inscrutably as the Man With No Name. Moench provides a good script and the artwork's good, but overall the series is a little too clinical to get passionate about it.~NF

SLAUGHTERMAN

Comico: *2 issues 1983*

The protaganist's boyfriend, a costumed hero in a fantasy mediaeval setting, is killed by a bad king, so, naturally, herself puts on the costume because the little people need their hero/ine. This is 100% witless and your mum could do the art better.~GK

SLAVE GIRL COMICS

Avon: *2 issues 1949*
Eternity: *1 issue 1989*

Costumed adventure in Roman times, with the comely Malu in her alluring two-piece rescued from the harem of a cruel master and dedicating herself to her Roman rescuer, Garth. Although there's a modicum more thought than most 1940s comics, it's surely only rarity that has these commanding such high prices. If you're really desperate, the Eternity issue reprints 1 in black and white, probably taking its reproduction from a 1960s I.W. reprint titled *Malu in the Land of Adventure*.~FP

SLAVE LABOR Graphic Novels

Abel by William Harms and Mark Bloodworth tells of John, a boy growing up in the harsh, depression-era US farm belt. Abused by his psychopathic elder brother, and neglected by parents struggling to make ends meet. In the early days of World War II, the lonely boy strikes up a friendship with a old Chinese gardener, but injustice and tragedy force him to confront his own developing morality. It's a thought-provoking look at the nature of truth and how children really are, and has recently been reissued.

A Lot of Love is a lightweight, but engaging tale about a normal, successful guy, Jack Peoples, who is in fact a man with a shameful secret. He is overwhelmingly attracted to excessively obese women. And ever so gradually he is succumbing to his darkest desires.. *Awkward Universe* is a disappointing thematic sequel to Andy Garcia's Seth Throb character from *Nerve* and *Oblivion City*, featuring his brother Malcolm. Igor Baranko's *Pifitos* tells the story of a recluse turned into a hero by a blind boxer and an old man who dispatch him to ancient Greece. It's a bawdy tale of mythological creatures, very human Gods and the rescuing of maidens from evil witches at the very gates of Hades. *Spark Generators* is a compilation of strips from some of comics biggest alternative names relating whose work made them want to be comic artists too. Contributors include Jeff Smith, Trina Robbins, Donna Barr, Creig Flessel, Scott Morse and many others. All the proceeds from the book were to benefit the Cartoon Art Museum.

The Yearning is a lyrical, wordless (apart from a four line poem) 100 page novel. Starting magnificently, it deals with the inner world of a young chef, the thoughts, dreams and emotions that flash briefly through his head as he goes about his day. Beautifully drawn by Dean Chiang, it blows it at the last hurdle by descending into silly superhero and monster pastiches in lieu of a strong resolution. A real shame too.~WW

SLAVE LABOR Stories

Slave Labor: *4 issues 1992*

A sampler for the idiosyncratic Slave Labor, one of the few comic publishing companies that's still one man's vision. If Dan Vado likes your work and can afford to publish it, you're in. Sadly, Slave Labor titles don't reach the audience they should, despite Vado's taste being generally excellent. He's also a pretty good writer, as displayed in 1's *Hero Sandwich* tale. It's an excellent first issue throughout, with a Dr Radium feature and a tale of Catholic childhood completing the mix. Succeeding issues don't match the first, but with Milk and Cheese, Bill the Clown and Samurai Penguin there's enough to make them worthy of a glance.~WJ

Recommended: 1

SLAVE PIT FUNNIES FEATURING GWAR

Slave Pit Inc: *6 issues 1994-1998*

Always more about cartoon violence onstage, it's no surprise that the members of heavy metal band GWAR would want their own comic. What is surprising is that they would go to the effort of producing it themselves. Or, to be precise, having the folk who produce their costumes and sets turn out the comic strips about their stage personas. Predictably enough, the same adolescent sensibilities that characterise GWAR's music are on display here, with only basic artistic ability to back them.~FP

SLAYERS

CPM: *6 issue miniseries 1998-1999*, 6 issue miniseries ('Super-Explosive Demon Story') 2001-2002*, 6 issue miniseries ('Special') 2002*, 2 volumes + ('Super-Explosive Demon Story') 2002 to date*

Based on a popular anime, *Slayers* tells the adventures of young sorceress, Lina Inverse, and her travelling companion, the master swordsman, Gourry, who's not very bright. The first series sees the pair food and treasure hunting, preventing robberies by the Black Fox and battling werewolves amongst other things. 'Super-Explosive Demon Story' 1-6, depicts an early adventure as Lina tries to find the Book of Time Sorcery, allegedly guarded by a dragon. Collected in one volume, the second 'Super-Explosive Demon Story' continues with a quest to find the mysterious metal, Orihalcon, which might be the root of evil. Along the way, they gain an ally in Rezo the Red Priest and a foe in Zelgadis Graywords. Rival sorceress, Naga the White Serpent, joins Lina against foes including Galdin Luda in 'Special', which provides some insight into Lina's past. Writer, Hajime Kanzaka, plays up the comedy in this undemanding series. The best of the artwork comes from Tommy Ohtsuka on 'Special', but there's not a lot in it as Rui Araizumi and Shoko Yoshinaka are also accomplished, but work in a slightly more conventional, anime-based style.~NF

SLEAZE CASTLE

Gratuitous Bunny: *9 issues 1989-1993 (1-6*), 1996-1999 (7-9), 4 issue miniseries ('Tales From Sleaze Castle') 1992-1994*

Quirky and engaging tale of the surreal life of Jocasta Dribble, perpetual student (doing a master's in Watching Television) and unwilling traveller in time and space. Her friend Panda is ruler and owner of a colossal, extra-terrestrial, extra-dimensional edifice she calls Sleaze Castle. Due to a trans-dimensional cock-up she ends up adrift in the continuum, often approaching but never returning to where she started from. It sounds complex, but the plot is nothing more than a good excuse for loads of puns, spoofs and sight gags. Dave McKinnon and Terry Wiley produce a delightful blend of peculiarly British humour that will appeal to comic fans, cult TV fanatics, music lovers and even those chaps that read actual books. The 'Directors Cut' collections are nominally reprints, but with so much new and reworked material its best to consider them as separate issues, and it should be noted that the miniseries *Petra Etcetera* (featuring Jo's younger sister) continues the main series numbering as *Sleaze Castle* 9-11. Great Fun for people whose brains work.~WW

Recommended: Directors Cut 0-3

SLEAZY SCANDALS of the Silver Screen

Cartoonists' Co-Op: *One-shot 1974*
Kitchen Sink: *One-shot 1978*

Hollywood Babylon comics by the cream of the underground cartoonists. Best is Art Spiegelman detailing the downfall of Fatty Arbuckle, with good art and inventive use of silent screen-style text captions. Kim Deitch, Bill Griffith and Spain Rodriguez are also on hand for a respectable package, and the obscure Jim Osbourne's Lupe Velez strip is also excellent. The Kitchen Sink reprint is printed in larger format.~FP

SLEDGE HAMMER

Marvel: *2 issues 1988*

If you like the TV show and are desperate for more the comic's okay. If you're irritated beyond all capacity for reason by the character, stay well away.~WJ

SLEEPING DRAGONS

Slave Labor: *4 issues 2001*

Competent but uninspired fantasy tale of Philip Escaladine, a young knight of the Order of Meggido, who almost saved civilisation from the Crough, invading zombie monsters before they were betrayed by the very princes they fought for. Two centuries later Philip, a wandering Paladin and peacekeeper, is the only hope as the Crough return.~WW

SLEEPWALKER

Marvel: *33 issues, 1 Special 1991©1994*

Laughably promoted as "*Sandman* done right", this pleasing series was ill-served by its advance publicity, which set most folks against it from the start. University student Rick

Sheridan is troubled by dreams of a tall, grotesque creature whom he senses is trying to break into the waking world. This creature is one of a group called the Sleepwalkers, whose task it is to patrol the Mindscape, another dimension, and prevent any of its more evil denizens from preying on innocent minds. Having become accidentally 'lodged' in Sheridan's mind, it can only access the outside world and fight evil while Sheridan sleeps. It's a refreshing idea to have a heroic protagonist who is ugly, rather than fashionably 'exotic', and Bob Budiansky creates a group of likeable supporting characters for our teenage hero. Bret Blevins illustrates most of the first dozen issues with appealingly soft-focus lines, giving a natural look to the admittedly unrealistic characters. Sadly, after Blevins' departure the replacement artists weren't up to snuff, and Budiansky seemed to have lost heart, turning in rote scripts with obligatory guest appearances by Marvel heavy-hitters to try to pad the sales figures. Not a mega-hit series, but the first dozen issues have a certain charm.~HS

The SLEEZE BROTHERS

Marvel/Epic: *6 issue miniseries 1989-1990*, one-shot 1991*

Simply dreadful *Blues Brothers* science fiction spoof that sees El Ape and Deadbeat Sleeze fail miserably and perpetually in their attempts to be private detectives. Set in the future and featuring most of the oldest jokes in the universe. Naff beyond belief.~WW

SLIDERS

Acclaim: *7 issues, 1 Special 1996*

This enjoyable series, based on the TV show in which three scientists and an R&B singer are flung from one dimension to another, through contemporary but differently distorted Earths, comes in three-issues-per-story chunks and in one-off specials. D.G. Chichester's scripts capture the flavour of the programme and the clear art by Dennis Calero, Kevin Kobasic and Val Mayerik makes it an easy read. The comics are able to cover subjects too expensive or risqué for television. The exciting *Sliders Special* 1, written by Jerry O'Connell, who plays Quinn Mallory, the show's youthful genius, is set on an Earth where the US government encourages citizens to take drugs.~GK

SLIME

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1995*

Ostensibly, this is the secret sex-life of J. Edgar Hoover. Drawn in a very rough and ready style by Eric Reynolds from a script by himself and Robert Peters, it's disturbing to say the least. We are treated to the graphic (and scatological) abuse of Hoover by his Grandmother, Mother, Father and a male servant. Quite where we're being led is open to question, though sympathy for the Hoover character is clearly part of it. Not for the squeamish or politically correct, at any rate.~NF

SLINGERS

Marvel: *12 issues 1998-1999*

Slingers follows the adventures of a group of teenagers who acquire, from a mysterious benefactor, superhero costumes that once belonged to Spider-Man. There's nothing especially clever or original about the series, written by Joseph Harris and pencilled (mostly) by Chris Cross, but it's a gem of gentle superhero soap. The characters' silver age-style angst and insecurities make it easy to read this as an unintentional comedy or plodding Marvel-by-numbers; they don't make comics like this any more because it's all been done before, but so what, if that's what you like?

The Slingers spend many a scene practising their powers with largely incompetent results, struggle with the moral dilemmas their new roles throw at them, their troubled relationship with their controlling and probably psychotic mentor, their own weaknesses (arrogance-hiding-insecurity, disability, alcoholic parents, mutant self-loathing, being dead... all the usual things that teens in the Marvel Universe worry about) and whether the world really needs more superheroes. Of course it doesn't, especially not ones who aren't very good at it, and this is the conclusion the team eventually reach for themselves, walking into the sunset and leaving the hero stuff to the people who know what they're doing. There is a *Wizard* preview that predates 1, and four variants of the first issue, each featuring a different member of the team in a back-up solo story.~JC

SLOW DEATH

Last Gasp: *11 issues 1970-1979 (1-10), 1992 (11)*

Taking their shock-endings from EC, *Slow Death* 1-5* are mostly science fiction stories concerned in one way or another with the end of humanity or the World – whichever comes soonest. Grim and very black, the scripts are twisted and thoroughly anti-authoritarian. The humour and artwork, which includes Richard Corben, Dave Sheridan, Jim Osbourne, Greg Irons and Jack Jackson, just about keeps it the right side of preaching-to-the-converted. 6 illustrates a move towards a broader vision with stories attacking/satirising attitudes to race, animals and women.

From 7, issues are themed, starting with War and moving through Greenpeace, Atomic Power, Cancer and Energy. These take a more militant stance, mixing didactic stories, documentary-style strips and information pages but lack much of the humour and bite of the early issues. Exceptions to note are Guy Colwell's 'Herpes is a Virus' in 10 (don't read it if you're squeamish) and Alan Moore and Bryan Talbot's 'Cold Snap', reprinted from *Food for Thought*, in 11. The final issue pays tribute to the late Greg Irons, who worked consistently on the title, printing his last work for the first time, including a Darnold Duck strip based on the Kurtzman/Elder Disney parody *from Mad Magazine*. Always boasting strong covers, particularly those by Rand Holmes (5, 6) and William Stout (7, 8), *Slow Death* delights in the extreme, attempting to reach by shocking rather than simply shocking for its own sake.~NF

Recommended: 4, 5, 6, 8, 10,

SLOW NEWS DAY

Slave Labor: *6 issue miniseries 2001-2002**

An American girl reporter joins the regional British newspaper on which her TV commentator mother cut her journalistic teeth, and rapidly becomes mired in a world of lost hamsters, turkeys with broken legs and front-cover advertisements for stairlifts. Charged by her mum to help revitalise the ailing Wheatstone Mercury, serving an agenda of her own while coping with her sullen co-workers and a shaky transatlantic relationship, Katharine Washington finds herself at the centre of a culture clash and a tug-of-love. Andi Watson's low-key, square-peg sitcom has an upbeat atmosphere despite the writer/artist's characteristic embrace of the mundane and trivial. Superb.~HS

Recommended: 1-6

SLOWPOKE

Alternative Comics: *1 issue 1998, 1 Collection 2001*

Jen Sorensen's initial comic is ill-served by a strange cover that may feature her cast and topics, but doesn't come close to representing the innovative whimsy and comment within. The uptight Mr Perkins shares space with M.I.D.I. Minnie, never without her electronic keyboard, and Drooly Jooly the under-sexed and always randy woman. Peter Bagge and Jim Woodring are the most recognisable influences, so the cartooning is fine. The collection is more focused, consisting of humourous commentary strips produced for a Virginia newspaper using the same cast, but lacking the sometimes manic energy of the comic, which is funnier. Many of these strips are available online at www.people.virginia.edu/~jls6c/aboutslowpoke.html.~FP

Recommended: 1

SLUDGE

Malibu: *13 issues, 1 Special 1993-1994*

Despite occasional flashes of inspiration, *Sludge* isn't a patch on *Man-Thing*, Steve Gerber's previous series about a muck monster. In this one, corrupt copper Frank Hoag is transformed into a mass of gray gloop after his dying body interacts with a DNA-transforming chemical. Hoag retreats to the New York sewers, where he either battles a series of bizarre mobsters (including the mysterious Lord Pumpkin), sits around working out ways to commit suicide or else talks to himself in irritating spoonerisms. Pedestrian artwork from Aaron Lopresti and Rob Phipps fails to enliven Gerber's disappointingly aimless storyline.~AL

Knight's SLUG'N'GINGER

Eros: *1 issue 1991*

Anthropomorphic sex comic by Milton Knight. Great cartooning, but feeble gags.~WJ

SLUTBURGER

Drawn & Quarterly: *6 issues 1991-1996**

Most of Mary Fleener's autobiographical strips revolve around music in some way, especially her adventures as a bass player over the years. She's a sharp, funny woman and her observations are diverting if not earth-shattering. Unlike many other female cartoonists her style is very polished, mixing in Cubism at every possibility. When people get stoned they start looking like black and white versions of Picasso paintings. When they get angry they start looking like Picasso paintings. And sometimes it's just because. This is a not entirely successful technique because Cubism is about more than drawing boxes, and the better strips are the short, surreal ones drawn entirely in a simplified style.~FJ

SMALL FAVORS

Eros: *6 issues + 2000 to date*

Higher powers decide that twenty-one year old Annie has already used up her lifetime allotment of masturbation time, so the Queen of her Conscience appoints the tiny Nibbil as her ever-present guardian, to ensure no more such activity. Fortunately for Annie, she and Nibbil can't keep their hands off each other, ensuring plentiful opportunities for explicit female-to-female sexual adventures. Other characters include the Queen's assistant, Janus, who accidentally falls for Annie's neighbour, Yuriko, and a new friend, the shy, but enthusiastic Sage (5). Subtitled "Girly Porno Comic Book", this is funny, cute, charming and sexy. Creator, Colleen Coover's influences embrace the Hernandez brothers, Richard Sala and manga amongst others, but the attractive artwork remains distinctively her own. A collection of 1-4 also contains some unpublished strips as well as pin-ups and the strips that advertise the series.~NF

Recommended: 1-6

SMALLVILLE

DC: *One-shot 2002*

So-so tie-in to the TV series. The show's script editor Mark Verheiden and artist Roy Allan Martinez produce a tale of Kryptonite irradiated fossils turning another generation X teen into something nasty to menace Clark Kent, his best pal Lex Luthor and Lana Lang. It's indistinguishable from a TV episode, which, of course, is the point. The package is filled out with *TV Guide* style interviews and features and a nice comic short from Michael Green and John Paul Leon giving us a peek at the inner workings of the real Lex Luthor.~WW

SMILEY THE PSYCHOTIC BUTTON

Chaos!: *One-shot 1998, one-shot ('Holiday Special') 1999, one-shot ('Spring Break') 1999, one-shot ('Wrestling Special') 1999*

Appalling bunch of comedy specials starring the deranged and degenerate badge worn by Evil Ernie. Kicking off is the 'team-up' of Lady Death, Evil Ernie, Purgatori and Chastity who try to stop the embarrassing antics of the obnoxious little badge, followed by the obligatory attack on Christmas. Then he and other corporate symbols go in search of pneumatic co-eds in the 'Spring Break Road Trip' issue before putting the boot in to the world of professional wrestling. A woeful collection of tired old gags and worn out situations dedicated to the mistaken belief that rude equals funny. A waste of your time.~WW

SMITH BROWN JONES

Kiwi Studios: *5 issue miniseries 1997**
Slave Labor: *4 issue miniseries, 2 Specials 1998-1999*

Smith Brown Jones is an alien accountant placed on Earth to gather data about human society. Naturally, he works on a newspaper investigating alien activities. In the first series this includes the takeover of the planet, and in the second encounters with supposedly mythical creatures in a quiet corner of England. Meanwhile his brother Jeff Chester Chuck turns up in the USA. Jon 'Bean' Hastings has an offbeat sense of humour, but otherwise delivers a very structured comedy in both cases, and the jibes at the administrative mind diminish as Jones develops into the traditional innocent abroad. The specials have other creators write material for Hastings to draw, but it's not as funny as his, so somewhat ill-advised. Not as ill-advised, however, as printing his wedding photos in the Halloween special.~WJ

SMITH'S ADVENTURES IN THE SUPERMUNDANE

Cryptic Press: *One-shot 1999*

Living up to the name of the publisher, on one level this is the story of Smith, a young boy in an institution, bullied and misunderstood. On another level, it's art or nonsense, depending on your willingness to interpret the largely incoherent events that substitute for a plot. Farel Dalrymple provides simple drawings with the hint of a Bill Sienkiewicz inking style.~NF

SMOKEHOUSE FIVE

Platinum Editions: *1 volume 1991*

A collection of silent, single page gag strips about a bumbling fire crew, full of Sergio Aragonés' signature detail, with lots of background jokes and manic running around. Well done, but not as developed as much of his work. In forty-eight pages you don't get the patterning of events and incidents that make up much of the humour in more sophisticated projects like *Groo the Wanderer*.~FJ

SMOOT

Fantagraphics: *1 issue 1995*

Skip Williamson's Snappy Sammy Smoot was a staple of late 1960s and early 1970s underground comics. He's an innocent who's that vital tinnie short of the barbie and used by Williamson as an obtuse commentator on all around him. This collection mixes one new strip with material culled over twenty years, some not previously seen in comics. As social commentary Smoot and his counterpart, the right-wing Radical Billy, are hardly subtle vehicles. While they raise a wry grin in small doses when they're part of anthologies, they haven't enough depth to sustain a solo run, so this only comes recommended to completists.~WJ

SNAKE EYES

Fantagraphics: *3 issues 1990-1993*

A short-lived attempt to find a successor to *Raw* and *Weirdo*, *Snake Eyes* maintained a feel for the underground while looking forward with a host of new talents. The best contributions to the first issue include David Mazzucchelli's inside-front-cover illo, Bob Sikoryak's 'Action Camus' (a series of redrawn covers from *Action Comics*), Chris Ware's short Clyde The Rat and Quimby Mouse strips, Julie Doucet's 'Alcoholic Romance', an untitled two-pager by Alex Ross and 'Pixie Meat' by Tom De Haven, Gary Panter and Charles Burns. Glenn Head edited the first issue solo, but contributor Kaz co-edits 2 and 3, which are similarly varied issues featuring many of the same creators. Kaz's extended 'Sidetrack City' episode in 2 is a highlight but overall there's a feeling that all the energy went into issue 1. *Snake Eyes* attempts to experiment with the comic's page, using fold-outs and strange panel shapes, but only Ware really succeeds. If you like the creators, *Snake Eyes* will offer you solid examples of their work.~NF

SNAPDRAGONS

Dork Storm Press: *2 issues + 2002 to date*

This companion series of sorts to Dork Tower has child protagonists instead of that series' adults, but the emphasis is still on the games that the characters play. Jody finds pretending to be ill to stay off school doesn't always work out, when she tries to sneak a turn on her and her twin, Jake's birthday present before him. 2 sees them deciding what to wear for trick or treating with friends. Writer John Kovalic has a good feel for obsessive personalities, young or old, while Liz Rathke's simple, broad-brush artwork is joyful. Backup strips, PS238 and Patty Cake simply add to the pleasure.~NF

SNARF

Kitchen Sink: *15 issues 1972-1981 (1-9), 1987-1990 (10-15)*

This underground anthology was initially a rather tepid collection of counterculture humour and knockabout funny-animal strips enlivened only by the beautiful art of publisher Denis Kitchen. 4, however, featured a short strip from Howard Cruse, who, from 5-9, would dominate the comic, growing in stature and sophistication from issue to issue. Other top-flight contributors attracted to the revitalised title included Justin Green (6-8) and Kim Deitch (7-9), although lesser-known talents like Robert Armstrong (6), Steve Stiles and Sharon Rudahl all contributed work of note.

Snarf's second run drew upon a different generation of cartoonists for its material, though again Howard Cruse weighed in with several superb strips in 10-12. To its credit, the comic admirably promoted then unknown creators like Chester Brown (10), Dennis Worden (11, 12) and Mary Fleener (10), along with the still undeservedly obscure Mark Landman (11, 12, 14, 15). Established cartoonists Rand Holmes (11) and Foolbert Sturgeon (12-14) also contributed fine work, but the star of the comic was Joe Matt. Matt's hilarious, if tortured, autobiographical strips appeared in *Snarf*'s last five issues and still make riveting reading today. They're available collected as *Peep Show*, the title of his later solo comic. Some issues are inevitably a bit patchy, but there's at least some quality entertainment in every one.~DAR
Recommended: 6-8, 10-15

SNARL

Caliber: *3 issue miniseries 1990*

Eccentric, dark humour comic featuring parallel stories set in the dismal metropolis of Plungetown. The lead strip 'Eaters' has vampire private eye Caleb Steel hunting down a mad scientist who is mutating fish into man-eating ghetto prowlers. 'Dog' has a Batman-like hero in a canine mask attempting to escape the nefarious plans of Victor Quasimodo, a multi-millionaire who needs man's best hero to advertise his dog food. Wacky but seldom entertaining comedy from Kevin Atkinson.~WW

SNOOKY FUDGE

Threshold: *One-shot 1993*

A compilation of newspaper-style strips by cartoonist Dave King. *Snooky Fudge* stars Hoo Hoo, the stupidest boy in the world, and his painfully intelligent cat Spap. The cat's disdainful thought balloons explain Hoo Hoo's mistaking of a cooker for a time-machine, for example ("Ouch! history hot!") and his scatological sense of humour. Very funny.~SW

SNOW QUEEN

Caliber: *One-shot 1997*

Stylish take on the classic Hans Christian Andersen tale of a young girl searching for a boy whose heart has been pierced by a splinter from the mirror of the Queen of Snowflakes. Insightful and very readable exploration of loss and redemption that remembers that in a too-saccharine world it's okay to be sad sometimes, skillfully adapted by Mitchell Perkins and George Broderick. A treat for all ages.~WW
Recommended

Walt Disney's SNOW WHITE and the Seven Dwarfs

Marvel: *One-shot 1995*

To tie-in with the cinema re-release of Disney's *Snow White* film Marvel republished the 1937 comic *Four Color* 49. What a beauty it is. The sadly anonymous artist has a gorgeous

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* Available in a collected edition

expressive technique, albeit looking charmingly dated now, and if some of the plot nuances were sacrificed to the format it's still very readable. The cover painting, again anonymous, is also excellent, and the package is rounded out with a seven dwarves strip. Should be enjoyed by adults and children alike, preferably together.~FP
Recommended

THE SNOWMAN

Hamish Hamilton: *1 volume 1978*
Puffin Books: *1 volume 1978*

For two generations now British children have spent each Christmas glued to their television transfixed by *The Snowman* cartoon. It was adapted from this, which has also become something of an institution, remaining in print for twenty-five years. The story is simplicity itself: a young boy builds a snowman who comes to life during the night; the pair get up to all sorts of hijinks and end up flying through the sky. This being Raymond Briggs, the sentimentality is abruptly subverted by the ending, and it would take a hard heart indeed not to be affected by the poignancy of it all. Thankfully there is none of the mawkishness of the cartoon, although the sense of joy, wonder and innocence transferred successfully. Briggs illustrates in a beguiling combination of coloured pencils and crayons, and his storytelling is so masterful that words are not required. For children there can be no finer introduction to the comic medium, and for adults there's much to enjoy and appreciate even after the 100th time!~DAR
Recommended

SNOWMAN

Hall of Heroes: *3 issue miniseries 1995-1996*
Entity: *3 issue miniseries ('1944') 1996-1997*
Avatar: *One-shot ('0') 1997*, 3 issue miniseries ('Dead and Dying') 1998*, 2 issue microseries ('2') 1998*, one-shot ('1944 Special') 1998, one-shot ('Horror Show') 1998, one-shot ('Flurries') 1999*

A snow demon exists in Silvercreek Colorado, the result of a Native American curse, and he emerges on killing sprees in the present (first series), and World War II ('1944'). Further series include guest stars Nira X, and the characters from Vortex, and the story continues in *Threshold*. Co-creator, Cameron Enders, joins Matt Martin to tell '1944', otherwise, it's all by Martin. His artwork is detailed, and there is plenty of violence (and some nudity in the Avatar issues), but there are gaps in the storytelling, and what might have been an interesting horror title is thrown away with the insertion of superheroes.~NF

SOBA

Drawn and Quarterly: *One-shot 1998*

Joe Sacco profiles the eccentric Soba, musician, artist and planter of landmines during the war in Bosnia. He's complex, seemingly depressive, and shaped both by artistic and physical conflict. While providing the effects of the war in Bosnia in microcosm this lacks the impact and gravitas of *Safe Area Goradze*, to which it's a prelude.~WJ

SOCK MONKEY

Dark Horse: *2 issue microseries 1998, 2 issue microseries 1999, 2 issue microseries 2000*

The product of Tony Millionaire's unique imagination, the Sock Monkey has become a left-field phenomenon, spawning toys, lighters, lunch boxes and children's books. Sock Monkey first appeared in Millionaire's alternative comic strip, 'Maakies', and this comic shares the same combination of elegant drawing, florid and antiquated language, and a genuinely troubling undertone. With hints of Windsor McCay's beautiful line drawing and the stilted formality of Victorian children's books, the comic is superficially a charming series of tales about the Sock Monkey, his friend Mr Crow and all manner of little creatures. Yet it also contains scenes of real terror and the sort of casual violence of childhood pranks gone wrong so that, while this title will not be for everyone (particularly children, despite appearance), it is undoubtedly the product of a genuinely inspired vision.~DAR

SOF'BOY AND FRIENDS

Drawn & Quarterly: *2 issues 1997-1998**

Our hero, a malleable blob of ectoplasm who somewhat resembles the Pillsbury Dough Boy, is an innocent abroad in the mean streets of Chicago. Sof'Boy constantly suffers verbal and physical abuse from the city's' mean-minded citizens, but literally bounces back by dispensing good cheer and kind thoughts, finding pleasure in the simple things in life, or hanging out with his cute animal pals Pidgy and Herbie. Creator Archer Prewitt is perhaps better known for his day job as a member of post-rock group The Sea and Cake, but on this showing he's an equally talented cartoonist. His clean, sharply detailed art style works well with a gift for sinister surrealism that subtly undermines and complicates the strip's smooth surfaces.~AL
Recommended: 1-2

SOJOURN

White Cliffs: *2 issues 1977*

Sojourn was an enormous tabloid-sized publication that featured a number of fine serials in three-page instalments, rather in the manner of British weekly comics. Publisher Joe Kubert revived his caveman feature Tor, and other contributors included Doug Wildey, Sergio Aragonés, Lee Elias and John Severin. The material was uniformly fine, but the format was obviously too different for readers of the time. While the bulk of the stories remained frustratingly unfinished, the Elias and Severin strips, respectively 'Kronos' and 'Eagle', were reprinted and concluded in Warren's *Rook*.~DAR
Recommended: 1, 2

SOJOURN

CrossGen: *Prequel, 17 issues + 2001 to date*

Three centuries prior to the start of this meandering fantasy the evil Warlord Mordath that terrorised this psuedo-medieval land was slain. Oh dear, he's been resurrected and reclaimed his former position. The series starts when Mordath's trolls murder the husband and daughter of Arwyn, our busty blond heroine. Accompanied by her nice doggy and worldly-wise rogue Gareth she seeks revenge on Mordath via a quest for the scattered pieces of an antique arrow. This good-looking comic is pencilled by talented Greg Land and well produced all round. The effective blend of sword and sorcery clichés is only marred by the increasingly repetitious scripts by Ron Marz. It took a dozen issues to find the first of the five pieces of the arrow, so try tuning in at about 59 with hopes of a finale. In the meantime CrossGen are issuing collections every six issues or so.~GK

SOLAR, MAN OF THE ATOM

Valiant: *60 issues 1991-1996*

In the 1960s Gold Key published a comic called *Doctor Solar, Man of the Atom* about a physicist who was exposed to strange radiation and acquired powers over molecular structure along with a skintight red suit. It was all good clean fun. The Valiant story is rather more complicated. The protagonist is Doctor Philip Seleski, designer of a nuclear reactor about to start operating. A fault develops and in coming to the rescue, Seleski is exposed to radiation and develops powers over energy. As his abilities increase to god-like levels and he becomes distanced from humans, he makes an error of judgement that wipes out the planet. These are the events that take place in Timeline A, recounted in a gripping, vivid insert story called 'Alpha and Omega' in 1-10, written by Jim Shooter with artwork by Barry Windsor-Smith and Bob Layton.

Seleski survives the events in Timeline A and travels back in time to try to stop any of it happening. The events in the main comic, written by Jim Shooter and pencilled by Don Perlin, start with his arrival in Timeline B some time before the accident with the reactor. Soon after arrival he turns into Doctor Solar – or into his own idealised version of his hero from his favourite childhood comic – and he later switches between Seleski and Solar as appropriate. There's more to it than that, but strict accuracy would give too much away.

However, no sooner is Timeline B saved from his error of judgement than he discovers that Earth is under threat from alien spiders. He leaves Earth for a year to fight them in space, then returns and attempts to live a normal life as a physicist. That pretty much exhausts the initial supply of plot, and from 16 onwards, with Jim Shooter gone, it's like almost any other superhero comic, shambling from issue to issue. Somehow, though, it keeps you turning the pages, even after the third crossover with other Valiant titles, where the final episode occurs in the other title, and even after the seven-millionth (or so it seems) reappearance of the alien spiders. Why does it still work, at any level? It's probably the soap-opera aspects – will he and his girlfriend stay together? How will they get on in their new jobs? – and the fact that his power remains unsettling and distancing. The stories never follow through on any of the ideas, but at least the ideas are there.~FC

Recommended: 1-10

SOLAR, Man of the Atom: Hell on Earth

Acclaim: *4 issue miniseries 1998*

The conclusion to the first year of plotlines running through all the Acclaim universe titles. Frank and Helena Seleski, in their combined form of Solar, accidentally destroy Seoul as the mysterious Jimmy Six drops a jumbo jet on the Holy city of Mecca, throwing the world into chaos. Heroes gather at the behest of the Eternal Warriors, who have a weapon that will destroy Solar. As the Armageddon countdown continues, it becomes apparent that the End of the World is just a bonus in a revenge-plot that spans all of time and a pretty big portion of Space. Christopher Priest, Patrick Zircher and ChrissCross pull it all together quite well and it's great not to have to buy three dozen spin-offs to get the full story. Worth a look.~WW

SOLAR LORD

Image: *7 issue limited series 1999**

The hero Nickson is infused with the might of the god Zeus in order to become Solar Lord, champion of planet Earth. Calling in a debt of honour, Lord Tygarr gambles that a newly-minted demi-god can cope with the onslaught of the Emperor of Darkness' forces. The destructive open ending in 7 promises a further series. Legendary Hong Kong comic maker Khoo Fuk Lung is given full rein production-wise here, but his style, so suited to spectacular effects from cheap printing, palls after awhile. The translated script is rewritten by James Hudnall.~SW

SOLAR STELLA

Sirius: *One-shot 2000*

J. Bone writes and draws this humourous space opera, featuring Solar Stella as a clean-cut version of Barbarella. Though beautifully drawn in cartoony, slick brush-line, and with fun stuff such as cut-out Stella paper doll and clothes, the story is thin and the jokes somewhat lacking. Still, almost worth your money for the artwork alone.~DB

SOLARMAN

Marvel: *2 issues 1990*

Light-hearted comics the way they used to be, written by Stan Lee the way they used to be. A flying hero whose power cuts out when clouds obscure the sun: it's as well he's located in California, not Washington State.~FP

SOLDIER X

Marvel: *4 issues + 2002 to date*

Set two years after Cable was last seen in his own title, he's a soldier without a purpose until he's contacted by his old mentor Blaquesmith and given a new name and a mission to find an Armenian girl. That Cable required a change of focus isn't questioned, but this is merely refried *Punisher* material. Artist Igor Kordey's striking covers are the best aspect of the comic.~WJ

SOLITAIRE

Malibu: *12 issues 1993-1994*

After failing to commit suicide Nicholas Lone, son of evil businessman Anton Lone, is brought back to life with his father's nanotech engineering, microcomputers that "rebuild and replace traumatized tissue". Assuming the identity of Solitaire, a martial-arts expert able to survive shotgun blasts, Nicholas attempts to bring down Anton's corrupt empire. A late addition to the Ultraverse group of titles, *Solitaire* benefits from strong artwork by Jeffs Johnson and Parker. Writer Gerard Jones tries to spice things up with oddball villains (The Degenerate, Double Edge) and some purple prose. No amount of fancy rendering or garish computer colour, however, can disguise the fact that this is an extremely ordinary vigilante series. Nothing much is made of the potentially interesting father-and-son conflict, while towards the end the comic becomes unexpectedly hostile towards women.~AL

The Green Hornet SOLITARY SENTINEL

Now: *3 issue miniseries 1992-1993*

The 1990s Green Hornet combats City Hall corruption while all his allies are out of action. But wait, who's this mysterious Black Hornet fellow? There's a decent plot that isn't entirely diluted by slapdash artwork, although there's seemingly no reason it couldn't have been part of the regular series.~WJ

SOLO

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1994*

Described as a one-man anti-terrorist strikeforce, Solo is heavily armed, has teleporting capabilities, and, for those that care, his past unravels here. The early appearance of the acronymical A.R.E.S. (Assassination, Revolution, Extortion and Sabotage) organisation warns that intelligence and originality are going to be at a premium, and so it proves. As if in implicit acknowledgement of *Solo* being a poor premise and of poor quality, Spider-Man is an equal participant throughout.~FP

SOLO AVENGERS Starring HAWKEYE

Marvel: *20 issues 1987-1989*

Hawkeye is the title feature, but the comic also includes back-ups spotlighting another Avenger. 1 sets the tone for this schizophrenic title, featuring some of Jim Lee's earliest Marvel art, inked by Al Williamson, on the Mockingbird back-up, and having Hawkeye fight a bunch of clowns at the circus in the lead. It's an introduction to his origin and sequel thereto in 2-5, rectifying a twenty-year-old continuity conundrum. Under Tom DeFalco and Mark Bright in 1-12 the Hawkeye feature is an undemanding superhero strip. He fights villains, he cracks jokes, and he's duffed up by the wife. DeFalco loses the plot somewhat from 14, with a particularly stupid A.I.M. appearance in 16, but after he leaves things become rapidly worse.

The back-ups are one-shot stories, and a largely uninspirational bunch. Females come in for the best treatment. John Ridgway draws a nice Scarlet Witch (5), in a silly tale returning Jon Kowalski from *War Is Hell*, and Bob Layton produces a touching Black Widow story in 7. J.M. DeMatteis and June Brigman deliver the best of the run with Hellcat, in 9, and there's a fun Chris Claremont and Alan Davis She-Hulk in 14. That's under a stunning Sandy Plunkett cover, and Plunkett, with Scott Hampton, provides a Black Panther story in 19 that, while not entirely successful, is at least well considered and drawn. The other decent male solo outing stars Hercules (again by Layton) in 12. There's a break with formula in 16, 18 and 20, which have a poor continuing story returning Moondragon. The title became *Avengers Spotlight* with 21.~WJ

The Sword of SOLOMON KANE

Marvel: *6 issues 1985-1986*

Ralph Macchio's writing isn't particularly stupid, but it is in no way outstanding. Unless one's just read it, one generally has a problem recalling a single moment from one of his comics. Go on, give it try. There's never the nice crafting of a line, a clever plot twist, or even an anachronistic curse to stick in the memory. And *The Sword of Solomon Kane* is no exception. Robert E. Howard's globe-trotting Puritan is

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* Available in a collected edition

Marvel's least favourite Howard character because although he can protect the odd quavering maiden he can't rip her top off. Here he hunts an evil bandit from rural France to Africa, pops back for some werewolf action, has an Arabian nightmare (nicely drawn by Mike Mignola) in 4, and finishes up in Africa again for the series' unexciting conclusion.~FJ

SOLSTICE

Watermark: *2 issues 1995*

Russell Waterhouse is a man possessed by the idea of attaining eternal life, and follows any leads to the legendary fountain of youth, accompanied by his son Hugh, about whom he's particularly scathing. Riddled with cancer, Russell plans a final expedition to Chile, and it costs him his life. *Solstice* is Hugh's story, yet despite dying on the second page of the first issue Russell looms over the story, as Hugh recalls incidents from his past. Russell is brutal, arrogant and single-minded, dominating his son and inculcating feelings of inferiority. He's the equal of any costumed villain to be found in comics – a masterful creation from writer Stephen Seagle. The Grail aspect of the story is secondary to Hugh's development, free of his father and able to become master of his own destiny, yet there's enough incident and horror to ensure a compelling read. Justin Norman's art is oddly misproportioned and static, yet conveys the necessary emotion when called upon to do so. The third and concluding issue never appeared, but should the planned collected edition ever be published *Solstice* ought to be a compulsory purchase for anyone interested in adult comics.~FP

Recommended: 1-2

THE SOLUTION

Malibu: *18 issues (0-17) 1993-1995*

The scripts for this were seemingly phoned in by James Hudnall to be drawn by such second-rate pencillers as Darick Robertson (1-4) and John Statema (most issues thereafter until the series finally ground to a halt). Part of the Ultraverse, The Solution are a by-the-numbers superteam who undertake covert operations against all kinds of villainy. Their chief enemies are the evil Dragon Fang, the world's largest Triad, who have taken over the company that once belonged to Lela Cho, aka Tech, leader of *The Solution*. Most of the background to this dull feud is explained in 6, but only partially resolved by 17, making The Solution a painfully protracted read. If you do want to sample, 6 is the best place, detailing the origin of Tech. She pays $5 million for implanted enhancements that enable her to control electronic machinery, and discovers hitherto unrevealed unarmed-combat expertise when faced with a room full of gangsters. Yes, it's all that good.~AL

SOME TROUBLE OF A SERRIOUS NATURE

Crusade: *One-shot 2001*

No, that's not a spelling mistake in the title. Well, it is, but creator Bill Tucci has taken it directly from the hoax letter that prompted this comic. It was sent by a pilot after World War II ended, written as if an Arkansas yokel, allegedly accounting for their wrecking an air force plane. The letter is reprinted in the back of the comic, is hilarious, and worth the price of the comic alone. Tucci attempts to adapt it, isn't satisfied, and promises instead to dramatise the letter for DVD release. Good luck to him.~WJ

SOMERSET HOLMES

Pacific: *4 issues 1983-1984**

Eclipse: *2 issues (5-6) 1984**

Psychological thriller with more twists and turns than a rollercoaster, and a similar idea of pacing, co-plotted by Bruce Jones and April Campbell and gorgeously illustrated by Brent Anderson. A woman comes to on a quiet country road after a hit-and-run accident, unable to remember how she got there or who she is. Her only clue is the label sewn into her skirt, and a key. All she knows is that people keep trying to capture or kill her, and very few of those who befriend her can be trusted. Jones and Campbell unfold shock after shock – a real Hitchcockian puzzler. All six issues feature a Cliff Hanger back-up (by Jones alone). The plots, in homage to Republic-style serials, may be hoary but Al Williamson's artwork is excellent. The man was born to draw lean heroes, gutsy lady explorers and evil Nazis in lush jungle settings.~FJ

Recommended: 1-6

Fright featuring SON OF DRACULA

Atlas: *1 issue 1975*

By the time Atlas began publishing comics Dracula was towards the end of a slow slide from icon of terror to staple of spoofs, but even that doesn't excuse a strip titled 'Son of Dracula' in which the protagonist assumes the identity of Mr A. Lucard. For once Frank Thorne isn't drawing busty babes, but the story is total kack.~WJ

SON OF MUTANT WORLD

Fantagor: *5 issue limited series 1990*

Originally in colour (1, 2) but forced into black and white for financial reasons, Jan Strnad and Richard Corben's sequel to *Mutant World* is much what you would expect: one girl and her grizzly bear, a man in a balloon with a bird, a father and son looking for food and a band of mutants out to destroy what little there is left of civilisation. It's good fun, told firmly tongue-in-cheek, but Corben's artwork suffers in 3-5, since it was clearly meant to be in colour and the printing is too dark or too light, obscuring the quality of line and removing much of the detail. There's a Bruce Jones back-up strip in each issue, the first four of which tell EC-style tales from a woman's perspective. Miscellaneous other Corben material fills out the rest of each issue.~NF

SON OF SATAN

Marvel: *8 issues 1975-1977*

Try calling a series that these days! Popular enough to graduate from *Marvel Spotlight* into his own series, the Son of Satan (honestly) was a curious fusion of superhero and horror elements that never quite mesh. He was later given some real wallop as *Hellstorm*.~WJ

SON OF THE GUN

Humanoids: *4 Volumes 2001*

'Born in the Trash' introduces Juan, abandoned because he's born with a tail, and rescued from dogs by a dwarf, who suckles him on a stolen pistol. He grows up on the streets, eventually leading a small gang of petty criminals until he betrays them for a position with the Prime Minister's bodyguards. In 'The President's Dogs', Juan becomes leader of the bodyguards and, after the death of the Prime Minister's daughter, personal bodyguard to his wife, Laura, and son. 'Flesh and Filth' reveals secrets about Juan's parentage, leaving him on the run from the remaining bodyguards, and in 'Sinner and Saint', lost in the desert, Juan has a final chance for redemption. Written by Alexandro Jodorowsky and drawn by Georges Bess, this is a compelling exploration of the human condition, if not, at the end, entirely convincing in the characters of Laura and Juan, but beautifully drawn.~NF

SON OF VULCAN

Charlton: *2 issues (49, 50) 1965-1966*

Johnny Mann, reporter, is speaking aloud while contemplating a classical ruin on "Cyprete": "You, the gods of ancient Olympus – why do you permit man to wage stupid wars?" The gods are angry at being blamed for human faults, and transport him to their Council Hall for judgement. He stands up for himself, and Vulcan takes his side, and they end up giving him armour, superpowers, and a mission in the war against evil. It's an original start, but thereafter he behaves like any other superhero, and the only evil he seems to find is Dr Kong, the Meanest Man Alive (a Fu Manchu figure). On this level it's good, clean fun, with above-average humour and imagination. The series starts with 49, inheriting the numbering from *Mysteries of Unexplored Worlds*, and that issue is the comics writing début of Roy Thomas.~FC

SONAMBULO

9th Circle Studios: *3 issue miniseries 1996-1999*, one-shot (Sonambulo's Strange Tales) 2000, one-shot ('Ghost of a Chance') 2002*

Taking almost four years to complete a miniseries won't win Rafael Navarro any plaudits for speed, but originality and talent are another matter. By slipping a masked Mexican wrestler into a film noir script Navarro concocted something new. Now a detective, Sonambulo is helped by being able to derive clues through reading people's dreams, and in the miniseries has to find a missing senator's daughter. The sombre mood is maintained to the end, but the plot rather falls apart in 3. The three stories in *Strange Tales*, one text and illustration, have a supernatural edge with Navarro showcasing a variety of approaches, after which the plodding 'Ghost of a Chance' is a great disappointment. Navarro is an excellent artist with a visually striking character, and a decent writer to boot, so crime comic fans can do far worse than seek out the first four issues.~FP

SONIC DISRUPTORS

DC: *7 issues 1988*

Destined to be a cult, but instead fizzled out. This concerns a future where rock music is banned in a puritan USA, and where musicians set up their own countries (the Republic of Rock); there are also orbiting radio stations, an Elvis Presley lookalike and a DJ called Sheik Rattle Enroll (you have to laugh). Plenty more interesting characters, both good and bad, come together for a convoluted plot. Just when things are starting to get interesting, the plug was pulled. Originally planned as a twelve-issue limited series, *Sonic Disruptors* was cancelled for "production reasons". Bit of a shame, really. Suggested for mature readers: sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll come to comics. Well, actually not much sex. Never mind, though, because this quirky series, written by Mike Baron and illustrated by Barry Crain and John Nyberg, still deserves some attention.~HY

Chilling Adventures in SORCERY

Red Circle: *5 issues 1972-1974*

After two issues bizarrely illustrated in the Archie house style this horror title featured some well drawn if overly wordy stories before changing title to *Red Circle Sorcery* with 6. Gray Morrow edited, wrote and drew all of issue 3, producing some of his finest work in the process. Morrow was also present in the final two issues, but they were dominated by the excellent Vincente Alcazar, who brought a moody sophistication to the title. Dick Giordano's characteristically fine work in 4 only adds to a delightful package that comes highly recommended.~DAR

Recommended: 3-5

Red Circle SORCERY

Red Circle: *6 issues (6-11) 1974-1975*

Previously *Chilling Adventures in Sorcery*, this comic also contained a succession of beautifully drawn, if sometimes overwritten, short mystery tales. Editor Gray Morrow had art in almost every issue, as did the talented Spanish artists Vincente Alcazar and Carlos Pino. Other talents included Howard Chaykin (6, 10), Frank Thorne (8, 10) and the little-known Ed Davis in 8. 7's 'The Rival' was a nice prohibition-era story enlivened by Bruce Jones' art, in which he was aided by friends Berni Wrighton, Mike Kaluta and Jeff Jones. Alex Toth drew a story for 8, and 9's 'If I Were King' was a typically quirky role-reversal story, written by Marv Channing, and was the highpoint of the run. The otherwise unknown Channing wrote most stories, although there were contributions from Steve Skeates and Don Glut. This was never particularly challenging, or frightening, but the art elevates it beyond just a good read.~DAR

Recommended: 6-11

S.O.S.

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1992*

Chloe is adrift on a raft after her ship has sunk. She writes an S.O.S. message to her family, and despatches it in a bottle, but will the circling shark get to her before the rescue party? About independence and the growth of self-confidence one presumes, but mostly one suspects about a cute Chinese girl sunbathing in the nude and wrapping threads around her nipples. Maybe if the castaway had been Colin instead of Chloe, Mark Kalesniko would have given his nipples the thread-treatment too – and it would still be a pretty but pretentious story.~FC

SOUL QUEST

Innovation: *One-shot 1989*

This is a fantasy about Sketch, the Royal Artist, whose portrait of the villainous Blackshard is planned by the King and his wizard to be the weapon that will defeat him. When Blackshard learns of the plot, he steals Sketch's talent and threatens his wife and daughter, but Sketch has an unexpected ally in the form of Mirage, a guardian of the gateway in the form of a horse. This is competently drawn by Glen Johnson, but there's little characterisation in a plot-heavy script. It was published by Sirius in shorter form as the one-shot 'Against Blackshard 3-D' in 1986.~NF

SOUL SAGA

Image: *5 issues + 2000 to date*

When demons attack a royal transport, guardsman Aries saves Princess Persephone's life at the cost of his sister's. Persephone is suitably grateful, but has higher ambitions and if that means consorting with demons, so be it. Stephen Platt moves squarely into Frazetta territory and his fans won't care that this is cliché-ridden nonsense, the only purpose of which is to let Platt drawn pin-up pages of demons and under-dressed women. 1-2 were reissued in a single collected edition. There hasn't been an issue for some while, so maybe it's dead. We can hope.~FP

SOULSEARCHERS AND COMPANY

Claypool: *57 issues + 1993 to date*

In the sleepy Connecticut town of Mystic Grove, a band of fearless supernatural investigators has arisen to do battle with lurking eldritch menaces. This courageous team consists of a failed Olympic athlete with an enchanted vaulting pole, a horny Arabic fire demon, a flaky teenage apprentice witch, a monstrously shapeshifting gypsy youth, an accountant with a bottomless carpet bag, and the firm's proprietor, currently a rodent, due to complications from a previous case. As you may gather, *Soulsearchers* isn't an entirely straight-faced series. Peter David's scripts for 1-10, were both witty and articulate, and artists Amanda Conner and Jim Mooney perfectly complementary. Mooney's inks add depth to Conner's work while losing none of her trademark expression and vitality. Sadly, after 10 the title lost focus. Conner left, (though she continues to draw all the covers, which remain amongst the better designed and most appealing in the field) and David seemed to flounder, going for cheap and easy parody rather than the charismatic blend of character-driven stories and atrocious puns that had graced the comic.

Things began to pick up when Dave Cockrum joined as regular penciller, and the outstanding 17 put it right back on top form with a genuinely shocking revelation for one of the team. Cockrum remained until 45 (with a couple of stellar guest fill-ins by Dan Spiegle on 36 and Marie Severin on 31). Since then the series has been plagued by less competent replacements, which is a shame, as while never returning to its former standards, there is much to commend.

The title has inventive plots, a likeable cast, vivid comedy characterisation, and a romantic relationship between Bridget and Baraka (the aforementioned athlete and demon), which seems to be progressing and developing, rather than stagnating in the great comics tradition. If they can solve the artistic problem, *Soulsearchers* remains one to watch. ~HS

Recommended: 1-10, 17

SOULWIND

Image: *8 issues 1997*

Oni Press: *5 volumes 1998-2001*

This enigmatic yet engrossing story by writer/artist C. Scott Morse lasted only two story arcs in its first run. In the first, an abducted Earth boy is erroneously hailed as the hero of a bunch of animals on a distant planet, where a malevolent exile lurks. In the second, a couple in 1938 run into supernatural events when on their way to seek an illegal abortion. *Soulwind* is difficult to describe; a summary makes it sound pedestrian, but the inventiveness of Morse's dialogue and the evocative, atmospheric quality of his art styles (different ones for both story arcs, and the framing sequences), make it a fascinating, yet frustrating, read. It's obscure, yes, but not just from a desire to drag things out. Fortunately, after the failure of the Image series, Oni Press took over, re-releasing the Image issues as digest-sized graphic novels, and following up with a further three volumes to conclude the series. A synopsis of the series would be difficult without giving too much away, and a reversion to fantasy-based 'easy options' mars the final two volumes, so unreserved approval is not possible, but it does reward attention.~HS

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* Available in a collected edition

SOUTHERN KNIGHTS

Guild: *7 issues 1983-1985**
Comics Interview: *26 issues (8-33) 1985-1988*

Known for the first issue only as *The Crusaders*, Henry and Audrey Vogel's quartet of unlikely superbeings was slammed with a lawsuit from Archie, who had just revived their superheroic Mighty Crusaders. With Ms Vogel departing early on, Vogel retitled his comic more inventively *Southern Knights*, and wrote an amusing riposte to the lawsuit in 26, once *The Mighty Crusaders* had again ceased publication. Electrode (master of electricity), Dragon (a were-dragon who occasionally becomes human), Connie (wielder of a psychic sword) and Kristin, the strongest teenybopper in the world, had low-key but likeable adventures. Often the concerns were domestic rather than heroic, and the team would frequently explore and investigate, solving puzzles and mysteries rather than being content to break heads, though that they could do perfectly adequately. Beyond the core team there are odd supporting characters, such as a 17th-century teenage sorcerer attempting to adapt to life in the 1980s. There's a commendable variety to the stories, with Vogel throwing in other-dimensional fantasies, Cold War spy tales, straight superhero battles, aliens and parodies of how other companies would handle his heroes. Founding artist Jackson (then Butch) Guice left the series shortly after its début, leaving Henry to provide entertaining scripts with a variety of artists. The longest running was Mark Lamport, from 19 to the conclusion, but Chuck Wojtkiewicz (5-11, 26) and Mark Propst (12-18) also provided artwork very much in tune with the writing. Space fantasy back-up strip 'Missing Beings' from 7-9 was later collected as a one-shot.~HS

SOUTHERN SQUADRON

Aircel: *4 issue miniseries 1990*
Eternity: *4 issue miniseries ('The Freedom of Information Act') 1992*

Claimed to have outsold the *X-Men* in their original Australian incarnation, the Southern Squadron is a witty and irreverent superteam containing the ghastly, definitely non-PC Nightfighter. The first issue is little more than a set-up and elongated fight scene, albeit one with quite a few jokes, but beyond that writer David DeVries manages to turn in offbeat and unpredictable stuff every time. Artists Gary Chaloner (lead strip) and Glenn Lumsden (back-ups, with Paul Gulacy in Aircel 3) look to be enjoying the material as well. It's a great shame their American début was a small-circulation title, although one highly praised in introductions by pros in the know, and these are worth searching out. The Eternity series offers some short stories in 1 and 2, then presents the never previously published conclusion to the full-length tale in 3. Lumsden takes over as lead artist, now modelling his art very much on Gulacy, and continuing the tradition of casting celebrities as villains and supporting characters. The DeVries drawn stories are less satisfactory, with his style sometimes rising above some shaky foreshortening and anatomy and sometimes not. Thankfully his scripts are every bit as funny, and in 4 he proves he can write a horrific story without a joke.~WJ

Recommended: Aircel 2-4, Eternity 1, 3, 4

SOVEREIGN SEVEN

DC: *36 issues, 2 Annuals, 1 Special (Plus The Legion of Superheroes) 1995-1998*

The Sovereign Seven are Cascade, Indigo, Rampart, Network, Finale, Cruiser and Reflex, refugees from different versions of Earth, fleeing the Rapture, which has consumed those worlds. The team lands in the town of Crossroads and an inn run by sisters, Pansy Smith and Violet Jones for an initial conflict with the Female Furies, before they discover that the inn contains portals to other worlds and Cascade is magically transformed into Nike and attempts to breach the doors that keep her mother, Maitresse, imprisoned (2-3). A super-powered serial killer, Skin Dance (4-5), an international paramilitary team, Force Majeure (6-8) and the demonic Dystopia, working for Neron (10-12), are all part of a fast-paced first year. Villain, Triage is introduced in 13-14, while 15-18 are a tie-in to *The Final Night*, with the title *S7* becoming more prominent on the cover. Cascade has a brief backup on her own in Metropolis, romancing Clark Kent (19-23) before the aid of Superman is needed to help the team against Siege, Snapshot and Triage (24). Power Girl is rescued from possession by Nike in 25, remaining with the team until the end of the series and Hitman makes his usual amusing appearance in 26. 27 is a Genesis crossover, with Cascade and her mother trading places and a return bout with the Female Furies. The loss of a team member (29-31) leads to Power Girl's formal acceptance within the team before the series draws to a close with a final battle against the Rapture (32-36). The first Annual includes guests, Lobo and Big Barda on a Year One theme, but the Legends of Dead Earth story in 2 is unremarkable. In the Special, Saturn Girl turns up from the future, hunting Network, who has been remembered as a terrorist. This is very much the story of these two telepaths, rather than a clash of teams, and all the better for it.

Creators, Chris Claremont and Dwayne Turner, start well, but never really flesh out these heroes, spending more effort on the supporting characters, like Sheriff Molly Savoy and her son, Conal. There's a lack of coherence in the storytelling with abrupt shifts of narrative and emphasis, and short cuts to a story's conclusion. Turner's dynamic artwork is pleasing enough (1-12, 15-16), but the work of his replacement, Ron Lim (13-14, 17-19, 21-36), lacks his fluidity and attention to detail.~NF

SOVIET SUPER SOLDIERS

Marvel: *One-shot 1992*

Poor teaming of all Marvel's Soviet superpowered characters, with the notable exception of the Black Widow, who presumably had more sense than to involve herself. Assorted factions bring their dispute to New York, while the Soviet mutants just want to be left in peace. This doesn't appear to be an option, as a baldy man with a big gun and cybernetic eye is killing them one by one. Curiously incomplete at the finish, this reads like a miniseries contracted to fill a one-shot. Don't bother unless Marvel's Soviet characters really push your buttons.~FP

SPACE: Above and Beyond

Topps: *3 issue miniseries 1996**

Well above average adaptation of the TV show pilot episode. The 21st-century equivalent of the Marines have to protect a planet colonised by Earth, but now under attack, and events develop from there. Roy Thomas has a good script to work with, and the art team of Yanick Paquette and Armando Gil convey a humanity whether dealing with battles or quieter moments.~WJ

SPACE ADVENTURES

Charlton: *Series one 59 issues 1952-1956 (1-21), 1958-1964 (23-59), 1967 (60), series two 12 issues 1968-1969 (2-8), 1978-1979 (9-13)*

1-14 issues are pre-comics code so a horror element occurs in many stories, while 10 and 11 feature some really early Steve Ditko art, his covers to 10 and 12 being classics of the time. 14 reprints Fox *Blue Beetle* stories. Post-code issues starred TV spaceman Rocky Jones in 15-18 and 'Destination Moon' in 20, originally drawn for Fawcett. The title changed to *War at Sea* for 22, and a year and a half later a relaunched *Space Adventures* picked up the numbering of *Nyoka* with 23 and joined Charlton's late 1950s boom with more 'Destination Moon'. Science fiction doesn't seem to have inspired many of Charlton's regulars, the artists in particular. Fortunately the scripts by Joe Gill, Ernie Hart, Carl Memling, Ralph Newman are occasionally drawn by an enthusiastic Steve Ditko. Stories of interest include 27's 'The Moon Snatchers' signed 'Space Mann' by Ditko and 'The Enchanted Planet' one of Gill and Ditko's space fantasies in 31. *Space Adventures*' main claim to fame is the debut of Captain Atom in 1960. As Captain Adam of the USAF he is accidentally blown up inside a nuclear missile. Upon re-integrating his body by force of will he discovers that he is immensely powerful... and radioactive! His adventures as a US secret weapon during the cold war of the 1960s are dated and a tad doctrinaire but Gill and Ditko do a terrific job on the 15 stories that appear in 33-40 and 42. When Captain Atom was given his own title his replacement was the feeble Mercury Man (44-45), an alien hero actually made of mercury. The run up to 59 is stultifyingly poor, but the revival in 60, with 'U.F.O' as the main logo, is a good read from Denny O'Neil and Jim Aparo among others.

The following year the title began new numbering with 2 and a new array of science fiction fare punctuated by the occasional decent story by Steve Skeates, O'Neil and Gill drawn by Ditko, Aparo and Pat Boyette. Denny O'Neil's serial 'Paul Mann and the Saucers of Tomorrow' drawn by Ditko, Boyette and Aparo in 2 is well worth reading. The title reappeared in 1978 providing welcome reprints of all the original Captain Atom stories in 9-12, 13 being a reprint of *Charlton Premiere* 4.~SW

Recommended: Series one 10, 31, 60, series two 2

SPACE BEAVER

Ten-Buck: *11 issues 1986-1988**

First thing, frat boy, Warren Ellis has made all the jokes better than you could in the introduction to the reprint collection. What we have here is your classic space adventure revenge fantasy populated by animals with human traits and created by Darick Robertson while still learning his craft. While his art was promising, the contrast between these issues and the conclusion completed for the second AIT published collection is immense. Don't let that deter you from sampling a well-crafted adventure romp owing a lot to *Star Wars* (although with a weaker female lead).~WJ

SPACE CIRCUS

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 2000**

Teenager Todd Cooper sneaks aboard the space circus, which has landed on Earth for repairs, and at first appears fundamentally unsuited to the rigours of his new life, not least spotting space pirates. This never reaches the comedy heights of other collaborations between Sergio Aragonés and Mark Evanier, but even their off-form work is better than many creators working to the best of their ability. Buy every issue of *Groo* first, then come back for this.~FP

SPACE FAMILY ROBINSON

Gold Key: *36 issues 1962-1969*

The comic, loosely based on the film *Lost in Space*, was retitled to capitalise on the successful TV series from 37, although the stories remain unrelated. This features the interplanetary escapades of the Robinson family – June and Craig (Mom and Dad), Tim, Tam and the pets – in their space-station home. Some imaginative plotting and reliable artwork from Dan Spiegle make most issues readable, but much of a muchness.~SW

SPACE GHOST

Comico: *One-shot 1987*

Space Ghost is a costumed hero in outer space. He was first seen in 1966, in a Saturday morning cartoon, which was one of the first to allow superhero cartoons to take their action seriously, rather than playing mainly for laughs. Steve Rude's artwork is very clean and dynamic, certainly captures the feel of a well-crafted cartoon, and is worth the price alone. Unfortunately the story starts to sprawl quite early on, and in a way that makes the action in the main fight sequence seem almost random. A shame, since the art is so good it could have been a gem.~FC

Recommended

SPACE KNIGHTS

Marvel: *5 issue miniseries 2000-2001*

Jim Starlin and Chris Batista resurrect one of the most popular of Marvel's licensed properties as the sons of Rom the Space Knight lead a whole new bunch of cyborg warriors against the intergalactic threat of demonic deathwings. Just remember that "popular" was never synonymous with "good".~WW

SPACE MAN

Dell: *8 issues 1962-1964*
Gold Key: *2 issues (9-10) 1972*

Drawn by Jack Sparling with his left hand while piloting a bob-sled, the first issue of this now dated space-exploration series bears the cover blurb "Man has broken the ties of Earth and is about to conquer space". These days "about" isn't good enough, although writer Ken Fitch's use of cyborgs must count as a comics first. 9 and 10 reprinted the first two issues.~SW

SPACE 1999

Charlton: *6 issues 1975-1976*

Simultaneously launched as both a colour comic and a black and white magazine, this is one of Charlton's typically pedestrian TV adaptations. Nic Cuti produced acceptable stories, and Joe Staton (1, 2) and John Byrne (3-6) decent enough art, both in their attractive cartoony periods.~DAR

SPACE 1999

Charlton: *8 issues 1975-1976*

Companion title to the comic, this magazine was assembled by Gray Morrow, who produced all the covers and a vast amount of artwork, though he left the writing to Nic Cuti, Joe Gill and Mike Pellowski. Strangely enough, neither Morrow nor artists of the calibre of Vincente Alcazar (5-8), Pat Boyette (5) or Carl Potts (7) seemed able to make much of the strip's space setting, and the art often looked rushed. Ultimately neither comic fans nor the show's devotees are likely to be satisfied.~DAR

SPACE USAGI

Mirage: *3 issue miniseries 1992, 3 issue miniseries 1993-1994*
Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1996*

Though, as the title suggests, this is little more in some respects than *Usagi Yojimbo* in space, Stan Sakai's anthropomorphic Japanese characters translate easily into science fiction. Rather than a ronin, Space Usagi is a loyal bodyguard to Prince Kiyoshi, heir and then Lord of the Shirohoshi Clan, which is under attack by the Kajitori Empire. The first miniseries tells the story of the betrayal of the Shirohoshi by Matabe and his attempt to learn the clan secrets from Kiyoshi. The second, in colour, continues the story and sees Usagi and his friends, Tomoeh and Rhogen, break into the Shirohoshi castle, now in enemy hands, to prevent the Kajitori from gaining the clan's secrets from its computers. Sakai makes more of future technology than in the first series, with heat-seeking shuriken, robot dinosaurs and ninjas with mind probes and invisibility cloaks. The Dark Horse series sees Kiyoshi kidnapped in a race to retrieve the Shirohoshi treasures, the introduction of Kiyoshi's uncle and some very dangerous shapeshifters. Sakai's distinctive artwork owes much to Japanese comics and Moebius, but that's no bad thing and his characters and storytelling are compelling if a little naïve.~NF

SPACE WAR

Charlton: *34 issues 1959-1965*

Period science-fiction nonsense, with three or four stories in each issue. The stories are preposterous and the art unremarkable, but most issues will provide a few chuckles,

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* Available in a collected edition

either with bizarre origin stories for the moon (8), or that old teeny-weeny invaders story (9), or giant snails from Uranus (13), or a meteor-munching space serpent (16). 5 stands out, having one story that seems intentionally funny, 'Objective Moon', and another with truly stylish Steve Ditko artwork, 'Exiled to Earth'.~FC
Recommended: 5

Dan Flahive's SPACE WOLF

Antarctic: *2 issues 1992-1993*

A prematurely cancelled miniseries about the furry freedom fighter. Presumably people didn't want to pay twice for episodes re-run from *Albedo,* and presumably *Space Wolf* failed to attract a new audience. Those who want a sort of *Star Wars* with dogs could do worse than look these out, as they're well enough cartooned, although accompanied by enormous blocks of text.~WJ

SPACEHAWK

Dark Horse: *5 issues 1989-1993**

Spacehawk seems to equate Earth with America and Uncle Sam when he's talking of his role as a defender of the Solar System, but he's incredibly strong and long-lived (in 4 he meets an old friend after 600 years). He also spends a lot of time battling space pirates and preventing war on various planets. By the end of the series he's even got a girlfriend from Neptune (well, almost). This reprint of Basil Wolverton's wonderfully detailed but simplistic strip is a delight, full of beautiful women, grotesque creatures and alien landscapes. The collection is titled *Basil Wolverton In Space.*~NF
Recommended: 1-5

SPACEMAN

Oni Press: *One-shot 2002*

Mike Allred and Lawrence Marvit collaborate on this sumptuously-illustrated adventure starring a character who debuted in Allred's *The Atomics* 10. Using many innovative visual techniques, it looks stunning, but to call the story flimsy and hackneyed would be being generous. Allred's statement is that he intended the magazine as a visual experience, and it certainly is that. Just don't expect to be entertained, or even greatly interested, by the narrative.~HS

SPANISH FLY

Eros: *5 issues 1995-1996*
NBM: *6 Albums 1994-2001*

These collect mostly short stories by creator, Tobalina, which originally appeared in the Spanish *Kiss* magazine. The plots, such as they are, concern one-night stands and affairs, featuring lots of hardcore sex. Album 3, however, has a recurring female character, 4 contains a long story where the sex accompanies a financial scandal in the making, while 5 (with 4, one of the two albums in colour) contains a full-length story about a pregnant woman's affair with another woman whilst her policeman husband is working mysteriously long hours. The artwork's in a realistic, clean-line, animation-like style, that's pleasing on the eye, and there's a healthy dose of humour amid some provocative and occasionally insightful situations.~NF

SPANK THE MONKEY

Arrow: *4 issues 1999*

Sermonising reactionary gibberish posing as comics featuring Spank and his brain dead associate Shock. Each issue is themed from 2 with Spank railing against Adult Entertainment, cable TV and *Star Wars* merchandising. It goes without saying that some pretty easy meat is beaten by author Randy Zimmerman in these odious pages. The covers have an advisory tag that reads "Warning: contains actual opinions – cranial stimulation may develop". Announcing that the innards were printed on absorbent paper might have been more helpful.~SW

SPANNER'S GALAXY

DC: *6 issue miniseries 1984-1985*

Nicola Cuti, creator of the faddish 1970s Charlton superhero E-Man, also overwrote this tedious space opera, stuffed full of laughably cosmic dialogue like "Daddy, can I have a Droog for a honey-pie?" On the run from the Space Authorities, lead character Polaris Spanner hops through the galaxy thanks to his ability to 'castle', which is matter transportation to you and me. He also has a magic sword called a Shek, a furry alien pal who speaks in a Southern accent, and a sexy friend called Andromeda Jones. Ugly artwork courtesy of Tom Mandrake rounds off a miniseries best left to moulder in every dealer's bargain box.~AL

SPARKS: an Urban Fairytale

Slave Labor: *5 issues 1999-2001, Graphic Novel 2002*

A surreal slice of life adventure of smart but plain Jo. Her life is one long stream of neglect and abuse from her family, friends… everyone in fact, but the slobs at the garage where she works and the little boy in the downstairs apartment. A frustrated romantic, she lives out her days waiting for her life to change. After a particularly horrendous date she finds herself back at the workshop and builds herself a "knight in armour" from scraps and junk, before despondently heading home. That's when an errant lightning bolt animates the junk man… As a different sort of relationship grows between Jo and her do-it-yourself perfect date they both learn more than they thought possible about what it means to be human. Engaging and entertaining fantasy from Lawrence Marvit that's not as predictable as it first seems. Originally planned as twelve issues *Sparks* folded with 5 and was collected and completed in a 424 page graphic novel that's well worth tracking down.~WW

SPARROW

Millennium: *4 issues 1995**

Former CIA operative Alex Lacy is missing two years of his life, and is now somehow able to melt any solid objects. Both appear connected to a period undercover in a research laboratory. Lacy wants answers, his former bosses want Lacy, the corrupt research corporation want the whole affair kept quiet and then there's the wild card policeman and his shady friend. Mitchell Reichgut wrote a very good thriller, well drawn by Don Hudson from 2 onwards, and only the fact that it remained unfinished precludes recommendation. Anyone who likes to concoct their own conclusions should take a look, though.~FP

SPARTAN: WARRIOR SPIRIT

Image/WildStorm: *4 issue miniseries 1995*

The WildC.A.T.S android leader wakes up to find himself confronted by Dr Able, a scientist who claims that Spartan is Zachary Kreiger, imprinted with the memories of his dead son-in-law. Before he has a chance to argue, Spartan is under attack and lost in the battles he was programmed to fight, with little time to reflect on the memories Able and his daughter claim he should have. Although he doesn't believe what they tell him – that he's needed to safeguard a remote Tibetan monastery, in which his 'father-in-law' is conducting experiments, from marauding Daemonites – he does what's needed until the reasons behind the deceptions become clear. Spartan doesn't have the history on which writer Kurt Busiek usually hangs his limited creativity, leaving a story which is largely dull and not really worth the effort.~JC

Jackie Chan's SPARTAN X

Topps: *3 issues 1997*
Image: *3 issues 1998*

Despite the title this is not a comic about Jackie Chan, it's a comic about one of his characters, the mercenary Spartan X. Confusingly, though, Spartan X has not appeared in any of Chan's films, only in this comic. The story is full of the sorts of stunts, fights and slapstick that characterise Chan's films, and like them is undemanding, but fun. Writer and artist Michael Golden manages an astonishing job of translating the feel of a Jackie Chan movie onto paper with exemplary draughtsmanship and an unparalleled ability to convey a sense of movement. The Image series reprints the Topps run, but in black and white rather than colour, which actually better suits Golden's art.~DAR

SPASM

Last Gasp: *1 issue 1973*

A collection of short pieces by Jeff Jones. A few of them are horror stories and rather effective, but most are pretentious or pointless or documentation of Jones' sexual fantasies, - and some are all three. Worth a skim if it falls into your lap, but worth searching out? Goodness, no.~FC

SPAWN

Image: *120 issues + 1 Annual 1992 to date*

Todd McFarlane's supernatural antihero was an instant success in terms of sales if not critical acclaim, combining many of the graphic elements that had made his runs on *Spider-Man*, and prior to that *Batman*, so popular. Soldier and government hitman Al Simmons is murdered by person or persons unknown and left to rot, which is where his story really begins. In a universe where Heaven and Hell are two sides of the same coin, someone with Simmons' abilities is a valuable asset. The soldier's dying wish to see his wife again is used by the Malabolgia, a highly ranked devil, to strike a bargain that ensures his return to Earth, albeit in the highly altered form of a Hellspawn, a demon warrior in training for the final battle with Heaven. After establishing this basic principle, the series flounders as Spawn takes up residence in an alley and fights cyborgs, perverts and his assigned mentor, a fat little clown, who can turn into an insectoid demon called the Violator. With momentum ebbing, McFarlane's answer was to hire four of the industry's top writers: Alan Moore scripts 8, Neil Gaiman 9, Dave Sim tackles 10 and Frank Miller scripts 11, between them creating enough back-story and character development to carry the series to date. Gaiman alone, with his creation of Angela, a Spawn hunter from Heaven and the whole concept of Hellspawn throughout history being co-opted and betrayed by the Malabolgia, created cornerstone concepts for many consequent episodes and spin-off miniseries. From this point, vaguely formed plot threads are followed up in an over-long but reasoned manner as Spawn becomes guardian of the New York City down and outs, the only people who accept him for what he is. He slowly unravels the mystery of who killed him and begins to gather allies such as the detectives Sam and Twitch and fights against his pre-ordained role in the cosmic scheme of things, seeking to protect his widow and her new husband from the repercussions of his past. It's all quite simple in plot and gratuitously overblown in delivery with artistic excess, firstly from McFarlane himself and his successors, artists Greg Capullo and latterly, Angel Medina, and scripter Brian Holguin. They're capable of destroying many potentially excellent character moments with the comics equivalent of using sledgehammers to crack nuts.

The major artistic theme seems to be one of slow degradation, as Spawn's physicality deteriorates and the sentient costume/parasite that comprises much of his power gains a stronger hold on his consciousness. This is augmented by the storytelling, which seems to indicate that you can't trust anybody. The major criticism would be the incredibly long time it takes for anything to happen, and the nagging certainty that, even if you only read every sixth issue, you would be unlikely to miss anything. Since 50 and the second redesign of the character (the first cosmetic change, for no apparent reason, being in 31), Simmons/Spawn moved closer to a resolution in his search for his murderers. This is despite many false trails, demon lies and a probable attempt to wrong-foot readers with a plot wherein the possibility of Spawn defecting to the side of the angels is floated.

From 75, and with Brian Holguin listed as co-writer, after a metaphysical journey Spawn turns his back on both Heaven and Hell in favour of a third way. He becomes the arbiter of right and wrong on Earth, dealing out punishment before (usually split seconds before) death, not after. The stories build towards an anti-climactic 100 with Spawn punishing the guilty whenever he finds them and then taking on Hell itself. Issues since have returned to aimless meandering, with Spawn taking on a ring of vampires, placating the distressed spirits of Japanese ghosts and once again becoming involved with abused children as another plot unfolds too slowly, this time the Hell he abandoned attempting to reclaim him. Once again there's a dependence on past ideas in the continuing search for a narrative drive to shape the series.

To his credit, McFarlane strives to keep the *Spawn* universe concise and self-contained, with few returning villains, a good balance between supernatural peril and human evil, and an overt decision that team-ups and guest shots be either cameos in the main storyline or in separate miniseries outside the flagship title. In many ways, *Spawn* is the perfect reading tool for the couch potato/soundbite MTV generation, with an almost deconstructed approach to storytelling. Hyperbolic and over-rendered, over-written whilst saying very little, it is a triumph of style over content. There are ongoing reprint collections, with Titan's UK schedule currently pre-empting US releases.~WW

Curse of the SPAWN

Image: *29 issues 1996-1999*

This was intended as a means of telling stories outside normal *Spawn* continuity about other, past and future, hellspawn. In fact, several stories don't feature a Spawn at all, including the best issues. These feature private detectives, Sam and Twitch and the case of Suture, both victim and hunter of serial killers (5-8, 26-28). Of the rest, there's a future Spawn in 1-4, Angela's origin in 9-11, mob boss, Antonio Twistelli (17-19), a hellspawn amongst the Greek gods (22), a very gory story in 25 about a boy's murderous day amongst his friends after being possessed by a spawn (or maybe not) and the closure of Purgatory in 29 (because, really, everything's so black and white now). Almost all written by Alan McElroy, and drawn by Dwayne Turner (1-23, 26) and Clayton Crain (24-25, 27-29), the storytelling is normally hard to follow in both narrative and artwork. In the end, it's all just too overwrought to make good comics.~NF

SPAWN:THE DARK AGES

Image: *28 issues 1999-2001*

Having established that Spawn was returned to Earth to enact vengeance after a pact with the devil, it stood to reason there may have been earlier incarnations. Here's one of them. While the fantasy styled art in 1-14 from Liam McCormick-Sharp is occasionally impressive (at its best in the sepia-toned 11-14) he's more inclined to supply pin-ups than tell a story. Not that there's much story to Brian Holguin's ludicrously overwrought scripts, although solitary adolescent readers probably thought them profound. From 15 Steve Niles ups the story content, transforming the Hellspawn into a sort of Dark Ages Conan, and pencil artist Nat Jones shines. While his storytelling is sloppy, the fluidity and grace is appealing and unusual for what is basically a horror title, and the mood he creates is well served by colourist Todd Broeker from 20. Yer actual eviscerations are sparingly placed, and while no masterpiece, it's better than many might expect from the *Spawn* franchise.~FP

SPAWN Miniseries

Image: *4 issue miniseries ('Blood Feud') 1995, 3 issue miniseries ('The Impaler') 1996*

Image/Top Cow: *3 issue miniseries (Medieval Spawn/ Witchblade) 1996*

Alan Moore's entertaining script just about saves the otherwise dull 'Blood Feud', and the stylised artwork by Tony Daniel and Kevin Conrad is best when following Moore's thumbnail breakdowns. 'The Impaler' is a clever story, written by Mike Grell, in which Vlad the Impaler woos the daughter of a couple of ex-satanic metal musicians, while the police search for a killer who drains victims of their blood. Unfortunately, both Grell's own pencil-only artwork for the flashbacks to Vlad's life, death and resurrection and Rob Prior's painted present day scenes provide only flat, static storytelling. For in-your-face butchery and good-taste-be-damned attitudes, look no further than the work of Garth Ennis on *Medieval Spawn/Witchblade*. The Darkness is introduced as a natural enemy of the Witchblade. Both grant their owners great power and, since they've been around since before mankind, there have been plenty of different wielders of these powers, hence the mediaeval setting. *Arcanum*'s Matthew Royale convinces the Darkness to destroy the Land of Faerie (cue lots of dead elves) with a view to gaining immortality for himself. However, he reckons without the intervention of a young Spawn and newly-Witchblade-empowered Katarina. Its humour is black and earthy, the artwork (mostly by Brandon Peterson) has its flourishes and overall this is an enjoyable romp despite reading a little like the scene setter for later series.~NF

SPAWN The Undead

Image: *9 issues 1999-2000*

In this series, written by Paul Jenkins, Al Simmons (Spawn) is largely peripheral to the story being told. Trying to act as a balance between Heaven and Hell, Spawn intervenes in people's lives to offer some truth that helps them understand what's happening and make their own decision about how to help themselves. Overall, Jenkins pulls this off, offering some good, human stories that provide the opportunity for philosophical discursion without falling back on easy answers. This might have been an above-average horror comic, then, if only Dwayne Turner's illustrative style had been up to the storytelling challenges of the scripts.~NF

SPECIAL HUGGING

Slave Labor: *One-shot 1989*

A collection of stories about childhood, from various creators and with various themes: the near-impossibility of getting a sensible explanation of puberty and sex; the dilemma of how to act when you see someone mistreating their children; and memorable moments from a happy childhood. It sounds fairly promising but none of it really rings true, and you put the comic down wondering why they bothered.~FC

SPECIAL MARVEL EDITION

Marvel: *16 issues 1971-1974*

Reprints of Lee and Kirby's *Thor* occupy 1-4, and Sgt Fury is reprinted in 5-14, so the only item of note is the début of Shang-Chi, Master of Kung-Fu, in 15. Although very different in tone from later strips, the Steve Englehart and Jim Starlin stories are moody and interesting. The title became *Master of Kung-Fu* with 17.~FP

SPECIES

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1995*, 4 issue miniseries ('Human Race') 1996**

The first series is a perfectly serviceable adaptation of the film in which a transforming alien hybrid woman is on the prowl for the perfect mate with whom to propagate her species. Enjoyable old tosh it was. But hey, it seems she wasn't the only hybrid about, which is where the second series takes off. Running through the scenario once was enough, so the repetition in 1-2 is unwelcome. 3 is the standout issue as Stephen Blue and Denys Cowan opt for minimal alien involvement, and 4 is dull despite Mark Nelson and George Pratt art.~FP

SPECTACLES

Alternative: *4 issues 1997-1998*

A variety of stories by Jon Lewis (with some written by Leo Geistler). They are usually strange, and frequently very funny. There's two series, 'The Frost Changes', full of Scandinavian folklore, false beards, reclusive rockstars, and musical hexes, and 'The Shell Men', a post-apocalypse story in which animals talk and humans don't, which is shaping up to be a major feat of the imagination. 'Springing (A Society Farce)' about a ill-assorted group of roommates is also notable, and there are other, shorter stories about possums and gators and getting up early. It's also worth reading for the letter column (outstanding in 1, with Lewis answering letters from himself, mostly abusive), and for the 'Things I Like' section, which has covered Glenn Gould, caddisfly larvae ("pretty amazing"), Thai soup, 1950s films, and sound-effects toys. This is an exhilarating read, on many levels.~FC

Recommended: 1-4

THE SPECTRE

DC: *Series one 10 issues 1967-1969, Series two 31 issues, 1 Annual 1987-1989, Series three 62 issues, 1 Annual 1992-1998*

Introduced in the 1940s (in *More Fun* 52, reprinted in *Secret Origins* 5), and created by Jerry Siegel and Bernard Baily, the Spectre evolved into the most powerful of DC's superheroes. God returns policeman Jim Corrigan to Earth after his murder, and he now hosts a ghostly alter ego in The Spectre. Operating as a ruthless agent of retribution and vengeful Angel of the Lord in the 1940s, he's in superhero mode to start the 1960s series, after tryouts in *Showcase* 60, 61 and 64. The standard DC gimmick plots of the time mean there's little of note in the early issues beyond art from a young Neal Adams in 2-5. The mid-period is more cosmic, but by the end of the series the Spectre is little more than another horror host. When he resurfaced in *Adventure Comics* 431, Michael Fleisher and Jim Aparo created a series of over-the-top, gruesome short strips prematurely cancelled due to their excessive violent content. Needless to say, they're great, and can be found along with stories that never saw print originally in the four issues of *Wrath of the Spectre*.

It was twelve years before DC were confident enough to give the Spectre another solo run. This time, though, he's powered down to more human levels, and bonded with Corrigan, now a private investigator. Corrigan, returned from the dead, is not happy with his lot, and the mixture of detection and mystical menaces is an uneasy one, with each aspect intruding into the other's domain. The idea of Corrigan and the Spectre in danger of dying when separated for longer than forty-eight hours is overworked in the early issues. That's a problem solved in 19, in which writer Doug Moench has the Spectre transform from Corrigan rather than manifest from within him. 21 is as good as the run gets, with both elements investigating a death from differing angles and perspectives. An expanded cast from 20 beefs up a dull series, but not by much, and there can have been few sad to see the comic cancelled. Those few can check 7 of the next series for what became of the cast.

Given its poor predecessor, the comparatively rapid revival of *The Spectre* just over two years later was surprising, but the character became more popular than in any previous incarnation. The startling glow-in-the-dark cover to the first issue (reprised on 8 and 13) surely enticed many people to sample, but those responsible for the success were John Ostrander and Tom Mandrake, who produce almost the entire run. A powerful retelling of the Spectre's origin in 3 and 4 sets the tone, affirming that the Spectre is the wrath of God fuelled by Corrigan, and assigning them the task of avenging the victims of murder until Corrigan comes to understand why evil exists. 1-4 are collected. The Spectre is back to his nigh-omnipotent self, but Ostrander's aptitude at setting ethical dilemmas negates this at a stroke, while permitting effective and imaginative scenes of retribution. These sequences echo the vindictive Spectre of Fleisher and Aparo (who draws the excellent 16), but constant questioning underscores the series. Mandrake's contribution is a succession of horrifically rendered nightmares blending effortlessly with modern urban settings. The series lasted long enough for Ostrander to rectify most anomalies of the Spectre's history, generally in fine fashion even when dealing with the likes of his 1940s comedy-relief partner Percival Popp, Super Cop in 24. His plots are unpredictable and don't shy from potentially uncomfortable topics such as the fragmentation of the American dream in 38-50, although that dragged more than a little, and the constant questioning of celestial motivation. The latter was well explored in the final issues. Continually thought-provoking, as much as anything *The Spectre* probes the many shades of grey. Best of all, though, for a title concerning the wrath of God manifested as man, there's an astounding humanity, personified by Father Cramer, introduced in *Suicide Squad*, but brought to fruition here as both conscience and adviser. This is an under-appreciated and consistently good series well worth sampling. Have a try at 20's sympathetic tour of the aged Justice Society, 51's peek into the Joker, or the Spectre's horrific courtroom manifestation in 55. Mention must also be made of the startling selection of seductive covers, using a different artist each issue to produce a symbolic rendering of the Spectre, already a strikingly visual character.~WJ

Recommended: Series three 3, 4, 6, 12, 16, 20, 23, 26-30, 39, 51, 52, 55

THE SPECTRE

DC: *27 issues 2001-2003*

When DC replaced its ageing icons with younger, more hip characters, the old stalwarts such as Hal (Green Lantern) Jordan were left out in the cold and then put through the wringer. Driven insane by the destruction of his home town and the death of his loved ones, Jordan committed mass murder and then set himself up as a god before eventually achieving a measure of redemption by sacrificing his life to save Earth in the miniseries *Final Night.* Luckily for Jordan, that wasn't the end of the road. In a stroke of genius DC provided a retraining programme that saw the errant one-time hero take over the Spectre identity in order to do his penance before entering the gates of Heaven. Jordan (or his ghost, if we're being pedantic) patrols the limbo between life and death, helping the newly deceased to pass over to the other side, and enabling souls in peril to see the error of their ways before it's too late. The idea received a dry run in *Legends of the DC Universe* 33-36. Ably drawn by Ryan Sook (1-13) and Norm Breyfogle from 15 onwards, J.M. DeMatteis' mix of cosmic philosophising and hippie morality isn't to everyone's tastes, but anyone who liked *Moonshadow* will probably enjoy this, and he does build a good supporting cast around the central hero. Jordan's tendency to spend long tranches of the plot wallowing in self-pity and regret can be trying, but lighter moments such as the Green Spectre Corps admonishing him for playing peeping tom on his ex-girlfriend stop it from getting too depressing. Mawkish and sentimental at times, some of the issues are nonetheless genuinely moving as DeMatteis tries – and often succeeds – in making some serious comments on the human condition. The self-contained issue 20 is a perfect sampler of the series' delights.~JC

Recommended: 20

SPEED FORCE

DC: *One-shot Special 1997*

The speed force is what gives DC's superfast heroes their powers, and this special features speedsters past, present and future. The best are a teaming of Barry Allen and Kid Flash written by Mark Waid, and John Byrne's golden-age Flash tale leading to an interesting plot in his *Wonder Woman* series.~HY

SPEED RACER

Now: *Series one 38 issues, 1 Annual 1987-1992, Series two 3 issues 1992*

Based on a 1960s Japanese cartoon series, issue 1 answers many questions posed by regular viewers and provides an origin for Speed. Lamarr Waldron writes most issues to 30, and they're simple but well crafted, as Speed and his Mach 5 car take on other drivers in an ever-continuing circuit of races in exotic locations, having adventures wherever he goes. A good sample is 14, in which Speed's girlfriend Trixie is believed to be the reincarnation of an Egyptian princess. Later issues inject a greater dose of realism and continuity, but it's to the detriment of the strip. A darker and more violent tale occupies the second series, again at odds with the original spirit. The first issue is also available as an expanded fifth-anniversary special containing text features about Mach 5 and cover galleries.~WJ

SPEED RACER

WildStorm: *3 issue miniseries 1999**

Speed continues the family trade as a racing driver, working alongside Sparky to get their car, The Mach 5, out on the track. Matters are complicated by sexy photojournalist Patricia 'Trixie' Shimura, policeman Inspector Detector, engine designer Bent Cranium, man of mystery Racer X, and the villain of the piece, race-fixer Buck Condor. As the emblematic names indicate, this is hardly gritty realism and functions more on the level of, say, *Tintin,* but with lots of mini-skirts. Tommy Yune writes and draws an action strip designed to have broad appeal. The jumps from humour to action to flashback are handled like smooth gear changes, with Matt Milla's colour work in 1 an incredible aid. His successor Guy Major does a good job too, but ruins a scene where the car's paintwork is a key factor in 3. Great fun even if you know nothing about motor racing.~SW

SPEED TRIBES

Nemicron: *1 issue 1998*

A stunner! So concerned were the publishers to implement every gimmick in their design program it completely escaped their minds that people might actually want to read the comic. So many overlays make following the story near impossible, and to make it harder the lettering is faded out and sometimes shrunk to a quarter size. It appears to be story about a rite of passage ritual in a dangerous future, but it's actually a template of how not to produce a comic.~WJ

SPEEDBALL The Masked Marvel

Marvel: *11 issues 1988-1989*

Steve Ditko returned to Marvel to create a teenage hero using the 1960s Marvel template, which, in essence, is the problem. Times had moved on, and despite Ditko's best art of the 1980s the entire project has a very dated feel (and a notoriously ill-advised title). The now traditional comics origin of an encounter with unknown energy bestowing powers transforms lab messenger Rob Baldwin into a costumed type able to bounce off any hard surface, an effect initially triggered by force, and given a nifty design effect by Ditko. Speedball later frequently appeared in *Marvel Super-Heroes* and went on to join the New Warriors.~FP

SPELLBINDERS

Quality: *12 issues 1986-1987*

Initiated to showcase some of *2000AD*'s second-level strips for an American audience, it would be a quality package but for the unsympathetic application of colour. Each issue opens with *Nemesis,* continuing the run from the Eagle comics miniseries, with Kevin O'Neill's final story in the first issue, and the Bryan Talbot-drawn 'Gothic Empire' thereafter. It's an alien world with a society based on Edwardian Britain, but with a greater level of technology, and incorporates Hammerstein, Ro-Jaws and the ABC Warriors into the *Nemesis* saga for the first time. The Celtic warrior Slaine was introduced to American audiences with 1, and there's stunning Mike McMahon art from 4 to 9. The final strip opening the anthology was the rather dull Amadeus Wolf, fat demon-hunter, given an early departure to expand the other features. These are best appreciated, though, in Titan reprint collections.~FP

SPELLBOUND

Marvel: *6 issue miniseries 1988*

Somewhere out there is a nasty spellbinder called Zxaxz who has two servants: Snugg, a fairy, and Snaarl, an ape. They are scared that Zxaxz is going to destroy the universe, so when they learn of another spellbinder in a different dimension, they pay a visit, attempting to recruit this spellbinder in the struggle against Zxaxz. The spellbinder is Erica Forture, an English teacher with no idea of her powers, and who overreacts at first after a lifetime of being ignored and taken for granted. It might have worked as a spin on the Cinderella theme if the writing had been better, but here it's doomed from the beginning. The writing has real problems with presenting information in a coherent way, with the four pages that set the story up impenetrable, and with making the characters believable or bearable. It does gradually improve, but the first issue is infuriating.~FC

SPELLJAMMERS

DC: *15 issues 1990-1991*

Part of the TSR *Dungeons and Dragons* franchise, this fantasy strip deals with the crew of a magic powered, inter-dimensional trading ship (although it looks more like a fish), and its trusty crew of stereotypes: Hard-assed captain, understanding doctor, jaunty thief and bold swashbuckler. 1-6 by Barbara Kesel and Mike Collins are good examples of the genre, but the quality rapidly drops after their departure and even the work of then neophyte artist Joe Quesada from 8 cannot restore it.~WW

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* Available in a collected edition

SPICE CAPADES

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1999*

The words 'sitting' and 'target' spring to mind. With contributions from the likes of Gilbert Hernandez, Kaz, Robert Crumb and Peter Bagge, it promises much, but ends up being a mix of the inconsequential and the indescribable (Ivan Brunetti, anybody?) and ultimately satisfies nobody. A major disappointment.~DAR

SPICY TALES

Eternity: *10 issues, 1 Special 1988-1991*

Subtitled "A Naughty Anthology"', *Spicy Tales* reprints strips from 1930s and 1940s pulp magazines. Publisher Frank Armer produced a series of disreputable pulps that dealt more blatantly with sex than was usual in that period. Alongside prose stories they also ran two to eight-page strips. *Spicy Detective*'s Sally Sleuth's first appearance, from November 1934, is in 1. She's an operative for an FBI-like organisation and predictably, most of her clothes fall off in the course of her assignments. 'Dan Turner, Hollywood Detective' is more restrained sexually but it's plenty hard-boiled and the character's colourful vocabulary, including neologisms like "butched" and "killery", is a wonder in itself. The series also includes reprints from *Spicy Western* and *Spicy Adventure*, such as 'Polly of the Plains', which chiefly sees the naked cowgirl being tortured by Mexican bandits, and Diana Daw, globe-trotting adventuress.

Despite a predilection for bondage, torture and racism, these pre-Code stories are not entirely without merit so long as they are considered within their context. The special contains three 'Lucky Dale, Girl Detective' strips and a Veiled Avenger story. Both strips' artwork is far superior to that in the ongoing title.~NF

THE SPIDER

Eclipse: *3 issue miniseries 1991, 3 issue miniseries ('Reign of the Vampire King') 1992*

Millionaire businessman Richard Wentworth is a costumed scourge of the underworld at night, complete with gimmicks, hide-out and butler. Despite the similarities, The Spider pre-dates Batman, and the character's 1930s pulp-fiction origins are well served here. Tim Truman concocts an entertaining tale incorporating exotic cults, Nazi revivals and deadly yet glamorous women, and Alcatena's finishes add a fluidity and warmth often absent from Truman's art elsewhere. Unintentional humour is derived from The Spider's distinctive dentistry, with every tooth filed to a point, rather a giveaway regarding his identity, you might think. Not so, as the civilian Wentworth communicates in the style of a ventriloquist, keeping his mouth tightly closed at all times. Sadly, the second series provides a prosaic explanation. Otherwise it's more of the same, this time with a supernatural feel.~ FP

Steve Bissette's SPIDERBABY

SpiderBaby: *2 issues 1996*

Reprints of Bissette's earlier work from his days at the Joe Kubert school, and covering, eventually, all the work he owns or co-owns. Although laudatory in intent, much of the work is really too embarrassing to be seen again. Masterpieces such as 'The 24 Hour Comic', 'A Life In Black & White' from 2 more than make up for such idiotically vulgar outings as 'The Telltale Fart', a nomination for the grossest comic strip of all time. The series also contains documentary material and articles by Bissette.~WW

Recommended: 2

SPIDER-GIRL

Marvel: *55 issues + (0-54), 1 Annual 1998 to date*

Spider-Girl is undoubtedly a comic for readers apt to moan "they don't make them like this anymore". Something about *What If?* 105 (reprinted as 0), dealing with a scenario in which Spider-Man's daughter had lived, captured the comic buyers' imagination enough to leave them clamouring for more. For the only time in its long history, a *What If?* scenario spawned an entire spin-off series, charting the continuing adventures of the teenage May 'Mayday' Parker as she continued her father's legacy. Exactly what it is about this unremarkable, resolutely Marvel house style title that makes it such a fan favourite is difficult to say, as there's nothing new, special or remotely challenging about Tom DeFalco and Pat Olliffe's gentle superhero soap. The alternate future in which it's set looks remarkably similar to the regular Marvel Universe. The characters act much like their younger counterparts, or fill the same roles as their parents do in the 'proper' Spider comics, and yet somehow, it's very, very difficult to put down. *Spider-Girl* represents good, old-fashioned storytelling and traditional Marvel values that are deeply rooted in the 1960s Marvel of Lee and Kirby, an odd anomaly for a comic that's meant to be set in the future, but this in itself gives it an endearing quality.

May's problems with High School and her parents; her place in the super-hero legacy; her battles with villains that are either the same, or the heirs of, her father's enemies; the love-triangle between her, Phil Urich and Normie Osborn; the strong supporting cast and even the remarkable consistency of its dedicated creative team make *Spider-Girl* seem like a haven from everything that the traditionalist would say went wrong with comics in the 1990s. Its cult following has been strong enough to change Marvel's mind about threatened cancellation, and while sales are not strong, the editors are sensible enough to realise that it's appealing to readers (including a well-above average female percentage) who won't go elsewhere if the plug is pulled. If you like your comics safe, clean, character-driven and entertaining, *Spider-Girl* won't let you down. 1-8 are collected.~JC

SPIDER-MAN

Marvel: *74 issues, 3 Annuals, 1 Super Special, 1990-1996*

Launched in a blaze of variant cover colourings, states of baggedness and a hot creator, Marvel's astute marketing rocketed the first issue of Spider-Man's fourth concurrent regular series to the number-one-selling comic book ever to that date. Fresh from his acclaimed artistic run on *Amazing Spider-Man*, Todd McFarlane was joined by unknown, untried writer, Todd McFarlane. He was honest enough to admit in the first issue text-page that he did not profess to be a writer, and proceeded to prove it in issues 1-14*. Lush artwork and thin stories evidence little development of McFarlane's plotting talents, and an over-use of staccato, monosyllabic scripting looks arty for half an issue and amateur over fourteen.

Déja vu struck as another hot *Amazing Spider-Man* artist, Erik Larsen, took over on plot and pencils in 18-23*, with a hopelessly muddled Sinister Six story guest-starring superheroes galore who materialise and disappear without reason. It took fill-in creators Don McGregor and Marshall Rogers to produce this series' highlight: 'Something about a Gun' in 27 and 28. With research assistance from the police, this mature, heartfelt story of juvenile crime, school bullying and the danger of guns scores a perfect ten. Single-minded obsession with the major themes is avoided as original displays of Spider-Man's web tricks complement a portrayal of his heroism that has rarely been surpassed. Ann Nocenti's 'Return to the Mad Dog Ward' in 29-31 improves on the original (in *Amazing Spider-Man* 295, *Spectacular Spider-Man* 133 and *Web of Spider-Man* 33) with a sub-plot focusing on Peter's pathological lying running out of control during his never-ending quest to hide his secret identity. Mainly routine fill-ins, all of them three parts, follow to 43. Avoid 35-37, the fourteen-issue 'Maximum Carnage' fiasco of a bloodbath crossing into all the regular *Spider-Man* titles, and concentrate instead on Marc DeMatteis' insightful Electro story in 38-40, with its amusing plot of a small-time crook who has been busted by Spider-Man countless times during his criminal career and is humiliated because the Web Man never recognises him.

Howard Mackie and Tom Lyle take charge from 44, and teasers for the 'Return of the Clone' saga begin in 48, followed by the full event in 51-63. It crosses over into all the major *Spider-Man* titles and is reviewed under *Amazing Spider-Man*. Publication halted whilst two issues of *Scarlet Spider* hit the stands, then 64 onwards concentrate on the Ben Reilly version, with John Romita Jr pencilling. Multi-part stories continue their weekly wrap around the four core Spider titles for six more months, and the clone thing still simmered until its culmination in the December 1996 cover-date titles with the double-size 75 dropping the final curtain. We can only hope. That was the issue with which the title changed to *Peter Parker, Spider-Man*.~APS

Recommended: 27, 28, 38-40

Amazing SPIDER-MAN

Marvel:*Series one 442 issues (-1, 1-441), 34 Annuals, 6 Giant-Size, 1 Super Special, 1963-1998, Sseries two 46 issues + 1999 to date*

"Bitten by a radioactive spider, student Peter Parker gained the proportionate strength and agility of an arachnid." Thus has Stan Lee presented hundreds of issues of Marvel's flagship solo character. Response to Spider-Man's intended one-shot appearance in the dying issue of *Amazing Fantasy* was so favourable that his own series followed seven months later. By today's standards, all early 1960s titles recount naïve, simplistic tales, but after the first dozen issues *Amazing Spider-Man* stands up better than its contemporaries.

Weak and fallible by superhero standards, Spider-Man functions best in down-to- earth surroundings, often pitted against the New York underworld. Stan Lee and Steve Ditko quickly settled down to these perfectly pitched plots of the superhero plagued by mundane problems. How many other superheroes had to stay at home because their aunt had confiscated their costume? The banter and camaraderie between Peter and his peers is hard to better. Supervillain spats resulted in few clear-cut victories, and even these usually involved some pyrrhic element. Ditko never could draw a pretty girl, but his angular, gangling figures were right for Spider-Man, and his exquisite use of shadow suited the book perfectly. All these components created thirty-eight issues deserving of their classic status. Their appeal remains today, so much so that Marvel launched *Untold Tales of Spider-Man* in 1995, setting new stories in that era. It proved popular and successful.

John Romita (Sr) launched his artistic stint with the revelation of the original Green Goblin's identity in 39-40, a tense story of the first villain to discover that Spider-Man is Peter Parker; his own identity had been a mystery since 14. After months of teasers, Mary Jane Watson finally shows her face in 42 and turns the dialogue seriously late sixties. Lee packs more soap opera and action in one issue than can be found in half a dozen modern comics; 47 is the best example. But Ditko took part of Lee with him, and after issue 50 gaps between the landmarks stretch longer. By 1968, more complex social issues supplanted much of Lee's superficiality. The first black character, Joe Robertson, *Daily Bugle* City Editor, is introduced in 52 and opens the generation gap with his son Randy as student riots infiltrate 68-70. Peter goes steady with Gwen Stacy and sub-plots tire as they run the gamut of options: 'She digs Spider-Man but hates Peter Parker' and its permutations. 96-98 are a noteworthy drugs-use story as Marvel deliberately defied the Comics Code and published these issues without its stamp of approval – an event de rigueur nowadays, but sacrilegious in 1971.

By 110 Lee had outstayed his shelf-life and Gerry Conway warmed up for a year before killing off Gwen Stacy and the Green Goblin (allegedly) in 121-122*. These issues acted as the catalyst for the superlative original Jackal War running intermittently through to 150. Conway introduces the Punisher in 129, eloquently portrays Peter's anguish, grief and guilt over Gwen's death and tantalisingly feeds the reader with scattered helpings of the Jackal's machinations rather than with a continuous bombardment. The resolution in 144-150* ushers in clones of Peter Parker and Gwen Stacy. The 'resurrection' of a non-superpowered supporting character was controversial at the time, but handling of the climax is first-rate, mainly because, as is evident, it's been properly planned. Little could Conway have guessed the terrible legacy this story would leave twenty years later. Despite the occasional absurd sub-plot and editing glitch, 121-150 is arguably Spider-Man's second finest hour after Lee and Ditko. Ross Andru's art is always adequate, never amazing, and a text page in 153 usefully ties up loose Jackal ends. 153 also holds its ground as a poignant one-shot, but Len Wein's stint (151-180) is generally mediocre. Marv Wolfman starts with a bang as Peter proposes to Mary Jane in his first issue, 182. Her rejection of him in the next issue effectively writes her out of the title for five years. The slide under Wolfman is slow, steady and inexorable. His only other mark is the first appearance of the Black Cat in 194-195, a supporting character developed more fully in *Spectacular Spider-Man*. Denny O'Neil effortlessly prolongs Wolfman's trend. His stories in 207-223 are not quite exciting enough to be described as poor.

Roger Stern's tenure from 224 coincided with the first period of artistic stability since Ross Andru's departure in 185, as John Romita Jr followed in his father's footsteps. The title was crying out for a scenario of tooth and intrigue, which Stern delivered courtesy of the Hobgoblin in 238. A shadowy figure discovers the Green Goblin's hideouts and adopts a similar persona. This move rescues all aspects of the book. Mary Jane's return in 242-243 is classic soap opera and 'The Kid Who Collects Spider-Man' half-issue tale in 248 is one of the most original and touching reappraisals of a superhero's origin you will see. Hobgoblin teasers permeate until Stern's grand finale in 251, with the mystery left unresolved.

Since her first appearance, Mary Jane had always been depicted as shallow, empty-headed and carefree: characterisation cleverly realised by a dearth of attached thought balloons. We learn the reason why in 257-259*, the first issue revealing her stunner two issues earlier that she has known that Peter Parker is Spider-Man for a long time (see also the 'Parallel Lives' graphic novel), and the last a sort of origin. It forms part of Tom DeFalco's best-ever work as 252-285 copiously feed the Hobgoblin enigma and integrate the *Secret Wars* black costume into mainstream Spider-Man mythology (from 252). The Rose, another mystery man in a mask, débuts in 253 and becomes Hobgoblin's conspirator. 269-270 form a heroic two-parter as Spider-Man outthinks Firelord, an adversary who, on paper, he stands no chance of defeating. The run is littered with fill-ins and guest creators but all issues by the regular team of DeFalco and Ron Frenz shine. Although they both take an early bath, Jim Owsley admirably concludes the Gang War story (284-288, revealing the Rose), as does Peter David on the Hobgoblin exposition in 289. *Web of Spider-Man* 29, 30 and the *Spider-Man versus Wolverine* one-shot are essential reading to these plotlines. Beware the slice of revisionist history, all the rave at Marvel nowadays, as the 1997 miniseries 'Hobgoblin Lives!' overturns the identity of the face beneath the Hobgoblin's mask.

David Michelinie steals a leaf from Marv Wolfman's portfolio as Peter proposes to Mary Jane in his first issue. 290-292 recount a fine modern-day follow-up to her origin, which concludes with her acceptance. Formal proceedings unfold in Annual 21. All are collected along with some new strips on the theme. Fill-in issues follow forthwith, but fill-ins as stunning as 293-294* are welcome any time, as Marc DeMatteis presents the newly-weds with a honeymoon to remember as Kraven buries Spider-Man alive for two weeks in *Amazing Spider-Man*'s two chapters of 'Kraven's Last Hunt'. Todd McFarlane joins as regular artist in 298 and Venom débuts in 300, but both of these two fine characters would later become victims of their own success as exploitation set in. McFarlane brings the best out of Michelinie as they paint another purple patch in the Webslinger's history. After McFarlane's departure on completing 'The Assassin Nation Plot' (320-325*), the art of Erik Larsen (to 350) and Marvel Try-Out Contest winner Mark Bagley (to 415) is unable to save the title from an excess of crossovers, superhero guest stars. Oh, and inane plotlines, such as the turbo-charged, superpowered Spider-Man in 327-329*. The last worthwhile appearances of Venom and offspring Carnage grace 361-363*. Subsequent outings reek of mass exploitation and gratuitous gore, exemplified by the egregious fourteen-part 'Maximum Carnage' bloodbath in 378-380* and other titles.

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* Available in a collected edition

Since 1992, Spider-Man's record has been blighted by two appallingly ill-considered decisions by Marvel. To provide a blockbuster thirtieth anniversary plot (365), Peter Parker's parents are reintroduced, having been absent since 1968's Annual 5 recounted their deaths. Michelinie's absurdly shallow final issue (388) revelations are poorly considered and illogical. DeMatteis' scripting stint overdoses on the psychoanalysis. But before long Marvel unveiled a second poke in the eye. Jumping on the fashion trend for major character revamps, Marvel unleashed the 'Return of the Clone', a storyline they hoped no one would forget. In that respect they indisputably succeeded.

Peter Parker's clone and the Jackal did not die in 149. Adopting the name of Ben Reilly, the Parker clone returns after five years of self-imposed exile and confronts Spider-Man in *Spectacular Spider-Man* 216. Unable to beat the habit, Ben assumes a webslinging identity as the Scarlet Spider. The Jackal returns and we learn that he created multiple copies of clones of himself, Gwen Stacy and hundreds of Spider-Men, which all crawl out of the woodwork at a moment's whim. In the endgame (*Spectacular Spider-Man* 226) scientific tests 'prove' that Parker is the clone and Reilly the real McCoy. Parker packs his bags for Oregon with expectant wife in tow. This story is an unmitigated disaster. It weaves its weekly way through all Spider-Man titles from October 1995 to October 1996, although each title keeps its own creative team. Once all the associated one-shots, limited series and follow-ups are counted, the story clocks up close to a hundred issues of drivel. Its most serious fault is that the reader cannot believe anything any character says. All the bad guys are lying and all the good guys don't have a clue what's going on. Its most infuriating fault is that most characters are unable to maintain consistent attitudes for more than five pages, exemplified by Reilly agonising that he must quit New York and leave it as Parker's territory, only to decide moments later that he can't. This questionable technique allows the same themes to be recycled endlessly and pads a hundred issues better than polystyrene ever could. The sorry saga smells of "We'll make it up as we go along", as indeed they did. Marketing Dept. sticks its finger in the pie as all titles are suspended and replaced by *Scarlet Spider* versions, renumbered from 1, in November/ December 1995. But Reilly saves tradition with redesigned Spider-Man costume, lifestyle and hair colour as the established titles and numbering resume from January 1996. This issue (407) also features the Return of the DeFalco who writes through to 439 without ever recapturing the shine of his previous stint.

And thus could the clone story have ended, but it was so vilified from all quarters that Marvel finally realised They Had Made A Mistake. Further teasers culminated in the four-part 'Revelations'* storyline in the December 1996 issues. We now learn that the original Green Goblin did not die in 122. He has been manipulating all the major players behind the scenes, and rigged the scientific clone tests to read a false result. Re-enter Peter Parker as the one, true and only Spider-Man as Reilly disintegrates before his eyes. This story and its companion, the 1997 one-shot 'Osborn Journal', inevitably heap hundreds of further inconsistencies on the not inconsiderable pile. Nevertheless, it does as much as is humanly possible to fix an irredeemable shambles. In the midst of the chaos, 400 shines brightly. Marvel's most senior citizen passes away (temporarily at least) in a beautifully sentimental gem from Marc DeMatteis, bereft of histrionics, melodrama or superfights. Steve Skroce and Joe Bennett share an erratic pencilling schedule from 418-436. The main theme of these issues is the long running Black Tarantula plotline which comes to a showdown in 436 without ever causing raised heartbeats. Of this DeFalco stint, only the offbeat 420 guest starring X-Man offers any refreshment. Fill-ins and crossovers pad the first series, with John Byrne writing 440 and 441 as he warms up for the relaunch.

However, Byrne provides pencils only on series two as Howard Mackie takes over scripting, adding to his workload on *Peter Parker, Spider-Man*. Continuity between the two titles is inevitably tightened as they read like one bi-weekly comic. Scant originality surfaces as Peter Parker discards his Spider-Man identity for all of two issues and the third Spider-Woman debuts in 5 as a prelude to her own series. Mackie trots out an encore of all the familiar Peter Parker/ Spider-Man lifestyle problems already aired dozens of times before. The long running Senator Ward plot thread is resolved in 23-24's *Maximum Security* tie-in. 28, 29 and Annual 2001 (plus *Peter Parker, Spider-Man* 29 written by Paul Jenkins) showcase Mackie's swansong in which he resolves the mystery of Mary Jane – missing, presumed dead, since her aeroplane exploded in 13. Her return is delicately handled considering the overuse of clones and revived dead characters that has plagued so many previous stories.

J. Michael Straczynski's much anticipated writing debut in 30 raised the quality of the title to heights not seen in eons. 30-35* showed originality, patience to build plotlines slowly, a searching question concerning Spider-Man's origin, underlying motives for characters' actions and the truly terrifying new villain Morlun. Their conflict builds to a climax of unbearable tension in 35 and before breath can be drawn, that issue's cliffhanger heralds a story Marvel described as "40 years in the making". In truth it's a story Marvel has been procrastinating over for forty years, but is no less worthy for that. From 40 onwards stories mellow slightly but Straczynski maintains quality, particularly with his emphasis on character interplay.

There have been dozens of trade paperbacks reprinting assorted stories from the first run. The vast majority of 290-380 have been available in book form, and other collections are themed, picking battles with Green Goblin, Hobgoblin or Venom through the years, or the work of Frank Miller on *Spider-Man* (mostly from other titles). What would be considered the classic early stories are readily available. 1-50 of series one are reprinted in five volumes of the *Marvel Masterworks* series and the first ninety issues of series one are reprinted in four volumes of the black and white *Essential Spider-Man* collections.~APS

Recommended: Series one 15, 17-21, 23, 25-27, 31-33, 38-40, 47, 50, 63-65, 121-125, 129-131, 134-137, 139-149, 153, 201, 202, 238, 239, 243, 248-251, 259, 269, 270, 275, 276, 278, 289-294, 300, 308, 309, 314-317, 361-363, 400, Annual 19, 20, Series two 30-35, 37, 38~APS

Peter Parker, SPIDER-MAN

Marvel: *Series one 24 issues (75-98), 2 Annuals 1996-1998, series two 49 issues + 1999 to date*

The title change from the adjectiveless *Spider-Man* slips through almost unnoticed. Howard Mackie's scripts improved almost imperceptibly throughout his run. He is lucky to have had John Romita Jr on pencils for all bar a couple of fill-ins to the first series finale. The latter's deliciously stylish artwork has more than compensated for plots hamstrung by too many clutching fingers from Spider-Man's past as hordes of never-previously-mentioned relatives of Gwen Stacy appear out of thin air. An additional problem is that the occasional offbeat issues Mackie has thrown in (such as 90, 93) are inferior to his regular fare. 88, topped by a stunning cover, is a rare gem and 95 has its moments. Crossovers dominate the final few issues and Aunt May confirms her immortality by reappearing in 97 to lay the foundations for the second series.

Romita Jr's post relaunch artwork drops a few standards, possibly owing to excessive workload which also results in pencilling fill-ins in 4 and 5. Early issues are carbon copies of *Amazing Spider-Man*'s second series, also written by Mackie. He exhibits his gift for stringing plotlines past the point where readers care about their resolution. Kraven versus Venom in 17 is probably his best effort. Paul Jenkins takes over from 20 and immediately introduces much needed sensitivity, feeling

and genuine humour. Although his initial efforts are somewhat erratic, 25's final chapter of an otherwise tired, multi-title crossover, Green Goblin retread is genuinely gripping. By complete contrast, 26's one-shot is a thoroughly original change of perspective. Mark Buckingham's clean pencils would benefit from a little finesse in the inking department. Thereafter Jenkins' work irritatingly promises greatness without ever managing to achieve it.~APS
Recommended: Series one 88, Series two 25, 26

Peter Parker the Spectacular SPIDER-MAN

Marvel: *Series one 2 issues 1968, Series two 264 issues, 14 Annuals, 1 Super Special 1976-1998*

Series one was Marvel's first experiment with magazine publication, an election story by Stan Lee, John Romita and Jim Mooney later re-jigged in *Amazing Spider-Man* 116-118. The colour second issue by the same creative team is better, featuring a psychological set-to between Spider-Man and the Green Goblin in their civilian identities before developing into a standard Spider-Man battle. Series two was the only Marvel comic introduced in the 1970s to survive into the 1990s, and was initially intended to focus more on the complex social life of his alter ego Peter Parker, hence the title. There's minimal recognition of this inside the comic, but Parker's name only disappeared from the masthead of Spider-Man's second ongoing solo comic with 134.

For a title that eventually turned out well, the only spectacular thing about 1-50 is the amount of villains that attack Empire State University (five between 37 and 43 alone). Cheap sniggers can be had from CB character Razorback in 11 and the disco Hypno-Hustler in 24, and the dozen die-hard *Champions* fans will require 17-18, featuring the team breaking up. Roger Stern shows the first glimmer of adequacy among writers and from 57, despite ever-changing artists, he's turning out reasonable stories.

It's the surprising team of Bill Mantlo and Ed Hannigan from 62 who begin the first run of good issues. Hitting form early with the moody introduction of Cloak and Dagger in 64, Hannigan's pencils, inked by Al Milgrom, are detailed, imaginative, and occasionally live up to the titular adjective. Mantlo's writing outshines his work elsewhere by light-years, deftly juggling Peter Parker's university supporting cast, and even the most ridiculous of returning foes (Boomerang in 67) is made interesting. Their finest issue is Hannigan's last, 72, in which Spider-Man encounters a very different Doctor Octopus. Al Milgrom and Jim Mooney are the artists by 74, pleasingly concluding a long-running subplot concerning timid secretary Debra Whitman in the midst of a multi-issue war between Dr Octopus and the Owl, also involving the Black Cat. 80 is a fine solo run for *Daily Bugle* proprietor J. Jonah Jameson, and 84 an excellent tale about a kidnapped child. Mantlo's scripts remain above average until Spider-Man's ridiculous romance with the Black Cat pushes everything but supervillains out of the title.

The black-costume era starts with 90, and Al Milgrom writes to 100, restoring Peter Parker and cast. The majority of 103-136 are written by Peter David, displaying his customary facility for witty dialogue and situations. The most acclaimed story of his run is 'The Death of Jean De Wolff' in 107-110*, a detective story tracing the killer of the *Marvel Team-Up* supporting character, but the sequel in 134-136 is better. 103, 113 (in May Parker's old folks home) and the *Rashomon* tribute in 121 are also good, and there's a clever surprise revelation in 129. By 130 there are three monthly Spider-Man titles, and stories begin to cross over, providing a shorter wait between instalments, but meaning that some long-running subplots are cleared up in the other titles, although usually referenced here. Chapters of J.M. DeMatteis and Mike Zeck's laudable Kraven six-part story occupy 131-132, and there's a very good sequel of sorts, founded on the repression of childhood abuse, in 178-183.

There'd been no regular penciller since Al Milgrom, but Sal Buscema returns with 134, and makes up for lost time by pencilling for the next decade. In 137 Gerry Conway returns as writer, reuniting the team responsible for the first issue (original inker Mike Esposito is back with 154). Most of their issues are entertaining superhero comics with effective subplots and page-turning twists – second nature to Conway – and crisp, solid art – second nature to Buscema. In 139-143 the Punisher's back and *Bugle* Editor Joe Robertson faces the consequences of an early career mistake, a plot kept on the boil until 157, a good sampler of the Conway/Buscema style. There are two dumb villains, the hasty resolution to Joe Robertson's problems, and plenty of the supporting cast. In 158-160 Spider-Man is cosmically powered, making him, in effect, Superman, a stupid device predicating stupid stories, but from 161 it's business as usual. Conway's swansong sees the return of Dr Octopus in 173-175, and J.M. DeMatteis is back with 178. His plots are slender, but he compensates with accomplished characterisation. Parker's Aunt May is transformed from the comic hindrance to Spider-Man's dual identity she'd been for twenty-five years to a sympathetic old lady and villains seen umpteen times previously are given believable motivation for their actions. A particular triumph is his unsettling depiction of the madness afflicting the Green Goblin (189, 200). While maintaining elements of continuity, DeMatteis' stories are generally complete in a set amount of issues. 'Funeral Arrangements' in 186-188 is a good sample of his style, as The Vulture has cancer and wants to tie up his life neatly before death. Sal Buscema, inking his own pencils, continues to be excellent throughout.

After DeMatteis concludes his first tenure with the 'Maximum Carnage' chapters (201-203), a variety of writers try their hand until the start of the infamous 'Spider-Clone' saga, none with particular distinction. Beginning in 216, the 'Spider-Clone' story runs as individual chapters through all *Spider-Man* titles until 229, and is dealt with in the review of *Amazing Spider-Man*. Sal Buscema remains as penciller but Bill Sienkiewicz's inks make for an uncomfortable mixture, much improved when he's replaced by John Stanisci. A dumb marketing move replaces the title for two months with The *Spectacular Scarlet Spider* (don't bother with it), and from the reinstatement with 230 Ben Reilly is Spider-Man for a short while, with an almost blank slate for writers – not that it seems to make a difference. With the mess of 'Spider-Clone' brought to a predictable conclusion the status quo is restored, and there's an immediate improvement. 241 is a decent stocktaking issue from DeMatteis, dynamically, if not always anatomically correctly, drawn by the team of Luke Ross and Stanisci, and from that point it's acceptable material all the way to the end. The return of several extremely stupid villains in 246 is handled with some panache, and DeMatteis crawls under the skin of Spider-Man's earliest villain the Chameleon in the issues prior to that. Then there's the return of Kraven and Norman Osborn, both previously believed deceased, and a new Jack O'Lantern manipulating events to destroy Jonah Jameson's family. It's all enthralling superhero soap opera, and adding a darker touch is a delve into the character of long-time cast member Flash Thompson, particularly a minus one issue (don't ask) contrasting his childhood with that of Peter Parker. Unfortunately, though, an oversize 250 merely keeps the pot boiling and resolves nothing. The final issues cross over with other Spider-Man titles for the story concluding their runs, resurrecting someone unexpected to the collective groan of Spider-Man fans everywhere.

Best of the annuals are the John Byrne-drawn battle with Dr Octopus in 1, and Peter David and Mark Beachum's stories of the mysterious Ace in 5 and 6.~WJ
Recommended: 64, 66, 67, 69, 70, 72, 80, 84, 103, 131, 132, 139-142, 157, 173-175, 178-183, 186-189, 200, 242, 243

Sensational SPIDER-MAN

Marvel: *34 issues (0-33), 1 Annual 1996-1998*

Seemingly replacing *Web of Spider-Man* only to trumpet the signing of writer and penciller Dan Jurgens, the cover of the zero issue is adorned with a nice multi-pose Spider-Man reflector. 1-7 exhibit the Jurgens trademarks of perfectly acceptable ideas, good art and woefully uninspired script. In his defence, he wasn't helped with the latter by plots intruding from other *Spider-Man* titles. Unfortunately, once the editorial decision to dispense with this had been made, Jurgens had gone. Todd Dezago writes the remaining issues and Mike Wieringo draws most in his appealing cartoon style, the pair providing readable stories throughout. The highlight of the run is the annual. Actually titled *Sensational Spider-Man '96*, it's a reworking of *Amazing Spider-Man* 15, by J.M. DeMatteis, the writer who's been most successful with the villain of the piece, Kraven. Unlike most reworkings of old stories, Kraven's début retreads familiar ground, but adds to the original in myriad subtle ways without either ruining or discounting it, and the art of Shawn McManus is delightful. A back-up strip returns the original Spider-Woman.~FP

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* Available in a collected edition

Recommended: *Sensational Spider-Man '96*

Web of SPIDER-MAN

Marvel: *129 issues, 10 Annuals, 1 Super Special, 1985-1996*

This replaced *Marvel Team-Up* after the latter's cancellation. The main periods of creative stability centre around Alex Saviuk, who pencilled 35-116 apart from about a dozen fill-ins, and writers Gerry Conway (47-70), Howard Mackie (84-96) and Terry Kavanagh (97-120). Paradoxically, however, better issues cluster amongst the early numbers, even though most read as routine fill-ins between Spider-Man's adventures in his other titles.

11-12, written by Danny Fingeroth and Peter David, confront Peter Parker with a tricky moral dilemma when he's tempted to adopt a vigilante role in his civilian identity. 29-30, by Jim Owsley, oversee the finale of the first Hobgoblin plotline. Much more than just a recap, these excellent issues adroitly tie up all loose ends of a complex story and capture the despair of the Kingpin's son. 31-32, along with *Amazing Spider-Man* 293-294 and *Spectacular Spider-Man* 131-132, print the outstanding 'Kraven's Last Hunt' by Marc DeMatteis and Mike Zeck. Peter David entraps Betty Brant in a religious cult in 40-43, which also feature Mary Jane contemplating nude modelling and Aunt May chancing across the glossies.

Conway brought consistency – unfortunately of a second-rate nature – but Saviuk's barren pencils supplied little nourishment. Their best effort has Chameleon kidnapping and replacing J.J. Jameson (50-54). Conway's long-running sub-plot of Mary Jane's young cousin Kristy's bout of anorexia provides needed substance. The series slid further downhill after Conway's departure. Mackie's 'Name of the Rose' (84-89) instils a brief surge as a new character adopts the Rose identity, but the original Rose sequence in *Amazing Spider-Man* is far superior. 100, 104-109 contain short solo back-up strips of Spider-Man supporting characters Nightwatch, Cardiac and Calypso. 'The Return of the Clone' storyline starts in earnest in 117 and wraps around all the Spider-Man titles. It is discussed in the review of *Amazing Spider-Man*.

Like the other *Spider* titles, *Web of Spider-Man* was cancelled in October 1995 and replaced by Scarlet issues: *Web of Scarlet Spider* 1-4. Unlike its counterparts, it did not reappear and was replaced by *Sensational Spider-Man*.~APS

Recommended: 11-13, 29-32, 37, 40-43, 49

Untold Tales of SPIDER-MAN

Marvel: *25 issues, 2 Annuals 1995-1997, one-shot ('Strange Encounters') 1998*

By the 1990s keeping track of Spider-Man's life had become unenviably complex over the assorted titles he occupied, never mind factoring in specials and guest appearances. Those who yearned for the simpler self-contained stories of previous years found their solution here, with continuity implants set in the earliest days of Spider-Man's career. He'd already met a few of his regular foes, but they'd not yet become too familiar. Kurt Busiek manages a good impersonation of Stan Lee's original snappy dialogue for Spider-Man and Peter Parker's self-pity, and given that comics are now more character-driven than in Spider-Man's introductory years, he's able to provide a greater depth to the slimmer supporting cast. He's also wise enough to retrain from an excess of knowing captions or dialogue. Penciller Pat Olliffe's wisdom is in not imitating the Steve Ditko artwork from the period portrayed, providing more modern layouts and style. All issues are self-contained, and *Untold Tales* is a consistently involving and satisfactory read. Any issue sampled will provide better than average superhero entertainment. The annuals are labelled '96 and '97, with Mike Allred drawing the first and Tom Lyle the second, and both match the high standards of the series. The 1998 one-shot has an encounter between Spider-Man and Dr Strange, but is oddly disappointing. 1-8 are collected.~WJ

SPIDER-MAN ADVENTURES

Marvel *15 issues 1994-1996*

Tales of Spider-Man based on the Fox TV show. As with Marvel's other TV tie ins, the stories stand apart from the accepted universe, so the long run of guest-stars such as Venom, the Punisher and Nick Fury are somewhat out of character. It works as a series aimed at young, casual readers however, delivering simple, solid, old-fashioned superhero action.~WW

SPIDER-MAN; CHAPTER ONE

Marvel: *13 issues (0-12) 1998-1999*

John Byrne takes it upon himself to retell classic stories from Spider-Man's early years, adding extra material of his own creation, and providing 'new details' concerning Spidey's origin and his first meetings with most of his classic villains. It's all competently enough done, and an okay read if, by any bizarre mischance, you don't know all this stuff about Spidey's background already. To those of more mature vintage, the implicit smug attitude of, "Well, Lee & Ditko didn't tell these stories properly the first time round, so I'm doing it right..." will rankle more than somewhat.~HS

SPIDER-MAN CLASSICS

Marvel: *16 issues 1993-1994*

Issue 1 reprints the origins of Spider-Man and Doctor Strange from *Amazing Fantasy* 15 and *Strange Tales* 115. Reprints of *Amazing Spider-Man* 1-15 follow.~APS

SPIDER-MAN DIGEST

Marvel:*13 issues 1987-1989*

Bumper-size title continuing reprints of *Amazing Spider-Man* from 51 on after *Marvel Tales* stopped its consecutive reprints in 190 and went hot. Three issues of *Amazing* are packed into each Digest. The title changed to *Spider-Man Comics Magazine* with 7.~APS

SPIDER-MAN Graphic Novels and One-shots

The expansive variety of Spider-Man one-shots ranges from special projects deserving of graphic-novel status to mundane offerings amounting to little more than big, thick comic books. All are independently produced by unrelated creators and quality varies accordingly.

It's old boys' reunion day in 'Fear Itself' as Lee, Conway and Andru concoct a routine tale of Spider-Man and Silver Sable sucked into a Baron Zemo scheme. When the plot involves a fear-provoking, hallucinogenic gas, you just know an overdose of padded pages will follow. *The Holiday Special* 1995 stuffs stockings with five tales of Spidey and his pals all baked to give you that cosy Yuletide feel. Spider-Man goes magical-dimension-hopping in 'Hooky', with Doctor Strange, unusually, nowhere in sight. With a child sorcerer in tow, this has all the ingredients of schmaltz overload. However, Susan Putney's charming story and Berni Wrightson's sumptuous, expansive artwork deliver one of Spider-Man's most off-beat adventures. 'Legacy of Evil' gives sophisticated treatment to the aftermath of the Green Goblin. It reads much like a Goblin biography but has enough substance to carry its own weight. 'Maximum Clonage' Alpha and Omega are crap tie-ins to the infamous clone saga, intertwining with Spider-Man's ongoing titles. Later Roger Stern attempts more retro engineering in 'Dead Man's Hand' to resolve inconsistencies in the clone saga. It doesn't work.

Published two years after the wedding issue, Parallel Lives' history class compares and contrasts Peter and Mary Jane. All script and artwork is new, despite reprising many panels from past issues. Background details are retrospectively fleshed out; most significantly that Mary Jane discovered that Peter Parker is Spider-Man during the events of *Amazing Fantasy* 15. One for Spider-Man connoisseurs only. Like most sequels, 'Soul of the Hunter' is inferior to its ancestor, the really outstanding 'Kraven's Last Hunt' storyline in *Amazing Spider-Man* 293, 294, *Spectacular Spider-Man* 131, 132 and *Web of Spider-Man* 31, 32. Unlike most sequels, it is excellent. Peter Parker must lay Kraven's soul to rest in this palpable portrayal of his haunting. DeMatteis' cultured, if intense, script unfolds fine Mary Jane characterisation as she assuages Peter's agony. The pencil/ink team of Mike Zeck and Bob McLeod displays its customary synergy as their chaste artwork comes to life on the page. Stan Lee's reunion with John Romita Sr. on *Spider-Man Kingpin*. 'To the Death' fails to rally any nostalgia as wooden prose chaperones Tom DeFalco's lifeless plot. The title is, of course, a complete misnomer.

Spider-Man and Batman is a Marvel/DC co-production written by DeMatteis, who plays it dead safe as he trots out the heroes' familiar character traits. Twin lunatics Joker and Carnage contribute to adequate superheroics. In *Spider-Man / Gen*^{13}, Peter David delivers one of his flatter efforts as he struggles to think of a reason for yet another cross company team-up.

'The Way To Dusty Death' has veterans Roy Thomas and Gerry Conway recycling a veteran plot as Spider-Man and Doctor Strange team up to fight their perennial nemesis Xandu. A bountiful premise is wasted by Terry Kavanagh in 'Designer Genes' as he produces a slugfest from the uneasy alliance formed by Spider-Man, Punisher and Sabretooth. Roxxon Corporation, their common enemy, manufactures chimeras to pad out the page count. Ugly, misproportioned artwork from Scott McDaniel does not assist. *Spider-Man versus Wolverine* pairs the twosome in Berlin and it's not for sightseeing. The dialogue is first-rate, a major character dies and Jim Owsley's depiction of Spider-Man losing his bottle is highly convincing. Further ramifications continue in *Amazing Spider-Man* 289. Charles Vess indulges his love of the Scottish Highlands in 'Spirits of the Earth' as Peter and Mary Jane take a vacation. The beautiful, mellow art does justice to the location and the domestic aspects are warm as the New Yorkers interact with the locals, but the main plot reeks of habitual megalomaniacs and predictable holographic Scottish ghosts. The vignette of Spider-Man impeded by a herd of cows sitting in the road is risible. In *Trial of Venom*, Spider-Man, Daredevil and Venom meet L.A.Law in the famous UNICEF donation special. Peter David injects just enough intrigue to rise above the gimmick. In 'The Venom Agenda', though, Larry Hama rehashes the same tired production already seen far too many times from Marvel's most overused villain.

After 1998's *Spider-Man* 'Made Men Marvel' called a temporary halt to the one-shots. That title is a gross misrepresentation as Spider-Man appears for a wordless two panel cameo. *Daily Bugle* reporter Ben Urich narrates a documentary of all out war amongst the New York City crime bosses with Kingpin as the focus. Howard Mackie delivers one of his marginally better efforts. The *Spider-Man* film prompted a restart, though, not least the adaptation. Of more recent efforts, the most unusual is *The Megalomaniacal Spider-Man*, in which Peter Bagge pens and draws the ultimate Spider-Man "what-if?". All of Peter Parker's neuroses are squeezed dry for maximum mileage in this ineffective parody. In the tiresome 'Sweet Charity', Ron Zimmerman drags a five page gag into a double sized sixty-four page one-shot, but Brett Matthews' low key plot and Vatche Mavlian's nocturnal artwork combine to sheer delight in the utterly unpretentious and heartwarming Marvel Knights *Spider-Man Daredevil* one-shot. *Spider-Man/Marrow* is a routine one-shot in which Scott Lobdell's attempts to evoke sympathy for Marrow fall flat. Do not take your anatomy lessons from Ale Garza. Despite a full forty-eight pages of story, The Official Movie Adaptation is too short. Although it is faithful to the film, all bridging material is stripped out to accommodate the required length resulting in a disjointed, episodic feel. Stan Lee's scripting is barely adequate but the fine Alan Davis and Mark Farmer artwork produces characters having a remarkable resemblance to the screen actors.

'Clone Journals', 'Jackal Files', *Spider-Man vs Dracula* and 'Parker Years' are reprints. The first two feature edited reprints of clone-related matters, *Spider-Man vs Dracula* reprints *Giant-Size Spider-Man* 1 and in 'Parker Years', Spider-Man or his clone (who knows or cares?) grapples with the validity of his past years unknowingly spent in clone form and fills an enormous number of pages with flashbacks in doing so.~APS

Recommended: 'Hooky', Soul of the Hunter, *Spider-Man Daredevil, Spider-Man versus Wolverine*

SPIDER-MAN miniseries

Deadly Foes of Spider-Man 4 issues 1991, Spider-Man Saga 4 issues 1991-1992, Lethal Foes of Spider-Man 4 issues 1993, Mutant Agenda 4 issues (0-3) 1994, Web of Doom 3 issues 1994, Spider-Man/X-Factor: Shadowgames 3 issues 1994, Spider-Man Megazine 6 issues 1994-1995, The Arachnis Project 6 issues 1994-1995, Friends And Enemies 4 issues 1995, Power of Terror 4 issues 1995, Funeral For An Octopus 3 issues 1995, The Final Adventure 4 issues 1995-1996, The Lost Years 4 issues (0-3) 1995-1996*, Redemption 4 issues 1996, Spider-Man/Punisher: Family Affair 2 issues 1996, Hobgoblin Lives 3 issues 1997, Death and Destiny 3 issues 2000, Revenge of the Green Goblin 3 issues 2000, Lifeline 3 issues 2001, The Mysterio Manifesto 3 issues 2001, Quality of Life 4 issues 2002, Spider-Man's Get Kraven 6 issue miniseries 2002-2003, Spider-Man and the Black Cat: The Evil that Men Do 3 issues + 2002 to date, Spider-Man: Blue 6 issue miniseies 2002-2003*,*

There is scant story reason for any of these titles to merit their own series. Each could quite comfortably have been accommodated as a continuing story in an ongoing *Spider-Man* title. But as limited series became increasingly viable in direct-market outlets, marketing fads demanded their presence to capitalise on a popular character and to maximise the number of titles on retailers' shelves having issue number 1 on the cover. These outings do afford irregular *Spider-Man* creators the opportunity to road-test the character, but results are generally below the standard of the continuing *Spider-Man* titles.

Arachnis Project serves up substandard superheroics as Spider-Man helps out an old college professor in time of need and excessive numbers of villains pile in. *Deadly Foes* looks at events from the point of view of six Spider-foes as Spider-Man grants little more than a token guest appearance. The villains are portrayed as bumbling incompetents in this verbose offering from Danny Fingeroth and Al Milgrom. *Lethal Foes* serves as its sequel and mixes a somewhat more concrete effort. Nevertheless, it is still feeble, as villains appear from nowhere and play pass-the-parcel with a nuclear blaster. 'Death and Destiny' is another continuity implant which attempts to fill some admittedly large holes in the events following Captain Stacy's death in *Amazing Spider-Man* 90. Lee Weeks' story fails to entirely satisfy although his art is beautifully bleak during the poignant moments. In Final Adventure, the one who thinks he is a clone leaves New York City to the other Spider-Man. His wife and unborn child move to Oregon with him. He works in a scientific research institution and vows never to don the costume again. She leaves him when he does. This touching, well-written and well-researched tale from Fabian Nicieza and Darick Robertson is the only silver lining on the dark, clouded clone saga. Darkhawk, Nova and Speedball team up in 'Friends and Enemies' to save six newly empowered teenagers from a variety of evil clutches. Spider-Man's appearance is a mere courtesy. Danny Fingeroth sprouts plot events without reason in a story that should appeal to a very juvenile audience. 'Funeral For An Octopus' is a clone-tied miniseries starring the Amazing and Scarlet Spider-Men as an undignified squabble breaks out over the Octopus arms following the Doctor's death in *Spectacular Spider-Man* 221. Tables are turned as Spider-Man wears the tentacles, but no events of consequence transpire. In 'Hobgoblin Lives', Roger Stern is awarded the opportunity to rewrite the Hobgoblin saga as he intended following his abrupt departure from *Amazing Spider-Man* with 251. His exemplary story admirably maintains continuity with all elements of the convoluted Hobgoblin plotline with no sacrifice to entertainment value as the mystery unfolds. Ron Frenz's pencils are undistinguished (is a different inker every issue essential?) although partly redeemed by a few lovely, single panel reverences to the 1960s Green Goblin legend. 'Lifeline' is a pedestrian slice of late 1960s Spider-Man as Fabian Nicieza pens a direct sequel to the Tablet of Eternal Youth story (which runs intermittently through *Amazing Spider-Man* 68-75) with all the associated second string villains and nostalgic ambience. Steve Rude's art disappoints.

'The Lost Years' is a clone spin-off in which a Parker body fills in his life during the five absent years between 1975 and 1995 (work that one out). Marc DeMatteis' thoughtful script is somewhat overloaded with character introspection. John Romita Jr/Klaus Janson turn out clean artwork, but the entire affair is incomprehensible without intimate knowledge of fifty other Spiderclone issues; it's also rendered meaningless by subsequent clone reversals. The posthumously released zero issue reprints clone stories barely a year old. 'Redemption' is an inferior sequel in which clone scenarios already recycled a thousand times are brought out for yet another airing. In 'The Mysterio Manifesto', Tom DeFalco attempts an entertaining story to clarify the mystery of Mysterio's death in the early issues of Daredevil (second series). He fails on both counts. In Mutant Agenda, Spider-Man and Beast confront Hobgoblin and Brand Corporation in an anti-mutant narrative. The zero issue is essentially a blank 'stamp album' to paste in the daily newspaper strips that simultaneously ran a version of the same story. 'Power of Terror' clashes heroes with villains in a cast of thousands as the Maggia battles for control of New York City in Gregory Wright's messy plot. The emotional angst Peter Parker suffers from the bloodbath and Darick Robertson's pencils are the plus points. 'Revenge of the Green Goblin' plots Norman Osborn's return to sanity in a story riddled with an over use of substance induced dream sequences. It concludes in *Amazing Spider-Man* 25 (second series) and *Peter Parker* 25 (second series). *Spider-Man/Punisher: Family* Affair has the co-stars thrashing out their usual stances on killing whilst up against the Mob in a standard story by Tom Lyle enhanced by a fine moral ending. 'Shadowgames' pits Spider-Man and X-Factor against designer supervillains courtesy of a shady military research project. Kurt Busiek and Pat Broderick conjure a rare event: meaningful contributions from Spider-Man supporting characters in a limited series. In '*Web of Doom*', a civilian suffocates to death, cocooned by Spider-Man's webbing. Jack C. Harris fails to capitalise on a favourable premise.

Try 'Quality of Life' for a taste of Spider-Man a little on the wild side. Greg Rucka produces an above par story with a dynamic new villain. Scott Sava's computer generated art may be all plasticine models and toy building bricks but the use of perspective and reflection is marvellous. In *Black Cat*, Kevin Smith's offering of a team-up against a drugs baron fails to meet expectations despite a neat superpower twist. Terry and Rachel Dodson's artwork has too much of a cosy, real home fire feeling and while the banter between Spider-Man and Black Cat just about saves the comic, even that strains. Following 3 there has been a long hiatus. In a similar vein to *Daredevil: Yellow*, Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale re-live Peter Parker's early years in *Spider-Man: Blue*. They do well to avoid the oft re-told Ditko era and focus instead on *Amazing Spider-Man* (series one) 40-48 when Gwen Stacy and Mary Jane Watson first hit centre stage together. Although plenty of liberties are taken with the continuity, it's a treat for nostalgia buffs and the dreamy artwork suits the mood perfectly, but rather too much has already been seen of Peter Parker's over-sentimental reminiscences of his lost love Gwen. An awful lot of people do an awful lot of talking in Spider-Man's *Get Kraven*. Ron Zimmerman's Hollywood send-up propels Kraven's jaded son, Al, to the West Coast to produce a movie whilst Spider-Man's contribution is strictly on the sidelines. John McCrea's pencils suit the lampoon perfectly and although Zimmerman's dialogue is slick and snappy, it is unfortunate that too many established characters are almost unrecognisable, having been infected with Zimmerman's sense of humour.

Megazine weighs in at ninety-six pages an issue and reprints selected issues from Spider-Man's ongoing titles, predominantly guest-starring hot characters. Saga chronicles a biography of Spider-Man using pasted panels from old issues linked by a new textual framing sequence. Each issue covers approximately seventy-five issues of *Amazing Spider-Man*, ending with 300, shortly after his marriage to Mary Jane.~APS

Recommended: Final Adventure 1-4

SPIDER-MAN TEAM-UP

Marvel: *7 issues 1995-1997*

Marvel Team-Up revived with a more obvious name in an oversize quarterly format. One wonders why. In 1-4 there's Spider-Man alongside the X-Men, Silver Surfer, the Fantastic Four and the Avengers, and the final two issues have Doctor Strange and the Thunderbolts. Despite the use of high-profile creators, they're all working on autopilot and there's nothing to justify the extended format or price. The best issue by a country mile is 5, containing a decent teaming with Gambit, and the far better Steve Gerber-written story reuniting both Gerber and Spider-Man with Howard the Duck. Gerber has a ball reviving the elf from his *Defenders* run and guest-starring the Savage Dragon (but hush, it's a secret), in the process subtly moving Howard to Image Comics. It's no classic, but far better than could be expected. In 1997 the illogical nature of the quarterly title finally percolated, and it was replaced with a revived *Marvel Team-Up*.~WJ

SPIDER-MAN:THE MANGA

Marvel: *31 issues 1997-1999**

Twice monthly for most of its run, this black and white series reprints the Japanese version of Spider-Man, drawn by Ryoichi Ikegami, the man who later became famous for his lush illustrative work on *Mai the Psychic Girl*, Sanctuary, and others. However, readers searching for Ikegami's characteristic rich texture and subtle facial expressions are in for disappointment, as this is crudely and cartoonishly drawn, either due to an immaturity in Ikegami's art at this stage in his career, or a deliberate choice because of the subject matter. The strip is mostly a straight transplant of the stock Spider-Man characters into a Nihongo setting; Peter Parker becomes mild-mannered student Yu Komori, Gwen/Mary Jane becomes his 'penpal' Rumiko Shirashi, his aged aunt becomes, well, his aged aunt, and so on. Komori gets a job working for the irascible publisher of the Joho newspaper, Japanized versions of villains such as Electro and the Kangaroo pop up, and it's all very familiar and diluted. Occasionally, an original villain appears such as the tragic Winter Woman in 23-24, whose heartbreak inadvertently causes disaster, and things break away from the rut, but even then, it's not really very good, just refreshing by comparison with the dumbed-down retreads that surround it.~HS

SPIDER-MAN 2099

Marvel: *46 issues, 1 Annual, 1 Special 1994-1996*

Most accessible of the 2099 titles, based in the Marvel Universe of 100 years hence, as Miguel O'Hara, hot-housed wunderkind of Alchemax, one of the mega-corporations that run the world, falls victim to his own genetic imprinting experiment, ably assisted by some timely sabotage by his assistant. In no time at all he's facing down a legion of superfoes and big-business evildoers in a world where the current obsession with corporate villainy reaches its ultimate extreme. It's good old fashioned fun from Peter David, Rick Leonardi and Al Williamson for the first two years, but eventually the stories run out of steam and Leonardi's replacement, Joe St Pierre whilst capable, lacks the easy flamboyance that typified the character.~WW

SPIDER-MAN UNLIMITED

Marvel: *Series one 22 issues 1993-1998, series two 5 issues 1999*

For the most part the first oversize quarterly series ran a long story not constrained by being connected with the regular *Spider-Man* comics. Unless, of course, money could be made by launching an expensive new comic with a protracted plot that runs through all Spider-Man titles before concluding in the second issue three months later, as was the case with

'Maximum Carnage' in 1-2. 10 also concludes a multi-part storyline. Sadly, given the opportunity, space, and no continuity restrictions, there's little more than average material throughout, with plenty of it downright shoddy. Tom DeFalco and Ron Lim's biography of Dr Octopus in 3 has moments, as does the reunion of Power Man and Iron Fist in 13. The best issues of the run are 16 and 19, decently plotted and written by Mark Bernado, but hindered by the unappealing stylised pencils of then regular artist Joe Bennett. Overall, stay well away unless you have an abiding fondness for Marvel's Z-list characters, who co-star regularly.

The second series ties into the animated TV show that had Spider-Man transported to Counter-Earth, an alternate Earth where humans are second class citizens, subordinate to sentient animals. Venom and Carnage come along for the ride, and a Green Goblin and a Wolverine soon show up, so one might ask "why bother?" That the comic only lasted five issues shows what readers thought, and they were right.~WJ

SPIDER-MAN'S TANGLED WEB

Marvel: *19 issues + 2001 to date*

An analogue to *Legends of the Dark Knight* permitting continuity-free self-contained stories of Spider-Man's world. Villains take the spotlight, some making debut performances. 'The Thousand' in 1-3 by Garth Ennis and artist John McCrea is a terrifying horror sequence where Spidey encounters someone who is definitely more spider than man. 'Severance Package' in 4 by Greg Rucka and Eduardo Risso gives Kingpin the *100 Bullets* treatment in a chilling story. 5-6 by Peter Milligan and Duncan Fegredo is a sad story of the Rhino inspired to escape his own stupidity for the illusion of love. All these issues are collected. 7-9 is a sentimental tale about a regular Joe who knows Spidey's secret identity written by Bruce Jones with Lee Weeks pencils inked by Joe Rubinstein. 'Ray of Light' in 10 uses Kaare Andrews' mixed media artwork to evoke the reality of TV heroes through a child's eyes. Darwyn Cooke's 11 is in entertaining retro cartoon-show style and placing it after 10's story is a stroke of either luck or expertise by the editor. Frog Man, now an ex-convict, is living with his son in 12 by Zeb Wells with crunchy artwork by Fegredo. Newcomer Ron Zimmerman has villains meeting for a drink and talk about chicks in 13, drawn by Sean Phillips, with Kraven particularly boorish. We meet the wrestler that Spidey defeats during his origin story in 14 by Brian Azzarello and Scott Levy. 15 features The Collaborator – the story of a super villain's daughter to match 12's boy. The slow, atmospheric build up by Paul Pope leads to a cramped and anticlimactic confrontation with the police. Heartbreaker in 16-17 is drawn by Leandro Fernandez whose caricaturish Risso style makes this seamy prison drama starring Tombstone seem humourous, which it isn't. Ted McKeever's 'Alphabet City' in 18 features squabbling losers Typeface and Spellcheck! Grizzly and Rhino's attempts at dating by Robbie Morrison and artist Jim Mahfood in 19 is a side-splitter! There's a curious mix of horror and violence with humour and sensitivity but instead of pushing the series apart these elements afford some excellent emotional counterpoint. Warning: you don't see much of Spider-Man after 1-3.~SW

Recommended: 5-6, 19

SPIDER-WOMAN

Marvel: *50 issues 1978-1983*

With astonishing restraint, it took Marvel almost fifteen years to introduce a female counterpart to their most popular character, and then, rumour has it, only in order to copyright the name before anyone else did so. Having been introduced in *Marvel Spotlight* 32, she was either foolishly or admirably, depending on your point of view, designed to be as different as possible from Spider-Man. Initial issues, although featuring costumed villains, were set in a distinctly horror milieu, with stories emphasising Spider-Woman's macabre background. 9's 'Eye of the Needle' features as demented and bizarre a villain as you're ever likely to see in comics, but the majority of issues by Mark Gruenwald and Carmine Infantino, although passable, didn't really thrill. Neither did much else. Chris Claremont writes the best run between 34 and 45, which contain some nice art from Steve Leialoha, although it's muddied beyond belief by the appalling printing used by Marvel at the time. Their best issues are 42-44, wherein the Silver Samurai and the Viper, an incompatible pairing of villains for some reason very close to Claremont's heart, go through their paces, and Claremont surprises with a seemingly capricious revelation to end 44. The best sampler of their run is the daft Impossible Man story in 45. If you like that try more. Ann Nocenti and Brian Postman finish the series, restoring the dark mood and producing an unpredictable conclusion.~FP

SPIDER-WOMAN

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1993-1994*

This is new Spider-Woman, introduced in *Secret Wars*. She's strong and she psychically projects spider webs, prompting one to ask why she doesn't project psychic brick walls instead. Her other novelty is that she's bringing up a pre-teen daughter. This series tinkers with her origin while her parents come to visit, and while never less than competent it's never more than competent either. With the demise of *Force Works* she's been left in limbo, though she meets the original article in *Sensational Spider-Man* annual 1.~FP

SPIDER-WOMAN

Marvel: *18 issues 1999-2000*

Marvel's third attempt at Spider-Woman is teenage Mattie Franklin, who is the niece of J. Jonah Jameson, editor of the *Daily Bugle* and chief Spider-man hater. Mattie is your average modern teenage super-type: clever, feisty, full of one-liners and in trouble at school. John Byrne's writing is average here, with little of the flair which at one time made his name mean something. Mattie spends her time bumping into a whole list of second-rate villains, with Flesh and Bones her most recurring foes. The nicest touch is the way Mattie keeps changing her costume: something a teenage girl would quite possibly do. On the art front, Bart Sears' pencils look a little rushed, but are still a lot more fun than those by Graham Nolan, who fills in on 8 and 14, and Erik Larsen's efforts on 10. By 18, it's all over and we seem no further forward than when we started. Readable, but forgettable.~DB

SPIN WORLD

Amaze Ink: *4 issue miniseries 1997-1998*

Brent Anderson, with creative partner Eric Vinicoff, waited over two decades to bring his stories of an eight kilometer long city space station into print, first not considering himself a proficient enough artist to realise his imagination, then waylaid by work for hire assignments. It's a shame that by publication, the comic market had dwindled to almost nothing. These stories of a near future are imaginative, with the Spacing Dutchman an impressive backdrop, but succeed because they're about people. 1 profiles medical student Sharon's battles with the AMA over the healing powers of a dolphin, 2-3 have Agent Bergenholm investigating teenage delinquency and a spy, and in 4 Dr Obami Bassa is seconded to work on a transmutation device while naïve about the political consequences. Brent Anderson carried *Spin World* around for twenty years. The least you can do is read them.~FP

Recommended: 1-4

THE SPIRAL PATH

Eclipse: *2 issue microseries 1986*

Two-issue reprint of Steve Parkhouse's rather dull tale of shamanism and magical battles, originally printed in British anthology title *Warrior*. Parkhouse is a much more talented artist than he is a writer, but his artwork, while faultless in its detail, somehow bogged down the story. Overall the strip reads as though it belongs to a bygone age.~FJ

SPIRAL ZONE

DC: *4-issue miniseries 1988*

Three careers, those of writer Michael Fleisher, penciller Carmine Infantino and inker Don Heck, reach their lowest ebb in this insipid, witless Tonka-toy spin-off. A must miss.~HS

SPIRE CHRISTIAN COMICS

Spire/Barbour: *50 one-shots 1972-1983*

Spire Christian Comics have a strange genesis and history, which remains incompletely documented. In the early 1970's, the Revell Company, publishers of inspirational Christian books, approached cartoonist Al Hartley to adapt some of their titles into comics form under the Spire imprint. Revell's output mostly consisted of 'true-life' stories of people whose lives had been touched by Christ, and included such books as *The Cross and the Switchblade* (preacher coverts Hispanic gang leader), *The Hiding Place* (sisters sustain each other through imprisonment and persecution), and the astonishing *Hansi, the Girl Who Loved the Swastika* (Hitler youth chick finds God). Al Hartley was a comics creator whose work had appeared since the 1940's on a regular basis. During the 1960's, he had worked at Marvel on Westerns, romance, the occasional superhero story and Patsy Walker, but by the mid-1960's he was at Archie, where he worked on their entire line. Hartley asked John Goldwater, the copyright holder for the Archie characters, for permission to use them in a series of one-off titles. Seeing it as good publicity, Goldwater gave approval on condition that sales were restricted to Christian bookstores, so as not to compete, or be confused with, the regular Archie series. Spire's product, undoubtedly bolstered by the Archie presence, soon grew to include autobiographies of famous contemporary Christians, bible stories (both classic and 'modern-dress' versions) and kiddie comics for the under-tens in the *Barney Bear* series.

There is no definitive list, but there have been at least fifty different Spire Christian Comics, of which twenty or so are Archie-based. The comics lack dates or issue numbers, as they were supposed to remain on bookshelves for a long time. They are not Comics Code approved due to tactful but clear references to sex, drugs, and other sins which the virtuous are supposed to eschew, and there are numerous printings, with price variations. Prices almost always ended, strangely, in 9c (39c-69c) apart from a brief period at 35c. Due to their peculiar distribution and frequent reprintings, release dates on the Spire titles, and even the precise number of titles published, remains unclear. They appear to have been issued over the course of a decade, with the earliest sighted being *The Cross and the Switchblade*, *God's Smuggler* and *Archie's One Way* in 1972, and the last, as far as present research can determine, being *Archie & Big Ethel* in 1982 and *Archie's Sports Scene* in 1983. Spire was jointly owned by the Barbour brothers, Hugh and Bill, and Hugh later started Barbour Christian Comics, which reprinted many of the Spires in the mid-1980's. These can often be found with either Spire or Barbour logo, further muddying the picture.

The known titles are listed below, categorised and starting with the Archie-related material. *Archie & Big Ethel, Archie & Mr. Wetherbee, Archie's Car, Archie's Circus, Archie's Clean Slate, Archie's Date Book, Archie's Family Album, Archie's Festival, Archie Gets A Job, Archie's Love Scene, Archie's One Way, Archie's Parables, Archie's Roller Coaster, Archie's Something Else, Archie's Sonshine, Archie's Sports Scene, Archie's World, Christmas With Archie, Jughead's Soul Food.* Known bible stories are *Adam & Eve, Alpha & Omega, Live It Up, My Brother's Keeper, Paul, There's A New World Coming. Noah's Ark* is also a bible story, but labelled a "kiddie christian comic", as are *God is...*, *Barney Bear* and other titles starring *Barney: Family Tree, Lost & Found, Out of the Woods, Sunday School Picnic, The Swamp Gang!*, and *Wakes Up*. The true life and witnessing category encompasses *Adventures With the Brothers, Attack!, The Cross and the Switchblade, Crossfire, God's Smuggler, the Gospel Blimp, Hansi the Girl Who Loved the Swastika, The Hiding Place, In His Steps, In The Presence of Mine Enemies, Through Gates of Splendour*, and *Time To Run*. Celebrity endorsements are *Hello I'm Johnny Cash, On the Road with Andrae Crouch, Tom Landry and the Dallas Cowboys*, and *Tom Skinner Up From Harlem*.

In terms of the content, they're earnest but unexceptional. The Archie-themed issues look just like the real thing, only less funny than usual and possessing the inevitable scene where the gang stops to think about what a groovy guy Jesus was, which brings on unintended hoots of laughter. Hartley draws the 'straight' action/autobiographical stories in a slick but generic style, with the only quirk being that no matter what the time period of the story, from the 1930's to the present, all the women wear hairdos and hemlines from 1971. The intent of the stories is benign, unlike more toxic evangelical comics such as Jack T. Chick's *Crusaders* series, and while it's doubtful they ever achieved much good, at least they endeavoured to guide, rather than terrify and intimidate, their readers. In later years, connoisseurs of the peculiar have discovered Spire Comics, and while there remains very little collectors' demand for most, *Hansi the Girl Who Loved the Swastika*, due solely to the bizarreness of its title, has become highly sought-after. Others pursued by aficionados of camp, though to a lesser extent, are *God's Smuggler, The Cross and the Switchblade*, and the *Gospel Blimp*.~HS

THE SPIRIT

Quality: *22 issues 1944-1950*
Fiction House: *5 issues 1952-1954*
Super: *2 issues 1964*
Harvey: *2 issues 1966-1967*
Warren: *16 issues 1974-1976*
Kitchen Sink: *Series one 2 issues 1973, series two 25 issues (17-41) 1977-1983, series three 87 issues 1983-1992, series four ('The Origin Years') 6 issues 1992-1993*

Will Eisner's *Spirit* has a longevity almost unequalled in comics. With few exceptions (noted below), the content of all Spirit comics is material originally published as seven-page Sunday newspaper inserts between 1940 and 1952. Unless otherwise indicated, all issue numbers refer to the third Kitchen Sink series, which reprints the post-1945 work in chronological order, mainly four stories to an issue. The stories work perfectly well in isolation, but there is an element of continuity giving an added level of enjoyment if they're read sequentially.

The Spirit is a whimsically portrayed (barely) masked and trenchcoated crimefighter. Central City police Commissioner Dolan, to whom Eisner bore an uncanny resemblance in later years, becomes a confidant, and his daughter Ellen a paramour. He also has an assistant, Ebony, considered by some to be racist comedy relief, but generally written with dignity. The supporting cast and parameters are so well drawn that it's possible to tell any type of tale. Ostensibly a detective strip populated by femmes fatales and exotic criminals, the Spirit often plays no more than a cameo role in stories bearing his name. A striking example is 'Heat' (72, written by Jules Feiffer), in which a battered Spirit lies barely conscious in an alleyway while life goes on in the streets and tenements around him. Eisner's not above resorting to gimmickry or re-working old material, but his brilliantly expressive cartooning compensates.

From its introduction in 1940 it took Eisner almost two years to hit a groove, and even then his work was of a lesser standard than his post-war material. 'The Origin Years' series didn't last long enough to reach that point. A shame it didn't reprint the daily strips of the time drawn by Jack Cole, or Sunday work by Lou Fine, then developing the illustrative style that would see him through years of advertising work. The first post-war tales see Eisner reclaiming his strip, instituting a quantum improvement over his successors and eclipsing his previous work. He'd refined his art, and within nine months he'd introduced additional characters who would recur for years: Carrion (6) and his buzzard, the mysterious crimelord The Octopus (8, only ever recognisable by his distinctive gloves), and, back again, the Spirit's pre-war nemesis Silk Satin. P'Gell, best defined of a number of female criminals who are alternately drawn to the Spirit yet turned by profit, débuts in 10. Her introduction is eclipsed in that issue, however, by the strange story of Artemus Peap, who assembles Central City's largest-ever gang.

By 26 (stories from early 1948) Eisner had hit peak form as both writer and artist, and there's at least one great story every issue. The inventive storytelling still inspires today. Poe and fairytales are adapted to modern settings, stories are written in rhyme, there are heart-shaped panels for a Valentine's Day tale, and increasingly imaginative ways of working a *Spirit* logo into the splash page. Above all, the amount packed into seven pages is a masterful lesson in economy. Eisner's broad streak of sentimentality underlies the feature, and many of the best have a little man caught in circumstances beyond his control. 'Gerhard Schnobble' in 35 is a typical example, often cited by Eisner as his favourite *Spirit* story. A night watchman recalls that he can fly, only to die in crossfire without anyone having noticed.

From 40 Jules Feiffer and Klaus Nordling contributed scripts, and from 47 Ebony disappears, replaced by the less controversial Sammy. Eisner turned to other projects with 73, leaving Feiffer as the main writer. His scripts match Eisner's but are invariably dragged down by a selection of inferior artists, with Eisner only returning for the final newspaper sections. This often-reprinted story sends the Spirit into space, and while Wally Wood's artwork is excellent, removing the Spirit from his environment doesn't really work.

Since 1952 there have been few new Spirit stories, although Eisner has drawn many new covers for reprinted material. The new stories can be found in the Harvey issues, giving the origins of the Spirit and the Octopus, and in the first Kitchen Sink series. The second Kitchen Sink series is magazine-format, continuing the numbering from Warren's magazines. Both had rather a haphazard approach to reprinting, although Warren issued some themed issues. 30 has many contemporary creators collaborating on a story featuring the Spirit, the result more a curiosity than anything else, but reprinted in 1998 as a one-shot titled *The Spirit Jam*. Most issues between 31 and 40 contain chapters from what would become the *New York* graphic novel. DC is now reprinting all stories chronologically in the hardbound *Spirit Archives*, and assorted stories appeared in Kitchen Sink albums.~FP

Recommended: 5, 8, 12, 15, 16, 20, 24, 26, 29-32, 35, 36, 38, 40-45, 48, 50, 52, 55-57, 59, 61-66, 69, 70, 72, 74, 78, 82

THE SPIRIT: The New Adventures

Kitchen Sink: *8 issues 1997-1998*

Will Eisner's best known creation got the luxury homage treatment with this highly inconsistent anthology. It began well, as the full length story in 1 saw Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons working together for the first time since their classic *Watchmen* series. They re-tell The Spirit's origin with obvious affection for Eisner's formal innovations in the marriage of words and pictures. Moore's second and equally fine contribution, the Daniel Torres illustrated 'Last Night I Dreamed of Dr Cobra' in 3, was another of his laments for anachronistic heroes. The writer took full advantage of Torres' flair for the architectural, weaving The Spirit logo into many of the story pages. Few of the other big name contributors – including Kurt Busiek, Mark Schultz, Mike Allred, Scott Hampton and John Ostrander – come close to matching Moore's level of inspiration and invention. Perhaps the biggest disappointment is the Neil Gaiman/Eddie Campbell offering in 2, which lacks any affinity at all for Eisner's nighttime, city-set farces, although Campbell redeemed himself with his nicely drawn contribution to 7. 5 and 8 also contained full length stories, by Paul Chadwick and Joe R. Lansdale respectively, but contained less peerless moments than virtually any post World War II Spirit original. On the whole, stick with the original and best.~AL

Recommended: 1, 3

SPIRIT OF THE TAO

Image/Top Cow: *15 issues 1998-2000*

D-Tron (writer) and Billy Tan (penciller and co-plotter), present a treatise on the battle between good and evil. Couched in less overtly religious terms than similar efforts, the Tao is an elemental force that has decided to eliminate humanity and has spawned Jasmine and Lance, allegedly making them the most powerful beings on the planet. Whilst Jasmine seems intent on following the path of the Tao, Lance acts against her to protect mankind. Plotting against them both is an industrialist attempting to subvert the Tao to his own ends. Initially limited by a real sense of déjà vu, the series does develop its own identity, but the stylistic flourishes of the studio artwork do little to help distinguish it from other, similar Image titles.~NF

SPIRIT OF WONDER

Dark Horse: *5 issue miniseries 1996**

A beautifully drawn historical Manga series by Kenji Tsuratu in which a young woman, China, owner of a restaurant/rooming house, is host to a couple of very eccentric inventors. It's a love story, odd, humorous and touching.~NF

Recommended: 1-5

SPIRIT WORLD

DC: *1 issue 1971*

Jack Kirby's black and white companion magazine to *In the Days of the Mob*, this time concentrating on the supernatural. As you would expect from Kirby at his creative peak everything was marvellously imaginative and beautifully illustrated. Stories for the unpublished second issue appeared in *Weird Mystery Tales* 1-3 and *Forbidden Tales of Dark Mansion* 6.~HY

Recommended

Ghost Rider and Blaze SPIRITS OF VENGEANCE

Marvel: *23 issues 1992-1994*

The 1970s Ghost Rider, Johnny Blaze, teams up with his skull-headed 1990s successor in a supernatural series that seems to serve little purpose other than to provide bridging chapters for crossovers into other titles. Of the twenty-three issues, no fewer than eight are direct crossovers with other titles, and several more are heavily referential to others in the 'Midnight Sons' series. This leaves little opportunity for developing characterisation for the leads, let alone any real supporting cast, and so the twosome lurch from one eldritch rumble to another, with little motivation or purpose.~HS

SPITFIRE and the Troubleshooters

Marvel: *13 issues 1986-1987*

Headless chicken of a series as luscious engineering Professor Jenny Swenson steals her murdered father's suit of super armour to stop it falling into the wrong hands. Every issue overwrites the previous as a rapid succession of writers and artists strive helplessly for a winning format and Swenson goes from avenger to hero to criminal to secret agent. Mindless, but art fans might want the Todd McFarlane (4) or Sandy Plunkett issues (13). The series title changed to *Codename Spitfire* with 10.~WW

SPLAT!

Mad Dog: *3 issues 1987*

Surely one of the best 'alternative' anthologies ever attempted. If each issue has its share of duff stories, each also has at least one strip that, on its own, is worth the price of admission. 1 has an early Peter Bagge strip from 1982, 'Just Like Pop', plus good stuff from Ron Wilber, J.R. Williams and Hunt Emerson, but is the weakest of the three issues overall. 2 has Eddie Campbell's 'Dead End Job', Marc Hempel's 'Cartoon Man's Best Friend', reprints of Alan Moore's Maxwell The Magic Cat and more Peter Bagge, J.R.Williams and Hunt Emerson. 3 has a sneak preview of Ted McKeever's *Eddy Current* and a *Calvin and Hobbes* parody by Scott Saavedra. In addition each issue had an interview with a humour cartoonist: S. Gross, P.S. Mueller and B. Kliban respectively.~NF

Recommended: 2, 3

SPLATTER

Northstar: *8 issues, 1 Annual, 1 Special ('Holidays in Hell') 1991-1994*

Claiming to set "the new standard in shock horror", Splatter suffers from leaving strips incomplete (David Barbour and Tim Vigil's strip in 1 would eventually be finished in Gothic Nights), a tendency to believe that blood and gore is shocking in itself, and too few really good writers or artists. That said, Dave Cooper's three tales of cannibalism (1-3) are lovingly, if lumpily, delineated, and Rich Longmore's delicate pencils (5, Annual, Special) show promise. The 'best' strip is the unfinished 'Boots of the Oppressor', written by LaMorris Richmond and drawn by Dan and David Day, which deals unflinchingly with the terrible treatment of a runaway female slave (3).~NF

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* Available in a collected edition

Star Wars: SPLINTER OF THE MIND'S EYE

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1995**

The first ever *Star Wars* novel is adapted by Terry Austin, who also inks the pencils of Chris Sprouse, thus ensuring this series looks very nice indeed. That's just as well since it's little more than one long chase sequence involving Luke, Leia and Darth Vader that would, in fact, be far better suited to Indiana Jones. Fine art, shame about the story.~FP

SPLITTING IMAGE

Image: *2 issues 1993*

Spoof on the Image characters by Rob Liefeld and Jim Valentino, along the lines of Marvel's *What The?* and about as funny.~JC

SPOOF

Marvel: *5 issues, 1970-1973*

Satire of the TV, films and personalities of the day, very much in the style of *Mad* magazine. It's quite entertaining even if you haven't seen the originals, and the spoof of *The Birds* in issue 3 is a classic.~FC

Recommended: 3

SPOOK GIRL

Amaze Ink: *4 issues 2000*

Trixie McGillicutty is Spookgirl, an agent for a mysterious global organization collecting data on the paranormal from her home in Neutron City, accompanied by her faithful hound Bongo. As our heroine battles winged monkeys, aquatic murderers, giant robots and her own hallucinations, one is supposed to be engaged and intrigued, but despite the topics and a competent style, it remains strangely uninteresting.~HS

SPOTLIGHT ON THE GENIUS THAT IS JOE SACCO

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1994*

An anthology of short pieces by Sacco, mostly on the weak side. Worth a look, though, for 'Zachary Mindbiscuit', who nobly starves his cat in the name of his own principles, 'Johnny Sentence' (corporate power games), and Sacco's own scathing comments on each story.~FC

Hit Me With A SPUD

Spud Press: *1 issue 1996*

Catholic guilt and dream-driven strangeness merge in the work of Art Baxter, the disturbing subject matter rendered all the more potent through the use of an appealing kid's cartoon style. Billy is a high-school kid terrorised by nuns, Sherry and Terry are teenage girls with secrets, and the silent Dominic DeSanto occupies a surreal and depressing world. An excellent début, and a cartoonist to watch out for.~FP

Recommended

SPX

SPX: *6 issues + 1997 to date*

The Small Press Expo in Bethesda, Maryland ipromotes small press and self-produced comics ranging from minicomics to professional efforts, and leading to much debate about what constitutes 'small press'. Since 1997 there's also been an annual sampler, identified by year of publication, starting with a thick comic, but thereafter an ever thicker paperback book has been the format. For 2000 and 2001 it was titled Expo. Initially a percentage of creators would submit sample pages from their titles, but it quickly became the norm to produce a new strip specifically for *SPX*. Luckily, there are editorially enforced standards, but the broad range of self-produced material displays how far beyond superheroes comics can go. Here are very good anthologies, with the major fault being one of design requiring frequent reference to the contents pages to discover the creators of a particular strip. 2000 spotlights the French artists of L'Association, including David B. and Lewis Trondheim, but with such a legion of creators, listing names would be pointless, as almost every high-profile self-published comic of recent years is represented. How about a highlight from each year? In '97 Ivan Brunetti reads a poem from his high school yearbook, in '98 Megan Kelso highlights how a child perceives the adult world, and in '99 Bruce Mutard speculates about Hitler's application to art college. In 2000 Nick Bertozzi's 'Underpass' constantly squirms away from expectations, in 2001 Thomas Ott's dark scratchboard crime story is a treat, and in 2002 Ben Jones adapts an anecdote from P.T. Barnum's earlier years. 2002 is the first book with a theme, biography, and the first where vibrancy, talent and innovation is overwhelmed by material that's lustreless, mundane or plain poor. The fault is not with the theme, which prompts a modicum of very good material about unlikely subjects, and it's to be hoped this is an aberration rather than a prolonged dip in the small press talent pool. For further information about the Small Press Expo, log on to www.spxpo.com.~FP

Recommended: 1998-2001

SPYBOY

Dark Horse: *16 issues (1-12*, 14-17*) 1999-2001, 3 issue miniseries (Spyboy/Young Justice) 2002*, 1 Special 2002*

Alex Fleming lives with his father and grandfather and is generally meek, mild and downtrodden at school. However, when his other personality is awakened, he's also an artificially enhanced, heartless super spy. With support from female spy, Bombshell and ex-bully, Butch, Spyboy is introduced in 1-4 to S.H.I.R.T.S. (Secret Headquarters International Reconnaissance, Tactics and Spies) and their enemies S.K.I.N.S. (Supreme Killing Institute). After a story in which his aunt appears as head of assassination bureau, Palindrome, Spygirl is introduced in an adventure (12-15) set in Japan, featuring a giant robot and M.A.N.G.A. (Middle Asian Network of Global Activities). Clearly, none of this is meant to be taken too seriously, and teaming Spyboy with Young Justice just adds to the humour quotient. They begin with a typical superhero fight amongst themselves before learning that their real enemies are miniature versions of themselves. Peter David's stories are good fun with plenty of irreverent wit, while Pop Mhan's dynamic artwork is a perfect complement, especially when using manga conventions on the comedy scenes. Carlos Meglia's two fill-ins (7-8) are also excellent, though Todd Nauck (*Spyboy/Young Justice*) isn't in the same league. For the curious, 13 does not exist.~NF

Recommended: 1-12, 14-17

SPYKE

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

It could be taken as editorial comment when the lead character concedes three issues in that the concept of the series is so crazy "'Oliver Stone wouldn't touch it with a bargepole". Having been transported to another dimension, Spyke Jones ("Just like the bandleader"!) learns that one can travel between further dimensions by killing selected individuals. This distasteful concept sets the tone for a predictable plot about humanoid extra-dimensionals taking over the planet. But hey... there's one man able to stop them.~WJ

SPYMAN

Harvey: *3 issues 1967-1968*

Created by Jim Steranko, Spyman was fitted with a prosthetic hand on which each robotic digit contained a different gimmick (magnet, camera, blaster). Probably best ignored as the initial fumblings of precocious talent.~FP

Ultraverse Year Zero: The Death of THE SQUAD

Malibu: *4 issue miniseries 1995*

James Hudnall tells the story of the Squad, Hardcase's original team, which retrospectively inaugurated the Ultraverse. The Squad are four newly-superpowered beings who decide to try and help but are hindered by a lack of precedent for their kind and by having unknowingly been targeted for destruction by the immortal Rex Mundi. The series offers some insights into Hardcase's character and Ultraverse history but doesn't make for particularly interesting reading.~NF

SQUADRON SUPREME

Marvel: *12 issue limited series 1985-1986*, Graphic Novel 1989, one-shot ('New World Order') 1998*

Introduced as alternate Earth allies in *Avengers* 85 as a homage to DC's *Justice League of America* in the days when company team-ups were unthinkable, the similarities were far fewer when the limited series ended. It begins with the Squadron Supreme's Earth in considerable disarray after a period of totalitarian rule and the subsequent battle for freedom. The Squadron decide that, as the planet's most powerful individuals, they should impose, as the optimum solution, a twelve-month period of global authority to implement a "Utopia Program" aimed at solving the world's ills, after which they will step down.

Mark Gruenwald's plot examines the ethics of a dictatorial system, however benign, through qualms being voiced by Nighthawk. He resigns from the team, and then actively opposes it on discovering that the Squadron are using mind-altering devices to rehabilitate criminals. Unusually for a superhero series, there's considerable change over twelve issues (each spanning a month). The characterisation is excellent, with the thrust of the series permitting most team members a turn in the spotlight, and events are rarely predictable. Pencillers Bob Hall and Paul Ryan are adequate without flash, but this is Gruenwald's comic and it's a rare treat to see twelve issues (or thirteen if the crossover into *Captain America* 314 is included) so well conceived and executed. The series stands alone and makes its point, so the graphic novel, although following up on the characters (and continuing *Nth Man*), is okay but superfluous to requirements, particularly at the prices it commands these days.

The team are next seen in *Quasar* 13 and further issues of that title, then the third *Avengers* series before returning home, where the one-shot picks up. It extrapolates the world left at the conclusion of the limited series. While not up to the standard of that series, it is a decent superhero story acting as a re-affirmation of the Squadron in their JLA incarnation.~FP

Recommended: 1-12

SQUALOR

First: *4 issue miniseries 1989-1990*

Squalor is Harry Keller – gentle psychotic with two PhDs – who has stumbled on A-Time: "not just another dimension, but your own neighbourhood bereft of linear time". He meanders between A-Time and normal time, trying to help people and to save the world. In places, this works very well as a depiction of his psychosis, but writer Stefan Petrucha obviously thinks there's an actual story underway, and one that needs four issues to tell, and there isn't, there just isn't.~FC

SQUEAK THE MOUSE

NBM: *2 volumes 1988 and 1992*

Before Itchy and Scratchy there were Massimo Mattioli's ultra-violent cat-and-mouse "goretoons" in which a dumb but cruel feline is constantly outwitted by a resourceful and equally nasty mouse. Mattioli's short strips are a hilarious wordless mix of old *Tom & Jerry* plots and zombie slasher movies. No matter how deranged and decaying the two characters become, they keep coming back for more. Mattioli's simplistic drawings reach a peak of hilarity in the second volume, when Squeak and a zombie cat begin cutting each other up on the beach using crabs and lobsters as weapons.~FJ

Recommended: 1-2

SQUEE!

Slave Labor: *4 issue miniseries 1997-1998**

Imagine if *Calvin & Hobbes* was a movie directed by John Carpenter or Wes Craven. Jhonen Vasquez produces four issues of shorts, single page stories and strips too wacky to define, featuring a little lad whose every waking – and sleeping – moment consists of staying one step ahead of all the aliens, monsters and devils in creation. Surreal and chillingly funny.~WW

Recommended: 1-4

STAINLESS STEEL ARMADILLO

Antarctic: *6 issues 1995*

Fantasy manga featuring two sisters and a quest to learn how to use mystic armour while being pursued by agents of the Dark Lord. For some reason there are many panels in which the sisters are without clothes – all in context, of course. The lightly-inked artwork is pleasing but there's little evidence of depth to story or character.~NF

THE STAINLESS STEEL RAT

Eagle: *6 issue miniseries 1985-1986*

Kelvin Gosnell adapts Harry Harrison's novels *The Stainless Steel Rat, The Stainless Steel Rat Saves The World* and *The Stainless Steel Rat For President*, each over two issues. Artist Carlos Ezquerra uses James Coburn as his template for the character of Slippery Jim DiGriz, suave intergalactic rogue. The stories romp along in fine comic fashion, although those who've read the novels will note there's a fair amount of material excised in order to cram them into the necessary length. Otherwise these are perfectly acceptable.~WJ

STALKER

DC: *4 issues 1975-1976*

Exchanging his soul for combat skills leaves Stalker devoid of any human emotion. Well written by Paul Levitz, and with the art team of Steve Ditko and Wally Wood conveying the eldritch mood, this stands as a miniseries almost a decade ahead of their proliferation. Stalker would later play a large part in the Justice Society's 1990s revival.~FP

STALKERS

Marvel/Epic: *12 issues 1990-1991*

A series of mediocre covers and sketchy and uninspired interior artwork from – let's name the guilty – Mark Texeira and, primarily, Val Mayerik ruins consistently inventive plots from co-creators Mark Verheiden and Jan Strnad. Stalkers are a franchised private police force operating in the near future, and the series concentrates on both operatives and people whose lives are touched by them. Beginning with the nuclear destruction of Detroit, interesting characters abound, and the scripts continue to surprise and entertain. Most issues contain chapters of separate ongoing stories, one written by each co-creator. Issue 4 offers a good sample of the series.~WJ

STANLEY AND HIS MONSTER

DC: *4 issues (109-112) 1968, 4 issue miniseries 1993*

Arnold Drake's creation was introduced in 1965 as a back-up strip in *Fox and The Crow* 95. This feature introduced us to six-year-old Stanley and his parents, who won't allow Stanley to have a pet dog. Meanwhile, hiding in a local sewer is a monster, who desires only to live in peace and solitude, but who is constantly persecuted by unfeeling humans. Stanley, being a well-behaved brat, asks his parents if he can keep the twelve-foot shaggy red monster he found in the sewer. Laughing at Stanley's imagination, they say "sure". And that's your premise. It actually sounds a lot more fun than it was, since comics were firmly for children at this time: innocuous rather than entertaining was the order of the day. Artists on the strip included Bob Oksner and Winslow Mortimer. In 1993, Phil Foglio turned his attention to this strip, and ingeniously tied it in with the critically acclaimed *Sandman*, making the Monster a demon exiled from Hell for the crime of compassion. Hell, however, is under new management. And, not knowing the monster had been exiled, the new owners want him back. The Phantom Stranger and Ambrose Bierce get involved in the action, as does a voluptuous demoness named Nyx (closely modelled on a character from Foglio's *Xxxenophile*), a former lover of the monster. Bitingly funny, mildly salacious, and poking fun at the Vertigo line while plausibly meshing with it, this series is one to watch out for. A kind of prequel to the series, also by Foglio, is in *Secret Origins* 48.~HS

Recommended: Series two 1-4

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* Available in a collected edition

STAR

Image: *4 issue miniseries 1995*

Spun off from Erik Larsen's *Savage Dragon*, this features rock-star-by-day, superhero-by- night Peter Klaptin (a cross between Peter Frampton and Eric Clapton, according to Larsen – what a thought). Quite why "the rogue prince of rock" should want to become wisecracking do-gooder Star is never fully explained, perhaps because scripters Tom and Mary Bierbaum spring a feeble 'surprise' in the final issue. The rest of the series is taken up with a series of plodding fight scenes between Star and sinister arms dealers Securitech, all quite slickly rendered by penciller Ben Herrera.~AL

STAR BRAND

Marvel: *19 issues, 1 Annual 1986-1989*

Flagship title of the 'New Universe' of Marvel Comics that posited a different Earth with all the superheroics stemming from a cosmic event that mutated 2% of the world's population. Ken Connell is an underachieving garage mechanic given the most powerful weapon in the universe (which looks like a tattoo of a star), in an origin drawing heavily on that of the 1960s Green Lantern. The early issues, particularly those written by Jim Shooter (on whom Connell is based), illustrated by John Romita Jr and Al Williamson (1, 2, 4-7), are excellent examples of the 'real world superhero' sub-genre, and an obvious template for Valiant Comics, Shooter's next project. With 11 John Byrne took over, and dismantled Shooter's concepts, making Connell a costumed superhero, a mass-murderer (as he destroys Pittsburgh, Shooter's home town), and finally a crazed degenerate. Connell's illegitimate child becomes the Star Brand and goes about doling out superpowers and being generally Cosmically Derivative. A sad end to a potentially strong series.~WW

Recommended: 1, 2, 4-7

S.T.A.R. CORPS

DC: *6 issue miniseries 1993-1994*

S.T.A.R. Labs are the all-purpose scientific research labs in the DC Universe, the acronym standing for Scientific and Technological Advanced Research. This spotlights the S.T.A.R. employees, and how they cope when an alien entity possesses the computers and some of the staff. The underlying message appears to be that folk shouldn't mess with what they don't know. It's a diverting read, worth hefting out of the cheap boxes where it now resides, but move no mountains to pick it up.~WJ

STAR CROSSED

DC/Helix: *3 issue miniseries 1997*

Dyltah is a genetically engineered drifter wandering through space who meets and falls in love with Saa, a sentient asteroid. Essentially a romance set in the atmosphere around Jupiter and its asteroid belt where a war is raging between miners and colonists and into which Dyltah is drawn. Matt Howarth's powerful imagination drives both narrative and artwork making this a delight to read.~NF

Recommended: 1-3

STAR HUNTERS

DC: *7 issues 1977-1978*

Infected with a disease that prevents them remaining on Earth, Donovan Flint and crew are charged with locating an artefact that apparently reveals the origin of mankind. Despite some distinctly slipshod art this is a better-than-average space opera that débuted in *DC Super Stars* 16, but unfortunately cancelled one chapter ahead of the conclusion.~FP

STAR JACKS

Antarctic: *1 issue 1994*

Trixie, Romeo, Whitney, Helen and Irwin are the crew of the repossession ship, Extior. They are forced into a job by the Universal Revenue Service, which is trying to prove that one of them is really a renegade from their own ranks. Written by Fred Perry, these anthropomorphic characters are quite engaging, though the artwork, by Scott Alston is sketchy and one of the crew has a very annoying Franglais dialect.~NF

STAR KID

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1998*

As it says on the cover, this is a prequel to the science fiction adventure film, rather than an adaptation. That appeared under the title *The Warrior of Waverley Street*. This is a decently produced, but largely unmemorable, adventure comic with a greater appeal likely for younger readers.~FP

STAR MASTERS

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 1995-1996*

Hideous would-be cosmic drivel starring The Silver Surfer, Beta Ray Bill (the horse-faced Thor) and Quasar, who is falsely accused of murdering three million characters, who are blatantly brought in so that they can be murdered and some over-powered and under-characterised moron accused of it.~GK

STAR*REACH

Star*Reach: *18 issues 1974-1979*
Eclipse: *6 issues 1984*

Groundbreaking anthology title that attempted to create a middle ground between the extreme excesses of the underground and the superhero-obsessed dullness of Marvel and DC in the mid-1970s. The title featured many of the brightest stars of that period. Some of them went on to greater things, although most have retained a cultish approach in their work that continues to set them apart from the mainstream. Having said that, the title itself has dated badly, with only a few stories showing long-term quality. Others are interesting, especially early work by people such as Dave Sim and Steve Leialoha. *Star*Reach* was also noticeable for the predominance of writer/artists who proved to have lasting appeal.

Of particular note: Howard Chaykin's grown-up space opera *Cody Starbuck* in 4; 'I'm God', by Dave Sim and Fabio Gasbarri in issue 7; P. Craig Russell's early attempt at opera adaptation with *Parsifal* (8 and 10); 'The Sacred And The Profane', by Dean Motter and Ken Steacy (9- 13*); Gene Day's 'Divine Wind' in 9; Gray Morrow producing an impeccably drawn but rather 1960s looking interpretation of Roger Zelazny's science-fiction story 'The Doors of his Face, The Lamps of his Mouth', and 'Replay' by Michael T. Gilbert, both in 12. The Eclipse issues are titled *Star*Reach Classics* and reprint from *Star*Reach* itself, *Quack* and *Imagine*. Despite being on better paper with higher production values, the selection of strips does the company little credit and the colouring does the stories no favours, either. They're a taster, possibly, but the original anthologies, in context, are a better buy.~NF

STAR SEED

Broadway: *3 issues (7-9) 1996*

Continuing the numbering from *Powers That Be*, where Star Seed had been the lead feature, this continues the top-notch adventure as Cor searches for his father. You'll believe a comic produced by committee can be good.~FP

Recommended: 7-9

STAR SPANGLED WAR STORIES

DC: *205 issues (131-133, 3-204) 1952-1977*

Originally a superhero comic titled *Star Spangled Comics*, in its later days it featured Western and mystery stories, hence the peculiar numbering system. This was amongst DC's earliest war comics, and, as was the case with the others, early issues contained one-off short stories. Initially these were drawn by the likes of Curt Swan, Leonard Starr, Carmine Infantino and Bernie Krigstein (34), and written by Ed Herron, Bill Finger and Bob Haney among others. By the time of Joe Kubert's début in 33 the regular line-up of artists Jerry Grandenetti, Russ Heath, Irv Novick, and Ross Andru and Mike Esposito, with editor and chief writer Robert Kanigher, was in place. With a pedigree like that pretty well any issue is a decent read, although as with other 1950s DC war comics their most exceptional artist was Mort Drucker (25, 26, 28, 38, 41, 59, 61, 64, 66-68, 73, 74, 76, 78, 83, 84). Drucker is closely associated with the comic's first series, 'Mlle Marie', although he only drew the first four instalments in 86-89.

While the title was always inventive, the short-story format was inevitably limiting and was prone to gimmickry. The lengthier 'Mlle Marie' stories allowed Kanigher the scope to stretch out as a writer. Mademoiselle (not Millie as a generation of readers have assumed) Marie was a French resistance fighter in World War II, but, although the milieu was fresh and the execution good, readers simply didn't warm to the feature. Unlike its successor.

With the basic premise of US soldiers fighting dinosaurs, 'The War That Time Forgot' (90, 92-138) was never going to be exactly high art, but the fans loved it, and today it has a certain whacked-out appeal. Again created by Robert Kanigher, the feature was drawn for the most part by Ross Andru and Mike Esposito, with great vigour but little regard for prehistorical accuracy. Later stories were illustrated by Russ Heath (124-126, 131-133), Gene Colan (123, 128), Neal Adams (134) and Joe Kubert (124-126, 137, 138), amongst others. The team of Kanigher and Kubert were reunited for the comic's next feature, the far more memorable Enemy Ace. It started in 139, though the character had earlier appeared in *Our Army At War* and *Showcase*.

Rittmeister Hans Von Hammer was the 'Enemy Ace', a Von Richtofenesque German World War I pilot with a crimson Fokker Triplane. A troubled, brooding character, Von Hammer's only friend was a wolf, and he was much given to calling himself 'a human killing machine'. Though occasionally marred by historical inaccuracy, particularly in the case of outlandish opponents like The Hangman and St George, the strip had an astonishing intensity, and its pensive, bleak tone was a far cry from the usual triumphalism of the era's war comics. With the exception of a couple of fill-ins (Adams in 144 and Heath in 152), the entire run was drawn by Joe Kubert, who excelled at the aerial battle scenes. 146 and 151 had already featured old material, and from 153 to the strip's demise it was all reprints, but by then Enemy Ace had long since lost the cover slot to its replacement. It was a strip both written and drawn by Kubert, The Unknown Soldier, which had débuted in 151 with an origin in 154.

The Unknown Soldier was both a skilful make-up artist and a consummate soldier, and each episode starred him in a different role, frequently behind enemy lines and often disguised as the enemy. Plagued by reprint stories introduced by Unknown and retroactively claimed to be previous missions (153, 157, 162), the feature's early episodes were a treat, and Kubert, joined by writer Bob Haney from 158, was on top form. Following a couple of fill-ins (Doug Wildey in 161 and Dan Spiegle in 163 and 164), Jack Sprang became the regular artist with 165, joined three issues later by new editor Archie Goodwin. Against all expectations, these, and later issues written by Frank Robbins (172-182), were every bit as good as Kubert's had been, and the strip remained both inventive and hard-hitting. Goodwin brought with him an adventurous approach to back-ups and utilised a wide variety of talent, including Howard Chaykin (167), Tom Sutton (168), Vincente Alcazar (178) and, most interestingly, a young Walt Simonson (170, 172, 180). The comic's finest back-up, though, and indeed its best-ever story, was Robert Kanigher's 'Yellow Devil', masterfully drawn by Alex Toth in 164. Frank Thorne also contributed a number of fine back-ups (173, 176, 178), including a lovely Enemy Ace three-parter in 181-183. Enemy Ace's last appearance here was to be in 200, by Kubert.

183 saw the installation of David Michelinie and Gerry Talaoc as the creative team, and their issues are, if anything, even more hard-hitting than those of their predecessors, particularly 183, in which we see the Unknown Soldier's hideously scarred face for the first time. Also notable during their tenure was a short back-up written by Archie Goodwin, with art from Steve Harper, and, surprisingly for a war comic, Mike Kaluta, in 197. With 205 the title changed to *Unknown Soldier*.~DAR

Recommended: 86-89, 138-152, 154-156, 158-160, 164, 170, 172, 180-183, 197, 200

STAR TREK

Gold Key: *61 issues 1967-1979*

Well, here we see Kirk and company boldly exploring new planets and such in exactly the same manner as portrayed in the TV series. This adaptation was doomed from the first issue (drawn by Nevio Zeccarra, as was the second). The characters are so well established and defined in the TV series that there's no opportunity for any author to do anything interesting or innovative with them in a comic. Not that Paul S. Newman, writer of most early issues, tried. The situations the crew find themselves in are far less imaginative, and overall the run yields a very monotonous and wearisome read. Furthermore, the main artist until 37, Alberto Giolitti, had never seen the TV show and worked exclusively from character stills. *2000AD* completists might be interested to know that Massimo Belardinelli assisted Giolitti. Al McWilliams illustrated most issues from 37 on, and was a considerable improvement, but the plots he was given, largely from Arnold Drake and George Kashdan, were as uninspiring as those in previous issues. Most issues to 38 were reprinted in four *Enterprise Logs*.~APS

STAR TREK

Marvel: *1 Super-Special, 18 issues 1980-1982*

The first *Star Trek* movie is adapted in the Super Special and reprinted in 1-3. This generation was by far the poorest of the comics incarnations, and its third-rate plots and inferior art, surprisingly from the likes of Marv Wolfman, Gil Kane and Klaus Janson, proved that even a cash cow like the *Star Trek* franchise needed to exercise some form of quality control. Avoid at all costs.~WW

STAR TREK

DC: *Series one 56 issues, 3 Annuals 1984-1988, series two 80 issues, 6 Annuals, 3 specials, 2 Graphic Novels 1989-1996, 4 issue miniseries ('The Modala Imperative') 1991**

Given the poor quality of the previous attempts at adapting *Star Trek* for comics, Mike Barr, Tom Sutton and Ricardo Villagran didn't really have to exert themselves to produce better material, and they certainly didn't. It seemed to be considered enough to get the likenesses right, ensure that the characteristic quirks of the crew remain intact, and reprise ideas from the TV series every now and then. The one departure from expectation is Saavik replacing the temporarily deceased Spock in the early issues as the comic followed the events of the second *Star Trek* movie. A return for the evil Enterprise crew from the TV episode in 9-16 was selected for collection, but it's no better than the rest of Barr's run. He left with 16, with 19 badly written by Walter Koenig (Ensign Chekov), but well drawn by Dan Spiegle. It was one of a succession of one-shot stories written by a variety of folk, usually drawn by Sutton and Villagran (although Gray Morrow draws nice fillers in 28, 35 and 56). The best of them is by Diane Duane in 24 and 25, who provides some required light relief, pulling her plot from *The Mouse That Roared*.

Len Wein's short run as writer adds some needed continuity, but his plots are no better than Barr's. He celebrates his departure by running through almost every bridge-scene cliché in the first five pages of 39, yet another issue in which an internal surprise – in this case on the final page – is blown on the cover. Mike Carlin is a marginal improvement in 41-47, again taking his cue from old TV episodes. By simple virtue of a fine ear for dialogue, Peter David improves the scripting immensely from 48. If not exactly realistic dialogue, most people simply not being that witty off the cuff, and sometimes too glib, it combines well with the first really engaging plot for over twenty issues, to provide one of only two runs worth bothering with in the first series. Someone is attempting to engender war between The Federation and the Klingons, and counterpointing this in microcosm are the sudden doubts of Klingon Konom and his bride-to-be Nancy in 48-50. Thereafter 51 and 52 are merely average, and Kirk starts 53 by almost dying. That and the following two issues involve the mystery of who was trying to kill him. David's now confidently dealing with the characters, and while the ending is a little too contrived (although well set up) it's a decent story, with Gordon Purcell filling in as penciller for two issues.

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* Available in a collected edition

Given his successful run on the previous series it's no surprise to see Peter David returning to write the new series, launched alongside the ongoing series starring the Next Generation crew. He starts well. 1 has the Klingons putting a price on Kirk's head, and issues to 10 see a gradual escalation in problems for Kirk until he flouts one regulation too many, leading to a trial occupying 10-12. Of course, as with his 'death' in the previous series, there's not going to be any significant change to the status quo, but David is adept at keeping the interest up, and he introduces some intriguing new characters along the way. The bounty-hunting Sweeney in 7-9 is David's idea of the stiff-upper-lip Englishman, and R. J. Blaise, appointed by Starfleet to supervise Kirk, is surely based on Katherine Hepburn's movie characters. 1-12 in their entirety are a decent story arc that should be enjoyable to any *Star Trek* fan, the only real fault being their concentration on Kirk to the neglect of the remaining crew. Gordon Purcell replaces James Fry as penciller on 11, and pencils or inks much of the series. Instead of relying on freehand drawing as he had during the first series, his lightbox works overtime in tracing likenesses, which gives his art a very static look overall.

David teams with Bill Mumy for 13-15, not his best work, and departs after a decent one-shot in 19. Howard Weinstein, who'd written *Star Trek* episodes and novels, débuts with 17 to pen most issues thereafter. His approach differs from David's, and isn't as appealing. Factors making David's scripts entertaining included his willingness to introduce new characters and incorporate them into an ongoing continuity interacting with the regulars, and short story arcs as part of a longer ongoing continuity. Weinstein is more focused on retaining the TV show formula, introducing new characters only for a particular story arc. The resulting familiarity dulls the comic to an extent, and Weinstein, although never less than professional, doesn't produce plots captivating enough to overcome this, although his stories are better than the majority of the first run. He also often runs plots over four to six issues at a time, providing fewer jumping-in points. 35-40*, largely a fable about arms escalation, provide a decent sample of Weinstein's run, with four of the six chapters pencilled by Rod Whigham, who goes on to draw more of the series than anyone else. It returns Saavik and gives McCoy and particularly Sulu, now promoted to Captain and on his first mission, a turn in the spotlight.

Steve Wilson writes a nice character episode involving Spock and Captain Christopher Pike in 61, and another story returning a TV series favourite is Weinstein's 'The Peacekeeper' in 49 and 50, with the enigmatic Gary Seven, who's back again in the sixth annual. Harry Mudd, rogue by trade, is a popular choice of recurring character from the TV series, returning in 22-24 as well as 39 and 40 of the first series. Later issues diverge from following the continuity of the movies to present untold stories from the "five year mission", i.e. the TV series era. This has the benefit of locating all the popular members of the crew back on the Enterprise, although to Weinstein's credit his plots generally united them anyway in a subtler fashion. Many of these later issues are written by Kevin Ryan, welcome for an ability to cram a plot into less than four issues, and drawn by Rachel Ketchum. She seems to trace the faces of the cast from photographs and stick them onto already drawn bodies, for a very odd, distorted look.

Of the assorted annuals and specials accompanying both series, by far and away the best is the first annual from the second series (1990). Written by Peter David and George Takei, the story naturally enough focuses on Takei's *Star Trek* character Mr Sulu. A number of late-twentieth-century concerns are transferred to the twenty-third century and combined with a story about lost love, all expressively drawn by Gray Morrow. The sixth annual teams the Enterprise crew with their twenty-fourth-century counterparts, but keep your expectations low. DC also adapt the third, fourth, fifth and sixth *Star Trek* movies as one-shot specials. They're all workmanlike, without being spectacular, the quality depending largely on the film script, thus making Star Trek IV the best of the bunch.

The graphic novel 'Debt of Honor' was much trumpeted. Writer Chris Claremont relates an unlikely incident from Kirk's past concerning a female Vulcan civilian named T'Cel (!) saving his life when they were attacked by Alien-like aliens. He was rescued, but she was captured by Romulans, eventually becoming one of their commanders. Their encounters since have all involved the mysterious aliens, who remain unknown except for rare attacks, and twenty years later, Kirk, T'Cel and a Klingon commander decide it's time to investigate. It's a decent plot, but Claremont undermines it by being unable to resist peppering the story with extraneous 'smart' references. It's not big, it's not that clever, and it's as distracting as hell. Artist Adam Hughes wore the freeze-frame button on his video remote down to nothing capturing those cast likenesses, and he's turned in some nice pages, but by and large they're swamped by excess verbiage. There's wads of expository dialogue, lacking any finesse where inserted, and several rambling character pieces, rendering this appallingly overwritten for a relatively simple plot. It's as if Claremont wanted to ensure that nothing he loves about *Star Trek* was omitted, which makes for an unsatisfying read. 'The Ashes Of Eden' adapts a *Star Trek* novel ostensibly authored by William Shatner, but which also credits Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens as writers. It's a decent romp that pushes feelgood buttons throughout, with Kirk, now apparently surplus to Starfleet requirements, offered the promise of eternal life, but unknowingly labelled a traitor, which requires his old crew to hunt him down. Considering Kirk was played by Shatner, he's surprisingly and effectively harsh on the character. Steve Erwin's art isn't as decorative as Hughes', but his storytelling is excellent, and of the two graphic novels this is the one *Star Trek* fans are more likely to enjoy. 'The Modala Imperative' precedes a *Next Gen* series with the same title. The Enterprise journeys to Modala on Ensign Chekov's first mission. The planet has applied for Federation membership, and Chekov accompanies Kirk to assess the merits of the application. What they find is a totalitarian regime possessing weapons far beyond the current level of technology. Then regular *Next Generation* writer Michael Jan Friedman proves as adept with the original crew, turning in an entertaining script dulled by poor Pablo Marcos art.~FP

Recommended: Series one 49, 50, 53-55, series two 4-12, Annual 1, *The Ashes of Eden*

STAR TREK

WildStorm: *One-shot ('All of Me') 2000*

An egomaniac science pal from Spock's past insists that the Enterprise protects his latest secret discovery. While remaining faithful to the series' story set-up, on the whole it's an unimpressive affair.~DB

STAR TREK: DEEP SPACE NINE

Malibu: *33 issues (0-32), 2 Annuals, 2 Specials, 2 miniseries ('Hearts and Minds'*, 'Maquis'*), 3 one-shots 1993-1996*

The first issue of Deep Space Nine comes in a bewildering array of covers, but what really matters is the story inside. Written by Mike Barr, as are all issues to 6, and continued into the following issue, it's very average, as are all issues to 6. The art by Gordon Purcell and Terry Pallot is good, though, dynamic and lively. The team would later return to DC's *Star Trek* titles. 6 begins a run of multiple short stories, and thereafter until 19 it seems as if everyone and their grandparents is given the chance to write an issue. The approach varies wildly, from Charles Marshall's overly comedic tales in 11-13 to Mark Altman's character studies; and his story in 8- 9 is the best of this run.

The experienced Dan Mishkin, who'd supplied 10, writes from 19, and is... average, but provides a baseline level of enjoyment each time. 23-25 is his epic, with the Bajoran sacred orb the subject of some to-ing and fro-ing. There are also three one-shots. 'Blood And Honor' is written by *Star Trek* actor Mark Lenard, and has a stupid twee twist to a story of the Romulan ambassador to Bajor and a mysterious artefact, while a more Ferengi-based story takes place in 'The Rules of

Diplomacy', in which Nog escorts a Klingon officer to his home planet. It's written by Aron Eisenberg, who plays Nog in the TV show, but there's no acting connection with the very ordinary 'Worf', which has two stories about the Klingon.

Both miniseries are written by Mark Altman and pencilled by Rob Davis. 'Hearts and Minds' has Sisko having to mediate between the Cardassians and the Klingons, and Dax and Bashir finding something very interesting. It's a suspenseful story that's leagues better than any of the regular series. The three-issue 'Maquis' has a weaker plot, and Davis's art not looking as good inked by Jack Snider as it did when inked by Terry Pallot. The freedom fighting Maquis capture Dr Bashir, and the entire group is then taken prisoner by some Cardassians, at which point Sisko takes a more direct hand.

Overall, only 'Hearts and Minds' shines, but the barrel isn't dredged very often. *Deep Space Nine* fans with a cash surplus might want to try a few issues, because the characters are well treated, but there's better *Star Trek* material elsewhere.~WJ

STAR TREK: DEEP SPACE NINE

Marvel: *15 issues 1996-1998*

Inferior spin-off from the TV series with Captain Sisko and his motley crew boldly staying put on the eponymous space station as conspiracies, traitors and alien invaders line up to cause trouble. Even the rare bright moments, such as Odo's renewed relationship with Lwaxana Troi (10-11) or the 'Origin of Tribbles' from 14, although entertaining, still fall prey to a confusing and annoying tendency to try to shoehorn the comic action into the bits between TV episodes. Pedestrian efforts of interest to die-hard Trekkies only.~WW

STAR TREK DEEP SPACE NINE

WildStorm: *4 issue miniseries ('N-Vector') 2000*

This follows directly from the last episode of the TV series, so some of the show's strongest characters, Odo, Worf and Sisko, are missing in action here. Science fiction author K.W. Jeter has a good grasp of the *Star Trek* universe, but turns in a routine story about a virus that infects every part of the Deep Space Nine space station. The highly stylised pencils of artist Toby Cypress don't help matters much; none of his humanoid characters look very much like their live action counterparts, and at times the murky storytelling is almost impossible to follow.~AL

STAR TREK: EARLY VOYAGES

Marvel: *17 issues 1997-1998*

The *Star Trek* franchise expands beyond the TV tie-ins with adventures of the Enterprise under Captain Kirk's predecessor Christopher Pike, star of the pilot episode, later recycled as 'The Menagerie'. With only one canonical appearance to draw from writers Dan Abnett and Ian Edginton were free to concentrate on producing solid action adventures without becoming trapped trying to reconcile the comic with the 'real' version. High points include Mr Spock's secondment in the first issue, yeoman Mia Colt's spin on the events in the aforementioned 'Menagerie' (4) and an alternate future story wherein James Kirk was kicked out of Starfleet and became a smuggler (12-15). Sadly, just as it was getting into its stride, the series ended abruptly, halfway through an intriguing espionage romp featuring the Klingons.~WW

Recommended: 1, 4

STAR TREK NEW FRONTIER

WildStorm: *One-shot ('Double Time') 2000*

Writer Peter David co-created the *New Frontier Star Trek* franchise for a series of "non-canonical" paperback novels, based around the adventures of Captain Calhoun and the crew of the starship U.S.S. Excalibur. David's script for 'Double Time' is full of exactly the same kind of time travel gimmickry and overwrought moral 'philosophising' that can be found in many an episode of 'classic' Trek, but sadly the cast of characters here are bland even by the standards of the insipid *Voyager* TV series. Artists Michael Collins and David Roach do their best to enliven some rather preachy dialogue from the normally more light-hearted David.~AL

STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION

DC: *6 issue miniseries 1988*, 80 issues, 6 Annuals, 3 Specials 1989-1996*

The introductory miniseries is the work of Mike Carlin and Pablo Marcos, with inkers Carlos Garzon and Arne Starr, and there are certainly teething problems. It was obviously produced with Carlin having seen very few of the TV episodes, and there's a stiffness in the dialogue and situations and an over-reliance on scenarios from those early episodes. Marcos, never the most dynamic or anatomically correct of pencillers, is adequate, but no more.

He returns to draw the ongoing series, now using more photo reference, and the new writer is Michael Jan Friedman, a wise choice. He's an adroit hand at maintaining the character interaction and the human interest stories that were so much the driving force of the TV series, and also turns in good plots and mysteries. While rarely stunning, his issues, which comprise almost the entirety of the run, are largely enjoyable reads for anyone familiar with the TV show, and have an admirable consistency. 7-8 focus on Data being kidnapped by space pirates whose dying leader wants to transfer his consciousness into Data's body. They're good representative issues and have the bonus of being drawn by Gordon Purcell, whose art is less static than that of Marcos. 19's one-issue character study 'The Lesson' is also a decent sample, this pencilled by Peter Krause and inked by Marcos, a competent art team that lasts through most issues until 51.

Friedman's first outstanding multi-part story runs in 20-24*. Worf, Riker and Will Crusher depart for a short mission in a shuttlecraft, but are sucked through a vortex that disables their star drive, in effect stranding them in a strange part of the galaxy. The story focuses both on their attempts to return home and on the emotions of those on the Enterprise who believe them dead; it also gives the Enterprise a mission diverting enough to be an effective counterplot, and to put everything to rights by the conclusion. 25-28 don't have quite the same emotional pull, but are still solid issues. After a poor Q appearance in the second annual, written by John DeLancie, the actor who portrays the character, Q returns under Friedman's pen in 33-35 for a more effective story, in which he transforms the Enterprise's crew into Klingons.

Those for whom a detailed time-scale slotting DC's comics and the novels into the TV continuity is necessary will find it on 37's editorial page (with an update in 69), the story being the middle chapter of a merely average piece starring the *Next Generation*'s Harry Mudd counterpart Ardra. 39-44 appear to be in response to readers requesting more action, and stretch a slim plot that extra mile too far, but Friedman's right back on form with 47-50, a tale of a parallel dimension in which Riker captains an Enterprise that is the universe's last hope against the otherwise all-conquering Borg. Plot and counter-plot ensue, and, given that all the crew are duplicated, Friedman has the luxury of permanently changing the status quo. Excellent stuff, with Krause on top form for his penultimate issues.

Considering the opportunities afforded writers by virtue of the Holodeck's ability to recreate any period or setting, Friedman was remarkably restrained in his use of it. 52-54, though, see Picard there in P.I. Dixon Hill mode, desperately trying to solve a mystery when the lives of crew members are dependent on his doing so. It's not the best of the longer stories, due to yet another appearance from an overused adversary. By this point Deryl Skelton is the regular penciller until 70. His layouts are dull and his art less expressive than Krause's by some distance, with stiff figures, and faces too obviously copied, and thus distracting. Gordon Purcell, for most of the remaining issues, is far better. 66 is a whimsical solution to the problem of dealing with nuclear stockpiles, and 71-75 return the Tholians in a story picking up after the final *Next Generation* TV episode. While not quite up to Friedman's best, there's still a well constructed plot with plenty of twists and escapes and not one, but two decent revelations as to who's responsible for some attacks on lonely outposts.

The final two issues, as did the final TV show episode, concern further intervention by Q. Hearing a funeral eulogy in which Picard wishes that all his crew had Data's android immunity to many forms of danger, Q grants the wish by transforming the entire crew into androids. All start on the same level that Data did, logical, nearly emotionless and lacking basic human concern, while Friedman masterfully includes Data's reactions to the occurrence. He's grown immensely through interaction with humans and other species, and sees his friends failing as humans. The eventual message is obvious, but getting there is hugely entertaining.

The annuals and specials are a generally rum bunch, with Friedman not on form for those he writes. There's a nice Diane Duane-written short in the first special, and Chris Claremont follows up on the *Star Trek* 'Debt of Honor' graphic novel in the second, but it's the third special that's the best of them all, with a quiet story about complex negotiations and new technology, yet nonetheless absorbing for all that, from Michael DeMerritt and Ricardo Villagran. The back-up has Scotty in the twenty-fourth century. There's also a one-shot special adapting the final TV episode, and the sixth annual continues a story from *Star Trek* annual 6 that mixes and matches the crews from both Enterprises, although it's hardly compelling.~FP

Recommended: 20-24, 47-50, 79, 80

STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION

WildStorm: *4 issue miniseries ('The Killing Shadows') 2000, one-shot ('Embrace the Wolf') 2000, 4 issue miniseries ('Perchance to Dream') 2000, Graphic Novel ('The Gorn Crisis') 2001, 4 issue miniseries ('Divided We Fall') 2001*

In 'The Killing Shadows', the crew protect a scientist from Bodai Shin (the killing shadows) who have been wiping out leading Federation science types. Picard and his crew go planet-side to find out more about the assassins and the secret subculture in which they operate. The art looks very good, with some pencils in 1 by Brian Hitch who captures likenesses without the images looking stilted. Even when Andrew Currie takes over the pencilling completely, it's still much more fluid than your average *Star Trek* comic. As for the story, four issues is a lot for what Scott Ciencin had to say. 'Embrace the Wolf' is a chance for Picard and co. to face off against Redjac, an evil force that once battled Kirk and had been Jack the Ripper. Now Redjac is on the Holodeck, facing Data (in Sherlock Holmes outfit) in a game of wits. Doesn't that sound great? All this, and some very ugly art. Wow. In 'Perchance to Dream', the crew are at an alien governor's inauguration protecting her from moral extremists who object to her sexual preferences. Written by Keith R. A. DeCandido, it's an enjoyable and well-paced adventure.

Remember the guy in the green rubber suit during the credits of the original *Star Trek* series? He was a Gorn, and they're back, in 'The Gorn Crisis'. Yes, a hundred years after Captain Kirk, Picard and the Enterprise return to the planet on a diplomatic mission, but discover the Gorn halfway through a military coup, and things don't look good. The painted artwork is stiff and lacks consistency, with a mediocre story by Igor Kordey – it seems hard to justify the $29.95 cover price. 'Divided We Fall' teams the cast of *Next Generation* with those of *Deep Space Nine*, set after both shows ended on TV. It's a suitably widescreen plot involving a band of revolutionaries in Trill society, and the emotional upheavals they cause among the familiar faces. For some reason Andrew Currie has a real problem capturing the likeness of Lt Riker, but otherwise it's something fans of the show can pick up with confidence.~DB

STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION
Miniseries

DC: *4 issue miniseries ('The Modala Imperative') 1991*, 4 issue miniseries ('Shadowheart') 1994-1995, 4 issue miniseries ('Ill Wind') 1995-1996*

DC/Malibu: *4 issue miniseries (The Next Generation/Deep Space Nine) 1994-1995**

'The Modala Imperative' follows-up a miniseries of the same name starring the original Enterprise crew. The new crew return a century later to see if Modala is ready to join the Federation, and the mysterious weapons supplier from the other series comes calling for payment. Peter David enjoys himself writing, but the Pablo Marcos art is rushed and ugly. The Enterprise, acting as security for the Solar Sailing Cup, sets 'Ill Wind' in motion. It's a curiously subdued piece from Diane Duane. Picard and The Mestral, a head of state unable to resign yet with many enemies, both feel hemmed in, and each envies the other's freedoms. Sabotage during the race and an assassination attempt complicate matters, but the nice character touches don't disguise that this is stretched too long over four issues. Worf and Riker are the leads for 'Shadowheart', in which Worf learns that his human brother, believed recently dead, is leading a rebellion in a Klingon outpost. Again, it's stretched too far, although the creative team of Michael Jan Friedman and Steve Erwin pack in a little more conflict, both physical and emotional. A teaming of the 24th-century Enterprise crew and those manning Deep Space Nine occurs over four issues, but as different companies have the comic rights to each series, each publishes two parts, both numbering them 1 and 2. DC publish the first and fourth chapters and Malibu the second and third. Mike Barr and Michael Jan Friedman construct a perfectly acceptable plot set as the Enterprise stops off at Deep Space Nine shortly after its recovery. The interaction between the two casts is well handled, and artists Gordon Purcell and Terry Pallot also do a fine job. It was collected as 'The Landmark Crossover'!~FP

STAR TREK One-shots

The best of three one-shots Marvel released in 1997 is Tom DeFalco and Mark Bagley's 'Mirror Mirror', an above average sequel to the TV episode of the same name set on the USS Enterprise of an alternate universe. On a ship where promotion comes from killing your immediate superior, machiavellian Mr Spock seeks a new way whilst trying not to be killed by his junior officers and the sadistically psychopathic Captain Kirk. 'Operation Assimilation' is the tale of Moliok, a strong willed Romulan who gets turned into a Borg. That's it. Really. At least it's well drawn by Steve Erwin and Terry Pallot. 'Telepathy War' concludes the crossover story that ran through Marvel's *Star Trek* comics in winter 1997. A plot by the Founders to neutralise the telepathic races of the Federation is foiled by the joint efforts of the cast of *Deep Space Nine, Star Fleet Academy, the Next Generation*, and *Mr Spock*. It's unsatisfactory; full of improbable coincidences and treknobabble, and the plot hook is lifted from Alfred Bester's *The Demolished Man*.~WW

STAR TREK SPECIAL

WildStorm: *One-shot 2001*

This has the feeling of a sampler, but is in fact WildStorm's last gasp at *Star Trek*. A short tale of each crew is provided, with two further stories cross-pollinating the original crew with the *Next Generation*, and providing a final farewell for Dr McCoy. It's all crafted to professional standards, and while there's nothing outstanding, neither should it disappoint its intended audience.~WJ

STAR TREK: STARFLEET ACADEMY

Marvel: *19 issues 1996-1998*

Using background history and supporting characters from the various *Star Trek* shows this series follows a team of Star Fleet cadets as they attend the Federation training academy and somehow get involved in plots and adventures that take them all over the galaxy. They catch drug pushers, Changelings, and spies, fight their opposite numbers from the Klingon school (Klingons go to school?), save the universe, and even have to deal with a spy in their midst. Woeful blending of *Star Trek* and Enid Blyton's *Famous Five*, and with too much effort wasted on making it all fit into the TV continuity. For hard-core fans only.~WW

STAR TREK UNLIMITED

Marvel: *10 issues 1996-1998*

Double sized title enabling the presentation of separate adventures of both the Kirk and Picard Enterprise crews in 1-5. From 6 on it's generally full length stories, permitting the regular writing team of Dan Abnett and Ian Edginton, to

include moments other than plot, improving what was already solid entertainment that should appeal to most *Star Trek* fans. The best issues are 7's switching of Enterprise captains and 9's romp starring Chekov and Sulu, but there isn't a bad issue in the run.~FP
Recommended: 7, 9

STAR TREK: UNTOLD VOYAGES

Marvel: *5 issue miniseries 1998*

Glen Greenberg and Mike Collins relate episodes from the second five-year-mission of the original crew, set after *Star Trek: the Motion Picture*. Routine adventures with Klingons, space pirates and misunderstood entities making life tough for Kirk and Co. Fairly mediocre and probably a nightmare to a Trek completist.~WW

STAR TREK VOYAGER

WildStorm: *One-shot ('False Colors') 2000, one-shot ('Avalon Rising') 2000, one-shot ('Elite Force') 2000, 3 issue miniseries ('Planet Killer') 2001*

Captain Janeway leads her crew in what read like attempts at TV scripts. In 'False Colors', Voyager encounters a less than convincing Borg vessel, so having their own Borg crewman helps matters. 'Avalon Rising', is written by Janice Ellen Young and Doselle Young, who need to check on the meaning of the term 'ponce'. It's set on a medieval planet where Janeway and her crew have become the stuff of campfire tales, and David Roach's well-balanced artwork is reminiscent of syndicated Sunday pages. 'Elite Force' features a raid on a Borg cube led by Tuvok, and 'Planet Killer', written by Kristen Kathryn Rusch and Dean Wesley Smith, borrows the Doomsday Machine from an original *Star Trek* episode. The undynamic art by Robert Teranishi inked by Claude StAubin is a parade of photo swipe talking heads sprinkled over clipped backgrounds, but the script is so dialogue heavy that this might be bearable if the pretty backgrounds properly described what was happening. All stories are bogged down by attempts at characterisation at the expense of any page-turners, many further so by writers intent on prioritising their own new creations at the expense of the Voyager crew. They're all collected anyway as 'Encounters With The Unknown'.~SW

STAR TREK/X-MEN

Marvel: *One-shot 1996*

In the spirit of the original Star Trek series, writer Scott Lobdell has the crew of the Enterprise encounter a strange dimensional rift through which they're pulled. For maximum effect, shake the comic about a bit when reading this sequence. On the other side they encounter the X-Men. It's an unlikely forced team-up involving Gary Mitchell, seen in the 1960s TV series, under the influence of X-Men adversary Proteus. Lobdell throws in all sorts of other superfluous characters, but the title is saved by the deftly written interaction between the Enterprise crew and the X-Men. Fans of both should figure out the Dr McCoy joke, but the opportunity to have Kirk say to Cyclops "Beam me up, Scotty" is sadly missed. A number of artists contribute, most notably Mark Silvestri.~HY

Atelier Lana's STAR TREKKER

Antarctic: *1 Graphic Novel 1991, 1 issue 1992*

The graphic novel introduces the crew of the Constellation II, more interested in partying than searching out new worlds, but quite able to deal with Kirk and company in this loose Japanese parody of Star Trek movies (they go back in time to eat the whale). It's more of the same lunacy, lacking familiar Star Trek faces, in the following one-shot. Atelier Lana's comedy art is well drawn, and perhaps he should be recognised for his precognitive abilities, managing to pre-empt a robot doctor on Star Trek, and the name of genuine Enterprise Vulcan T'Pall by a decade.~WJ

STAR WARS

Marvel: *107 issues, 3 Annuals, 1977-1986, 4 issue miniseries ('Return Of The Jedi') 1983-1984**

Star Wars merchandising branched out into every conceivable medium in the late 1970s, and comics were no exception. Marvel started with a competent adaptation of the film in 1-6*, including some scenes from the original script that never made it to the screen, such as a sequence in the Tatooine workshop between Luke Skywalker and his friend Biggs. The adaptation was also released as an oversize Marvel Treasury edition, initially in two parts, then collected. *The Empire Strikes Back* adaptation was also issued in the Treasury format, and as a colour magazine. The gap between 6 and the next film was bridged with a series of stories which, while entertaining, were visibly unable to advance plot or character. The unresolved (and unresolvable) love triangle between the major characters was a particular albatross around the neck of many plots, with Han, Luke and Leia unable to have each other or, indeed, anyone else. Adventures instead focused on weird aliens and bizarre robots, interspersed with fights with storm-troopers and TIE fighters, which wasn't too far from the spirit of *Star Wars* in any case. 39-44* detail the events of *The Empire Strikes Back*, but, like the first film, leave the comic in limbo until the subsequent movie, this time without even the advantage of having all the main characters available for use, as the middle film of the trilogy had left Han Solo a captive of his old enemy Jabba the Hutt – a useful device in case Harrison Ford, by now a major Hollywood star, chose not to return for a third outing. This left the comic in the awkward position of not being able to have Solo's friends attempt to rescue him while trying, unsuccessfully, to make it seem like they hadn't got round to it yet because they had better things to do. *Return of the Jedi* was adapted in a separate miniseries, written by Archie Goodwin with art by Al Williamson throughout. It came in two formats, regular comic-size and collected as a magazine, in an attempt to attract a non-comics audience. *Star Wars* itself survived for a few years after the end of the trilogy, basically running on until interest in the movies began to peter out.

During its near-ten-year run, *Star Wars* boasted some impressive creators, particularly on the art side. The first ten issues, written by Roy Thomas, were pencilled by Howard Chaykin. Archie Goodwin, with Carmine Infantino on pencilling duty, took over from issue 11, and, under a succession of inkers, steered the book to 37, during which period the stories took Luke Skywalker back to Tatooine, and dealt with both Han and Chewie's debts to Jabba the Hutt, and Ben Kenobi and Darth Vader's pasts. Many of the stories either noticeably skirt around actually revealing anything at all, or are simply inaccurate in the face of later developments. Goodwin stays on the writing through to issue 50, aided by Al Williamson on art, starting with the *Empire Strikes Back* adaptations and lasting through to Infantino's return with 45. After this, an unsettled creative team dooms the book to a succession of fill-in issues until David Michelinie (writer) and Walt Simonson take over with 56, kicking off with a tale of Lando Calrissian on Bespin. The next regular team is Jo Duffy and Ron Frenz, inked by Tom Palmer, who take the book up to its unspectacular finish. Unlike the Death Star, the comic dies with a whimper rather than a bang. The final issue includes art by Whilce Portacio – some of his earliest published Marvel work. In general, however, while the series always remains around average, it is the interest in the films, rather than the comics for their own sake, which keeps back issue prices ridiculously high.

To their credit, since Dark Horse began publishing *Star Wars* comics they reprinted many of the Marvel comics, most prominently as six paperback books titled *Classic Star Wars* 'A Long Time Ago...' They've also reprinted all three movie adaptations, and 95 by Goodwin and Williamson, released as *Classic Star Wars:* 'The Vandelhelm Mission'. They're now reprinting the entire series in paperbacks.~JC

STAR WARS

Dark Horse: *47 issues + 1998 to date*

The regular series set in the *Star Wars* Universe takes place in largely chronological order in step with the cinema release of Episode I and Episode II. It's broken into palatable story arcs, conveniently named on the covers, with changing, though recurring, characters and creators. 'Prelude to Rebellion' (1-6), has Jedi Knight, Ki-Adi-Mundi interacting with his rebellious daughter, while his home planet, Cerea, debates membership of the Republic. 'Outlander' (7-12), written by Tim Truman, sees Ki-Adi-Mundi on Tatooine, searching for a Jedi, now Tuskan warrior, called Sharad Hett, whose son, A'Sharad is destined to train as a Jedi. Truman stays for 'Emissaries To Malastare' (13-18), in which Jedis, Mace Windu, Ki-Adi-Mundi, Yaddle and Adi Gallia are involved in supervising peace negotiations and then the smuggling of Akk Dogs on Nar Shaddaa.

John Ostrander and Jan Duursema are teamed for 'Twilight' in 19-22, a good thriller with twists and character, in which Jedi, Quinlan Vos, suffering from memory loss, meets Villie Grahrk, a smuggler, whilst trying to find his padawan (apprentice), Aayla, who has disappeared. Quinlan Vos must then face the witches of Dathomir, in Pat Mills and Ramon F. Bachs' 'Infinity's End' (23-26), another good piece that keeps the reader guessing. 27 tells a poor fairytale of an arrogant young Jedi and a princess, while Davidé Fabbri joins Truman for 'The Hunt For Aurra Sing' in 28-31. Ki-Adi-Mundi, Adi Gallia, A'Sharad and the Dark Woman join the hunt, but it's necessarily inconclusive. Ostrander and Duursema return to re-unite Quinlan Vos and Villie on a prison planet, where they're joined by several other Jedi to confront a Jedi turned to the dark side, in 'Darkness' (32-35).

'The Stark Hyperspace War' (36-39) is a wide-scale adventure as a smuggling collective challenge the Republic, and there are battles and a siege on Troiken where Jedi (including Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan) and Republic representatives are trapped. The same team of Ostrander and Fabbri tell Villie's side of the 'Jedi Council: Acts of War' series in 'The Devaronian Version' (40-41). 'Rite of Passage' (42-45) is another good tale from Ostrander and Duursema, as Quinlan Vos and Aayla face father and son mercenaries, members of a near extinct warrior race. The series has 'Republic' added to its title with 46 and the start of the three-part, 'Honor and Duty', in which Obi-Wan and Anakin are asked to guard a senator, who has just replaced an assassinated relative, though the plot hinges on the family of Senate Guard, Sagoro Autem, whose brother appears to be the person who hired the assassin.~NF

Recommended: 19-26, 32-35, 42-45

Classic STAR WARS

Dark Horse: *20 issues 1993-1994*, 9 issue limited series ('The Early Adventures') 1994*, 2 issue microseries ('A New Hope') 1994*, 2 issue microseries ('The Empire Strikes Back') 1994*, One-shot ('The Vandelhelm Mission') 1995, two issue microseries ('Devilworlds') 1996, one-shot ('A New Hope' Special Edition) 1997, 3 issue miniseries (Han Solo at Stars End) 1997*, 6 issue miniseries ('A Long Time Ago…') 1999**

Reprinting the newspaper strip adventures of the *Star Wars* characters produced between the initial film releases, the original artist of choice was Al Williamson, whose 1950s EC strips had influenced *Star Wars* creator George Lucas. Williamson was committed elsewhere, though, so Russ Manning drew the first three years worth of material, written by Rick Hoberg, comprising 'The Early Adventures'. Superbly illustrated, it's for art lovers and Star Wars completists only. When Williamson took over he asked to work with long time co-creator Archie Goodwin, then writing the Marvel comic, and the strip hit high gear. Their collaboration is set between the destruction of the Death Star and the attack on the Ice Planet of Hoth. Reprinted over 20 issues, it forms an epic novel that rattles along at rocket speed, yet still successfully manages to fill in all the blanks and plot holes of the movies. It's good old-fashioned space adventures often surpassing the source material.

As the newspaper strips available for reprinting dried up, Dark Horse re-packaged Marvel's film adaptations along with another Goodwin and Williamson collaboration 'The Vandelhelm Mission' from *Star Wars* 95, followed by stories now considered non-canonical from Marvel UK's early 1980s titles in ''Devilworlds'. You will find work from Alan Moore, Alan Davis and Steve Parkhouse among others, but it's not their best or the best *Star Wars*. To commemorate the 20th anniversary re-release of the first *Star Wars* movie there was a new adaptation of the original script, now known as 'A New Hope'. It's solid work from Bruce Jones, Eduardo Barreto and Al Williamson. A new newspaper strip was also launched, drawn by Alfredo Alcala. 'Han Solo at Stars End' reprints the strip, and while Alcala's art is not to everyone's taste the strip is a little gem. The 1999 series reprints stories from the Marvel issues.~WW

Recommended: 1-20, 'Han Solo At Stars End' 1-3

STAR WARS Episode I

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries ('The Phantom Menace') 1999*, one-shot ('Anakin Skywalker') 1999, one-shot ('Obi-Wan Kenobi') 1999, one-shot ('Queen Amidala') 1999, one-shot ('Qui-Gon Jinn') 1999*

Obviously enough, 'The Phantom Menace' adapts the film, and does so well, with Rodolfo Damaggio and Al Williamson a fine artistic combination. It does, however, highlight how similar the plot is to the original *Star Wars* trilogy compressed into a single film. The one-shots concentrate on the main characters from the film, telling stories based around it, and should all have an appeal to *Star Wars* fans except 'Obi-Wan Kenobi', which pointlessly provides a *Phantom Menace* precis from the title character's viewpoint. Ryder Windham provides the best story in 'Qui-Gon Jinn', set following the pod race on Tatooine, but while Robert Teranishi captures cast likeness, his art is static. 'Queen Amidala is set just prior to the pod race, and Jar Jar Binks co-stars. The art by Galen Showman and P. Craig Russell is the best on the one-shots, although Steve Crespo and George Freeman run them close on 'Anakin Skywalker'. Also set before the pod race, it follows Anakin's life immediately prior to the arrival of the Jedi. All the comics come with the choice of a movie still or an illustrated cover.~FP

STAR WARS Miniseries and One-shots

Dark Horse: *6 issue miniseries ('Dark Empire') 1991-1992*, 6 issue miniseries ('Dark Empire II') 1994-1995*, 2 issue microseries ('Empire's End') 1995, 4 issue miniseries ('River of Chaos') 1995*, 6 issue miniseries ('Heir To The Empire') 1995-1996*, one-shot ('Tales From Mos Eisley') 1996, one-shot ('Battle of the Bounty Hunters') 1996, one-shot ('Shadow Stalker') 1997, 6 issue miniseries ('Dark Force Rising') 1997*, one-shot ('The Protocol Offensive') 1997, 4 issue miniseries ('A New Hope Special Edition') 1997*, 6 issue miniseries ('The Last Command') 1997-1998*, 4 issue miniseries ('A New Hope – Manga') 1998, one-shot ('The Jabba Tape') 1998, 6 issue miniseries ('Mara Jade: By The Emperor's Hand') 1998-1999*, 4 issue miniseries ('Jedi Academy: Leviathan') 1998-1999*, 3 issue miniseries ('Handbook') 1998-2000, 4 issue miniseries ('The Empire Strikes Back – Manga') 1999, 4 issue miniseries ('Return of the Jedi – Manga') 1999, 4 issue miniseries ('Union') 1999-2000*, 4 issue miniseries ('Jedi Council: Acts of War') 2000*, 5 issue miniseries ('Underworld') 2000-2001*, 6 issue miniseries ('Jedi vs. Sith') 2001*, 4 issue miniseries ('Jedi Quest') 2001, 2 issue microseries ('Tag & Bink Are Dead') 2001, 4 issue miniseries ('Infinities: A New Hope') 2001*, one-shot ('Jango Fett') 2002, one-shot ('Zam Wesell') 2002, 4 issue miniseries ('Jango Fett: Open Seasons') 2002*, 4 issue miniseries ('Episode II: Attack of the Clones') 2002, 3 issue miniseries ('Starfighter: Crossbones') 2002, 4 issue miniseries ('Infinities: The Empire Strikes Back') 2002*, Empire 3 issues + 2002 to date*

This review covers the series in largely chronological order within the *Star Wars* canon. Other miniseries have been issued under their own prominent titles rather than the *Star Wars* heading (*Crimson Empire, Droids* and *Jabba The Hut* among others) and are dealt with under those titles. 'Jedi vs. Sith' is the powerful story, from writer, Darko Macan, of the final battle between the Jedi and Sith lords on Ruusan, where three children have been recruited to replace the dead. 'Jedi Council', with battles aplenty, explains how a violent warrior race, the Yinchorri, immune to Jedi mind control are manipulated by the Sith into attacking the Jedi on Coruscant, with Mace Windu leading a team of knights (including Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan), to locate their base. Ryder Windham contemplates the issue of slavery in 'Jedi Quest', in which Obi-Wan and Anakin have a mission to escort a Colicoid diplomatic mission, but are intercepted by pirates. 'Jango Fett' and 'Zam Wesell', written by Ron Marz, are two parts of a story that begins with them both hired to retrieve a stolen artefact, but then requires them both to try to prevent its use

* Available in a collected edition

against the Republic. Tom Fowler is responsible for the good, painted artwork on the first of these, though Ted Naifeh is not as impressive on the second. 'Open Seasons' is a history of Jango Fett, written by Haden Blackman, telling how he came to be chosen as the prime clone by Count Dooku. 'Episode II: Attack of the Clones' is attractively drawn by Jan Duursema, but is otherwise a straight adaptation of the film.

'Starfighter concerns the mercenary Nym, hired to bring a halt to the activities of a pirate, with the Trade Federation waiting to pick up the pieces. This is a good romp from Blackman and Ramon Bachs. 'Tales From Mos Eisley' contains three short stories, by Bruce Jones, told over a drink and with twists in their tails. Windham teams with *Star Wars* actor, Anthony Daniels for the clever and amusing 'The Protocol Offensive', drawn by Igor Kordey, in which C-3PO and R2-D2 are 'helping' diplomatic negotiations until a murder and powerful weapon endanger the whole planet. In 'Underworld', three Hutts (Jabba, Embra and Halta) have a wager on which can most efficiently retrieve the Yavin Vassilika, allowing the use of three contractors each. Jabba chooses Han Solo, Lando Calrissian and Boba Fett leading to a playful treasure hunt, well told by Mike Kennedy and Carlos Meglia. 'Empire', which may or may not be a miniseries, begins with the excellent, four-part 'Betrayal', by Scott Allie and Ryan Benjamin. Set in the weeks prior to 'A New Hope', the Grand Moff Trachta and some Imperial Generals are plotting to kill the Emperor and Darth Vader.

'A New Hope Special Edition' by Bruce Jones and Eduardo Barreto, is a good, but not great, re-telling of the film, which introduced the Star Wars characters. There are three manga series, adapting the films 'A New Hope', 'The Empire Strikes Back' and 'Return of the Jedi'. They're all in different styles, but are faithful to the films and enjoyable reads, though the first by Hisao Tamaki is the clearest. 'Tag & Bink Are Dead' is a mildly amusing comedy about two rebels trying to stay alive during the events of 'A New Hope' and 'The Empire Strikes Back'. Ranulf Trommer, pilot and son of an Imperial General is sent to the planet M'Haeli in 'River of Chaos', to spy on the Governor suspected of something illegal. Whilst there, he's framed by and falls in with the planet's budding rebellion, which has just attracted the attention of Princess Leia. This is a well-crafted tale, by Louise Simonson, of the reasons for rebellion. 'The Jabba Tape', by John Wagner and Kilian Plunkett, is a comedic squabble over the legacy of Jabba the Hutt, fun, if not well coloured. 'Shadow Stalker' is related to the 'Shadows of the Empire' series, originally presented in Topps' *Star Wars Galaxy* magazine 9-12. Jix is sent by Darth Vader to assassinate a defecting Imperial Governor, but finds that the situation isn't as clear-cut as he was told. 'Battle of the Bounty Hunters', by Windham and Christopher Moeller, is a novelty, but well-presented, pop-up book, depicting Boba Fett's trials as he tries to deliver the frozen Han Solo to Jabba the Hutt.

Unarguably the best of these series, 'Mara Jade: By The Emperor's Hand', is the story of what Mara Jade did after failing to kill Luke at Jabba's Palace. She's sent to kill Dequc, leader of the Black Nebula organisation, which is usurping Imperial authority on the planet, Svivren. Having killed only a double, however, Mara Jade finds herself cast as a traitor after the Emperor's death, and is imprisoned, before she can try again. Written by Timothy Zahn and Michael A. Stackpole, with artwork by Carlos Ezquerra, this is a very attractive, well-characterised story. 'Heir To The Empire', 'Dark Force Rising' and 'The Last Command' are a trilogy, all adapted by Mike Baron from the novels by Zahn. They concern Grand Admiral Thrawn's attempts to revive the Empire's fortunes with assistance from rogue Jedi, Joruus C'Baoth, who wants Luke, Leia and the latter's twins, Jacen and Jaina. Luke meets Mara Jade for the first time and smuggler Talon Karrde is introduced. With artwork from Olivier Vatine, Terry Dodson (inked by Kevin Nowlan), and Edvin Biukovic respectively, this starts well, but loses something in the final episodes.

Another trilogy is 'Dark Empire', 'Dark Empire II' and 'Empire's End', which tell of the return of the Emperor Palpatine and Luke's dangerous journey to the Dark Side, the Emperor's dark agents' plotting and the birth of Leia's third child, Anakin, while Luke plans the rebirth of the JediKnights, and then the final fate of the Emperor, who wants to use Anakin for his rebirth. Written by Tom Veitch and with distinctive artwork from Cam Kennedy (first two) and then Jim Baikie, this is a good story, with an irritating narrative voice. Each issue of the 'Handbook' is concerned with a different series, providing background information on *X-Wing Rogue Squadron*, *Crimson Empire* and *Dark Empire* respectively. In 'Jedi Academy: Leviathan', Luke's Jedi students travel, in response to a distress signal, to a mining colony where something monstrous has been awakened. 'Union' tells the story of Luke and Mara Jade's wedding, which disgruntled, ex-Imperial soldiers are plotting to disrupt. This is terribly sentimental, surprisingly from Stackpole, with false sounding dialogue, and artwork from Robert Teranishi that has some beautiful panels, but makes all of the characters seem far too young.

The two 'Infinities' series each tell an alternate version of *Star Wars* history. Chris Warner and Drew Johnson complete the whole story from 'A New Hope' to 'Return of The Jedi', from the premise that the Death Star didn't explode. Luke spends years with Yoda becoming a Jedi Knight, whilst Leia becomes a Jedi herself, under the tutelage of her father, Darth Vader and the Emperor. In 'The Empire Strikes Back', Luke dies on Hoth, and Leia takes his place on Dagobah, training with Yoda before facing Darth Vader.~NF

Recommended: 'Mara Jade: By The Emperor's Hand' 1-6', The Protocol Offensive', 'Underworld' 1-5, 'Empire'

STAR WARS TALES

Dark Horse: *14 issues + 1999 to date*

As with all Dark Horse licensed material, almost everything in this anthology is crafted to a level of professional competence, meaning it provides decent adventure material that should appeal to *Star Wars* fans. There's little that pokes its head up above the parapet of acceptability, though. This is certainly not due to a conservative editorial policy, as the title finds room for interpretations of characters by Dave Cooper (2), The Filbach Brothers (14), Dave McCaig (9), Tony Millionaire (5), Jay Stephens (9), Craig Thompson (5) and Andi Watson (8). The series spans all eras of the *Star Wars* mythos, and sometimes mixes them such as setting Darth Vader against Darth Maul in 9, and sooner or later most major players are covered. A popular theme is looking in on characters or events just prior to their impact in one of the movies, such as a meeting to discuss the creation of the Death Star, rendered in whimsical fashion in 6, or Garth Ennis and John McCrea's story of a Stormtrooper in 10. That issue also includes the illustrative art of Vatche Mavlian, who's not quite mastered his technique yet, but will be very impressive once he has. The better stories include the teenage diary entries of Princess Leia in 11, Ryder Windham and Kilian Plunkett's look at young Anakin Skywalker and C3PO contrasted with Darth Vader in 6 and the series starts well with Qui-Gon teaching Obi-Wan some lessons in 1 from Jim Woodring and Robert Teranishi. Other notable names contribute along the way, but what they produce is no better than the general standard.~WJ

STARBLAST

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1994*

Utterly stupid story making little sense to anyone who doesn't also read *Quasar*, particularly issues 54-57, with which it crosses over. Dozens of superheroes are embroiled in a plot to siphon off the Starbrand energy welded to Quasar's girlfriend and use it for nefarious purposes. The appalling dialogue – step forward, Mark Gruenwald – makes everyone sound like kids playing at being superheroes, and the ending is extremely rushed.~FP

STARBLAZERS

Comico: *4 issue miniseries 1987*, 5 issues 1989*
Argo Press: *2 issues 1995*

The Comico run consists of pages assembled from animation cells from the Leiji Matsumoto created feature *Battleship Yamato*, seen by many as the initiator of comics/animation fandom in 1970s Japan. The Yamato is a spaceship named after the pride of Japan's fleet during WWII. The colour and production standards are impressive, but lack the implied motion and feel for whole-page design that a comic needs. Result: luscious but ultimately very dull. The Argo Press effort is a translated version of later material, *Yamato: The New Voyages*. The mirror proofs are reproduced in full colour (unusual for imported manga) and are eminently readable translations. As with most manga series you're expected to be completely familiar the Yamato and her crew (introduced in 2) so reading stray copies may be unrewarding.~SW

STARCHILD

Taliesin Press: *13 issues (0-12) 1992-1994**
Coppervale Press: *4 issue miniseries ('Crossroads') 1995-1996**
Image/Coppervale Press: *5 issue miniseries ('Mythopolis' 0-4), 1997-1998**
Coppervale Press: *2 issues ('Tales from the TwoPenny Inn') 1999*

An expansive and ponderous generational saga from James A. Owen that explores the nature of the creative act using a rustic and classical fairytale vehicle. It concerns the actions of Ezekiel Higgins, who becomes the latest dalliance of Titania, Queen of Faerie, and the children, and grandchildren, of that union. This is over-complex and uncomfortably derivative, but the early lack of narrative discipline eventually gives way to more considered and effective storytelling. It's collected as *Starchild:* 'Awakenings', and is worth the effort.

In 'Crossroads' Owen relates stories just prior to the events of the first series, one to an issue. 'Mythopolis' is the further adventures of Anders Higgins after the resumption of Reality at the end of 'Awakenings'. If the Wild Wood was a distillation of a rustic fairytale countryside, the city is a similar treatment of medieval through Dickensian urban life, full of gutters and gas lamps, and not at all a cheery place. After the scene setting Prologue in 0, 1-3 introduce the menacing Grey Men as Anders sets to deciphering the eerie Book Without Words inherited at the end of 'Awakenings'. 'Fisher King', in 4, introduces a new enemy for Anders and is also known as *Starchild* 21.

The final series was never completed. It's short stories further blurring distinctions between comic page and illustrated prose that Owen uses for portions of his work. It's the vehicle for adventures in storytelling – an abiding theme of all the author's work – and both issues feature half a dozen stories. *The Essential Starchild* is ostensibly a series of reprint volumes, but with such substantial tinkering and retooling by Owen, as well as extra pieces, that it might be fairer to consider the work as a Director's Cut. Overall *Starchild* is a worthy effort, but not easily accessible, and sometimes not much fun.~WW

STARDUST

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1998**

Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess, take a step backwards into the security of illustrations accompanying text. The story is beautifully realised with great charm as are Vess' gorgeous watercolours and drawings. Tristan Thorne's half-faerie birthright, which he knows nothing of, is the subject of the first issue, and in 2 he promises his girl a newly-fallen star. In Faerie he knows where anything is as soon as he's asked, but the star, who surprises him by being a girl with a hurt leg fractured in the fall. The journey back is complicated by others who seek her for less innocent reasons. Thereby hangs the tale, as full of resonance from legend, fairytale and drama as you'd expect from Gaiman. Vess' delicate illustrations manage a romantic elegance without succumbing to over-sugary sentiment. A lovely artefact, but hardly what one could call a comic.~SW

STARFIRE

DC: *8 issues, 1976-1977*

A sword-and-science/sorcery series about a slave who attempted to free her world from alien invaders (she was a sort of love-child of Princess Leia and Attila the Hun), *Starfire* had potential, but lacked direction. And without wanting to sound sexist, Starfire (not to be confused with the *New Teen Titans* character) didn't seem to have enough strength to file her nails, let alone fight with a sword.~HY

STARGATE

Entity: *4 issue miniseries 1996*

Adaptation of the film of the same name, by Barry Blair and Delfin Barral. There's no attempt to make the characters look like the actors, and that's not necessarily a bad thing, but there's little exposition and no heart in this.~NF

STARGODS

Antarctic/Conquest: *2 issues 1998, one-shot ('Visions') 1999*

An ambitious attempt to mix science fiction and mythology in a series about war amongst star-faring pantheons (Greek, Asgardian and Egyptian), heading for Earth. The computer-generated artwork is so overwrought and darkly coloured, it's often difficult to make out what's happening amidst the 3-D effects, and many figures look as stiff as the toy-like models they're based on. 'Visions' just contains pin-ups from the two previous issues.~NF

Legends of the STARGRAZERS

Innovation: *6 issues 1989-1990*

An all-female space crew roams the galaxy in this distressingly exploitative series. There's not much to the plots other than ways of showing off skimpily dressed women in poses copied from glamour mags, making the entire concept a rather unsavoury substitute for pubescents unable to buy *Playboy*. The back-up strips and detours are usually better conceived, with Tom Yeates contributing to 3.~WJ

STARJAMMERS

Marvel: *2 issue microseries 1990, 4 issue miniseries 1995-1996*

In the microseries the team of *X-Men* supporting characters embarks on a space-operatic quest in a race against its traditional enemies, the Shi'ar empire. Writer Terry Kavanagh lacks a clear direction. The plot features too many characters (Imperial Guard, Excalibur, X-Factor), too many token appearances and too many plagiarisms of *Star Trek* devices. By contrast the miniseries is intelligent space opera in which the Starjammers and Shi'ar dance around each other in the face of a new, common menace: the Uncreated. Warren Ellis injects welcome background and characterisation into Starjammer personnel. Breathtaking Carlos Pacheco pencils and beautiful, airbrush effect computer colouring make this series a very attractive package.~APS
Recommended: miniseries 1-4

STARK RAVEN

Endless Horizons Entertainment: *6 issues 2000-2001*

Super-powered enforcers, assassins and renegades, a possibly corrupt secret branch of the military, and a terrified mafia, are all components of an ambitious story. The key is an event in about which official explanations don't tally with emerging facts. Unfortunately, with only six issues of a proposed ten published this amounts to a lot of smoke and no fire. Writer Ken Smith's ambition is commendable even if his reach occasionally exceeds his grasp (particularly with clumsily inserted blocks of expository dialogue), while the art is very Image influenced.~WJ

STARLIGHT

Eternity: *1 issue 1987*

Ten years later and this story of buxom babes piloting a starship would have been a fan favourite. In 1987 it sunk without trace among the glut of black and white comics. Penciller Uriel Antonio couldn't decide if he wanted to be Miller or manga, but was very promising, and Scott Hanna's inks are already accomplished. It's no masterpiece, but given the exploitative cliché as concept, *Starlight* is not entirely without merit.~FP

THE STARLIGHT AGENCY

Antarctic: *3 issues 1991*

As far as the writing goes, this is a decent stab at a detective agency in the future, with a lot of thought given to the background. The art, though, doesn't quite meet the full professional expectations.~WJ

STARLORD

Marvel: *One-shot 1982, 3 issue miniseries 1996-1997*

Always heavily promoted as science fiction, *Starlord* is little more than superheroics in outer space. None the worse for it though, as the sporadic tales of Peter Quill and his symbiotic relationship with a starship regularly surpass average. His bibliography reads: *Marvel Preview* 4, 11, 14, 15, 18, *Marvel Super Special* 10, *Marvel Premiere* 61 and the second series of *Marvel Spotlight* 6, 7 in addition to the eponymous entries. The 1982 one-shot is a colour reprint of *Marvel Preview* 11 by Chris Claremont and John Byrne, wrapped up in a cosy six-page framing sequence by Claremont and Michael Golden. Seven pages of Dr Who by Steve Moore and Dave Gibbons provide back-up.

In the miniseries, weakly telepathic Sinjin Quarrel faces a life of mundane obscurity as a justice administrator on a backwater planet until he stumbles across Starlord's abandoned and derelict ship. Science-fiction author Timothy Zahn shows his strengths as Quarrel struggles to come to terms with the Starlord identity, powers, gadgets and Ship's sentient persona. Substantial plotting weaves Quarrel through tangled political machinations of corrupt officials, and the non-explanation of Quill's disappearance whets the appetite for the future. Dan Lawliss' painted art is solid but unspectacular; the story just lacks sufficient fizz and sparkle to earn recommendation.~APS

STARMAN

DC: *46 issues 1988-1992*

Although DC published various **Starmen** over the decades a new character first occupied an eponymous title. It's light superheroics, aping the 1960s Marvel template. Will Payton wakes up in a morgue unable to account for six weeks of his life. During that time he's somehow learned to fly and acquired superhuman strength and resilience along with being able to generate great heat. He can also morph his features and skin-tone. Roger Stern and Tom Lyle produce most of 1-30, during which Payton faces an assortment of villains, meets plenty of other DC characters and generally plays the superpowered boy scout. There's a nice mixture of action and introspection, with 10's face-off against Blockbuster a good sample of the former, and 24 of the latter. For an all-round sampler try 7, revealing what Payton is and featuring most of the supporting cast. Len Strazewski continues the formula from 30, but he's not as adept, and later issues, while competent, lack any spark.~FP

STARMAN

DC: *82 issues (0-80, 1,000,000), 2 Annuals, 1 Giant, 1 Secret Files 1994-2001*

This *Starman* series at its best is an unusually satisfying read. Writer James Robinson introduces Jack Knight, son of the first DC character to adopt the name Starman. Knight's brother wore his father's costume to battle the **Starman** above in 26 of his title, but was dispatched with little ceremony here only to make an annual return as a ghost in sometimes twee bonding issues. When the logic behind them is revealed, though, it matches the remainder of the series in an ingenious use of DC's past continuity. Robinson enjoys switching styles of storytelling, his plotting is exceptional, foreshadowing events dozens of issues in advance, his nostalgia for old DC superhero comics serves well, and his characters are finely tuned and memorable. Old villain The Shade is particularly well manifested as a literate eminence grise. A factor adding to the mood is the conception of Opal City, Starman's hometown. It's gloriously designed by first pencil artist Tony Harris: a consistent and individual art-deco backdrop gives the series a mystique and history and at once sets it apart. Starting as a reluctant superhero, preferring to run his memorabilia store to following the family tradition, Jack eventually falls into line, and his awkward yet loving relationship with his father is particularly well presented. The career choice permits *Starman* to wash over the breadth of popular culture past and present, and superhero standbys such as the costume and the secret identity are discarded, to no detrimental effect. Although tying up loose ends of a multi-part story and hinting at the future, 17 sums up the mood of *Starman* in a single issue.

Structurally, *Starman* is a superhero comic like no other. Jack Knight is often supplanted by anyone else who's taken the name Starman over the years, or one of the large supporting cast, these issues regularly interrupting multi-part stories involving Jack. Another series feature is more than one penciller working on an issue, divergent styles neatly accommodated by the plot. Presumably initiated as a way of helping Harris maintain a schedule, it's to Robinson's credit that what would elsewhere be regarded as fill-ins are never throwaway and often have a bearing on later events. A top-notch selection of pencillers helps, with Guy Davis (23), Stefano Gaudiano (annual 2), Gene Ha (46, annual 2), Craig Hamilton (28, 54, annual 1), Steve Yeowell (27, 35, 47-49, 55, annual 2) and Chris Weston's Kirby pastiche (55) particularly impressive.

48-50 are turning points. From 48 two long stories occupy most remaining issues, and Peter Snejbjerg becomes regular penciller from 50. While his style lacks the ornate flourishes favoured by Harris and his regular inker Wade Von Grawbadger, Snejbjerg's storytelling is superior. Film writer David Goyer co-plots 'The Stars My Destination' between 48 and 60, in which Jack journeys into space. His company is alien Starman Mikaal Tomas (previously only seen in *First Issue Special*) and a holographic representation of his father; his quest to find his girlfriend's long lost brother, Will Payton, the previous Starman. Jack meets assorted DC characters from beyond the universe, as obscure as various Omega Men and the Space Cabbie, and as pivotal as Superman's father. It's grand space-opera, but as a whole doesn't hit the series' peaks. The ambition is to be admired, though, and it paves the way for a considerable achievement, the far superior 'Grand Guignol' in 61-73, with preludes in 47 and 56. That features the entire cast as previously introduced plus extra heroes Elongated Man, Black Condor and Phantom Lady. Opal City falls under the malign influence of The Shade, apparently not the reformed villain after all. Blocked off from the outside world and with all its protectors captured, Robinson draws together almost all loose threads from the series. Here the benefit of a large cast is some being expendable and others not being what they previously seemed. The epilogue, a memorial service in 73, is particularly effective. With the story over there are still moments of significance, particularly the mystery of a Starman active in the early 1950s as revealed in 77-79. Better still, there is as near to a definitive conclusion as is likely for corporate owned properties. DC have chosen to profit from collected editions, with most issues now available, rather than continue under other hands a series indelibly stamped with Robinson's style. The particularly fine selection of covers from Harris, Alex Ross and Andrew Robinson should also be noted.~FP

Recommended: 0-4, 6-8, 10, 12-17, 20-27, 29, 35, 37, 41, 44-46, 51, 55, 56, 63-68, 70-74, 76-80

STARRIORS

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1984-1985*

Having licensed Transformers with lucrative results, Marvel obviously thought they could come up with their own version. Whether they considered this witless derivative pap could also spawn toys and cartoons is lost to history.~WJ

STARS AND GUTTERS

Armchair: *2 issue microseries 1998*

These contain five stories about heroes written by Gavin Burrows. Some work better than others, but all have something to say. The strongest is 1's 'Swings and Roundabouts', drawn by Steve Martin: Jack prays to his hero James Dean for help, with a result that induces a gasp. 2 contains the best story overall, drawn and co-plotted by Peter Poole. 'The Other Side' can be enjoyed simply as a surrealist romp, although there's much more to it than that. It's about a young artist who's come to Spain in 1936 to paint, but he's barely laid down a stroke when Salvador Dali steps out of the easel (and also out of the future), extolling the virtues of chaos as the ultimate creative compost for an artist. The story is buzzing with ideas, and the artwork is perfect.~FC

STARS AND S.T.R.I.P.E.

DC: *15 issues (0-14) 1999-2000*

When 14 year old Courtney discovers her adoptive father Pat Dugan was a 1940s sidekick called Stripsey, she goes crimefighting using the accoutrements of his former partner the Star Spangled Kid. For protection, he accompanies her in an armoured suit. The smalltown setting works well in accentuating the strained relationship between Courtney and Pat, but Lee Moder's cartooning is adequate rather than spectacular (the artistic highlight being Chris Weston's pages in issue 0). The lighthearted touch employed throughout by writer Geoff Johns is a good approach, and plasters over too many convenient coincidences. Young Justice come to call in 5-6, which are representative sample issues. Older fans may also appreciate an untold story of Pat's colleagues in the Seven Soldiers of Victory in 9 and the Shining Knight 10-13.~FP

STARSHIP TROOPERS

Dark Horse: *2 issue microseries ('Official Movie Adaptation') 1997, 3 issue miniseries ('Insect Touch') 1997, one-shot ('Brute Creations') 1997, 4 issue miniseries ('Dominant Species') 1998*

Based extremely loosely on the Robert Heinlein novel from 1959, a race of giant spider-like aliens threatens humanity. Earth has to mobilise and take the war to the invaders. The Starship Troopers are conscripts, expendable ground troops in an interplanetary war, while the spiders prove to be cold, unreasoning engines of destruction (inspired by the Nazis of World War II in Heinlein's story). The adaptation is by Bruce Jones and artists Arthur Adams and Andrew Pepoy. As a prequel, 'Insect Touch' tells how mankind's first encounter with the aliens played out on Mars while 'Brute Creations', with moody art by Tommy Lee Edwards and Robert Campanella tells of a skirmish between a Mormon community living on the outskirts of the empire and the aliens. 'Dominant Species' has the troops sent to deal with an alien stronghold. Despite all the hardware and red/yellow/blue spiders this is a series of homogenised war stories. Dull to the max.~SW

STARSLAMMERS

Marvel: *Graphic Novel 1983*
Bravura: *4 issues 1994-1995*

The Starslammers are a race of mercenaries who're the best combat soldiers in history. They had a considerable incentive for learning to fight, once being hunted for sport by a race with superior technology. This is the story Walter Simonson tells in the graphic novel, but it's told in a needlessly convoluted manner that removes most of the impetus. The art is impressive, though, and Simonson's approach to depicting telepathic communication is particularly clever and effective. The Bravura series is set hundreds of years later, and was unfinished, as Simonson withdrew it from Bravura before publication of the final issue. It's still worth reading, however. In this story one of the Starslammers has been captured after an unsuccessful attack on the colony of a small and unlovely empire, and some strange things start happening on the ship transporting him to the emperor's planet. It's a lively, interesting read with solid characterisation and good dialogue. Take a look at it, if only for the scene where the mercenary asks Colonel Phaedra why she chooses a bikini as her military uniform, to which she gives a witty, intelligent answer!~FC

Recommended: 1-4

STARSLAYER

Pacific: *6 issues 1982*
First: *28 issues (7-34) 1983-1985*

After many years doing *Warlord* for DC, Mike Grell moved to the fledgling independent company Pacific and produced a mirror-image title in *Starslayer*. Instead of a modern man in a barbaric land he gave us a barbarian in the far-flung future. He goes over old ground thematically – the lone warrior's quest for a honourable way to live, etc. – and left as artist with 7 and scripter with 9 for *Jon Sable, Freelance*. Torin MacQuillon, a half-Scythian somehow living with Celtic Britons, is seized at the moment of death by Tamara, an Earth super-agent on a mission to save our solar system. Why she needs a hairy, middle-aged swordsman is never really explained to anyone's satisfaction but she does, and they do, but not without chucking the Earth into the Sun to "reignite" it. This pisses off the Earth's rulers, who promptly chase them across the universe for the rest of the series.

In John Ostrander's hands, Starslayer quickly became an adjunct of Grimjack, with the heroes based in Cynosure fighting Celtic goddesses, a Grimjack crossover in 18 (it had been the back-up strip from 10 onwards), and various characters, such as Kallibos, in common. Lenin Delsol's art, 7 onwards, was very flat, and singularly unsuited to the continual fight-and-flight pages he was required to draw. Tim Truman, who took over from 16, depended on his inker (soon finisher) Hilary Barta excessively, ending up being credited with "continuity". By 19 the title was seriously losing its way. Ostrander's attempt to give it its own feel by introducing various deity/protectors for the characters and staging fights between life and death reads like a load of pseudo-religious hogwash, which indeed it is. Dave Stevens fans will find The Rocketeer's first appearance in 2 and 3, while Tom Sutton fans can enjoy his lush artwork on The Black Flame from 17 onwards (27 is all Black Flame). Unfortunately, the script is bilge by Peter Gillis. *Starslayer* was an okay idea, poorly executed, which soon descended into predictable pirates-in-space clichés. Early issues were reprinted, modified with some new dialogue and colouring by Valiant's Windjammer imprint in 1994 as *Starslayer: The Director's Cut*.~FJ

STARSTREAM

Whitman: *4 issues 1976*

Conscientious, but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to adapt classic science-fiction stories to comics. Anderson, Asimov, Bloch, McCaffrey, Niven and Van Vogt, among others, supply rich source material, but the stories, though competently recounted, are cramped and stifled and suffer from largely unimaginative artwork.~HS

STARSTRUCK

Marvel/Epic: *Graphic Novel, 6 issues 1985-1986*
Dark Horse: *4 issues 1990-1991*

Starstruck began life as a stage play, written by Elaine Lee with sets and costumes by Mike Kaluta. Epic published a graphic novel and this six-part series in colour, while the Dark Horse series was intended to run for twelve issues, reprinting what had gone before with 320 pages of new material. It's a complicated story containing pleasure robots, the great houses of the multiverse, March Baptists (the wealthiest Christo-Zedian denomination in the inhabited universe), Andromedicones (a self-propagating race of androids), Galatia-9 (once Molly, now an Amazon), the Guernican art squad, the tranquil nunz and Brucilla the Muscle (not to mention the Galactic Girl Guides and their terrorist tendencies). Told in a variety of voices and not always in a linear timeline, Lee's script requires some effort to understand but it's worth it and Kaluta's artwork is gorgeous.~NF

Recommended: Dark Horse 1-4

STATIC

DC/Milestone: *47 issues 1993-1997, 4 issue miniseries 2001*

Present at the massive gang war known as the Big Bang, Virgil Hawkins, geeky high-school student, gains electromagnetic powers from the chemicals unleashed by corrupt authorities on the rioting crowds. Calling himself Static, he sets out to improve his neighbourhood. Yawn, right? Heard it before. What that synopsis doesn't convey is the essence of Virgil's personality. He's tough, engaging, with a well-hidden sensitive side and a highly literate streak that wins you over, making you root for him during his days as a neophyte superhero. His cast of supporting characters is equally diverse and appealing, primary among them being Frieda Goren, his best friend (but refreshingly not a romantic interest), in whom he confides his secret; and Daisy Watkins, the insecure and troubled girl who wins his heart. R.L. Washington III and John Paul Leon carry him through his trials and tribulations with skill and panache, turning him over to Ivan Velez Jr and the unsurnamed Wilfred seamlessly in the middle of a story arc (19), after which the comic, against all odds, gets even better! The superheroics are well conceived, with Virgil using his head as much as his powers to defeat his enemies in a variety of surprising ways. Additionally, the creators tackle issues – bulimia, anorexia, drugs, sexual identity – faced by real teenagers, and present them intelligently, realistically, and without any of the preachy 'quick fixes' that usually plague comics with 'morals'. This policy caused the creators problems from time to time. 'What Are Little Boys Made Of?' (16-20), the story arc dealing with a gay supporting cast member, was rejected by the Comics Code Authority, and a safer-sex hint on the cover of 25 made distributors DC freak out completely and stick an extra cover on the issue! After 29, the creative team changed again, to less skilled hands, and it became routine superstunts, albeit with a beautifully drawn, but nonsensical, Gil Kane fill-in in 31. Some people will also want to get the Rod Ramos issue, 32, but frankly it's not great work. Eventually, sadly, it fizzled out in a flurry of inappropriate and short-run creators. 1-4 are collected.

In 2000, an animated TV show called *Static Shock!*, starring Virgil and company, was launched. In response, DC issued a miniseries called *Static Shock* – 'Rebirth of the Cool'. Oh dearie me. Despite the woeful title, the Dwayne McDuffie/John Paul Leon collaboration, set a few years on from the close of the ongoing series, is a pleasure. Virgil has semi-retired his Static identity to concentrate on other matters, but is called back to action when many of his fellow super-beings start disappearing. Not only a clever re-introduction to the Milestone 'universe' (with an interesting revelation about its untold history), but an ingenious synthesis of the comics and TV versions of the character. There has been no sequel for *Static*, or the rest of Milestone, so far, but since the TV show has run three seasons, the properties remain in the public eye. We can only hope. It has so far resulted in a collection of the early issues.~HS

Recommended: 1-29, miniseries 1-4

STATIC-X

Chaos!: *One-shot 2002*

Wayne-5534, Ken-7390, Tony-2692 and Tripp-1811 are members of a rock group and leaders of an underground resistance movement, but when their revolution fails, only neural safeguards can override the state's brainwashing as they are split up amongst different work forces. Intending this to be the first of a series of one-shots, with the first about the band's escape, and with each issue offering an exclusive CD of the band's music, Brian Pulido scripts from a story concept and lyrics by the band. It's hardly original or riveting, but Andrew Pepoy's inks add an interesting texture to David Brewer's otherwise inexpressive pencils.~NF

STEALTH FORCE

Eternity: *8 issues 1987-1988*

Four recently deceased specialists are resurrected by a mysterious corporation and ordered to undertake covert missions or face a second and final demise. Big on bodycount, but short on actual suspense or drama, a disappointing outing from screenwriter Mike Valerio and neophyte artist Patrick Olliffe. For gun nuts only~WW

STEAM DETECTIVES

Viz: *5 volumes + 1999 to date*

These are the adventures of boy detective Narutaki in Steam City, a hybrid of London and Tokyo that runs on steam. Narutaki has a butler, a beautiful nurse girlfriend and a giant steam-powered robot containing the nurse's father's brain. The villainous mad scientist is called Dr Guilty. They ought to be amusing, but as executed by Kia Asamiya the stories lack atmosphere, and are crazily fast-moving and mindless manga by numbers. If you like uninterrupted shouting, insane laughter, and explosions then this is one for you. These digest volumes reprint, five at a time, episodes first published in Japan in 1995.~GK

STEAMPUNK

WildStorm: *One-shot ('Catechism') 2000, 12 issues 2000-2002**

Set in an alternate London of 1838 after Lord Absinthe has used knowledge of the future to create his own kingdom, this is described as "an industrial gothic sci-fi action adventure love story". If that sounds as though creators, Joe Kelly and Chris Bachalo, were confused about what this series was meant to be, wait until you try to work out what's going on when reading it. Cole Blaquesmith, with a coal-powered heart, has been awoken after a hundred years from hibernation, mourning the loss of his lover, Fiona. Disoriented, he is drawn into the rebellion of Sir Robert Peel who's looking for a champion of the people, and hunted by Absinthe's assassin, Faust. While Absinthe plots with and against the Pope for power, Victoria, a bounty hunter trained and loved by Faust, finds her loyalties wavering towards Blaquesmith. This series requires a lot of attention. How rewarding that is, will depend on a reader's tolerance for Kelly's poetic, enigmatic, and often wilfully obscure dialogue, and Bachalo's detailed artwork, which rarely provides any real perspective of the big picture – everything's in close up. At times, it seems as though Kelly and Bachalo are working on completely separate comics, so divorced is the narrative from the artwork, and there are times when dreadful colouring makes interpretation almost impossible. Despite this there is a certain appeal, lying somewhere between *Luther Arkwright* and *Teknophage*. These issues represent the first two of three parts. While 13 has not yet been scheduled, 1-5 have been collected.~NF

STEED AND MRS PEEL

Eclipse/Acme: *3 issue miniseries 1990-1991*

Scripters Grant Morrison and Anne Caulfield with artist Ian Gibson reunite the title characters from the *Avengers* cult TV show, with Tara King and Mother thrown in for good measure. The two stories serialised over this series are intelligent, lively, and very true to the spirit of the show, with secret societies committing murder with impeccable manners, and mysterious goings-on in quaint country villages. Printing defects plague the print run, though, with many issues printed off-register, smeared or otherwise marred.~HS

Recommended: 1-3

STEEL

DC: *5 issues 1978*

In 1978 DC cancelled a lot of comics at very short notice, causing much wailing, gnashing of teeth and sacrificing of first born among fans. They were, however, almost silent about missing this shoddy World War II superhero hacked out by Gerry Conway and Don Heck. Entirely fittingly, DC continuity had it that a reworked version headed what's still considered the worst ever version of the *Justice League*.~FP

STEEL

DC: *53 issues (0, 1-52), 2 Annuals, 1994-1998*

One of the four replacement Supermen introduced during that hero's temporary demise, John Henry Irons, armour-clad weapons scientist, graduated into his own series under the nom-de-guerre of Steel. Louise Simonson's deft and empathic scripting, focusing closely on Irons' family circle and his own confusion as he struggles with his heroic role, stops the title from becoming 'Black Iron Man', as it so easily might have. It even distracts the reader from the appalling John Bogdanove art, of the 'everyone looks like they've been hit in the face with a shovel' school. More competent artists Chris Batista, then Phil Gosier, take over, and the comic becomes a pleasing, low-key study of the responsibilities of power and the duties of family, interspersed with the inevitable kicking of heads. That's until 30, when, presumably in light of the Shaquille O'Neal movie deal, Simonson and Gosier were abruptly yanked from the series, replaced by generic creators who pump up the action and downplay the emotion, hugely to the series' detriment. The movie was a calamitous failure, the title continued to lose its way with less and less inspired creators, and when nothing more interesting can be thought of for the 50th issue 'special event' than a 'Millennium Giants' crossover with the Superman titles, then you know the strip's in trouble. Although his own series has perished, Steel played a prominent role in the *Our Worlds at War* crossover.~HS

The STEEL CLAW

Quality: *4 issue miniseries 1986-1987*

The Steel Claw originally ran in the British weekly comic *Valiant*, and this miniseries collects its first episodes from the early 1960s. Louis Crandall, inexplicably renamed Randall here, was a conniving lab assistant with a steel hand, the result of an earlier accident. Caught in an explosion, he survived, but whenever his hand touched electricity he became invisible. He was a crook here, but later reformed, becoming a secret agent and even a superhero for a while. With scripts by science-fiction author Ken Bulmer, and exquisite art from Jesus Blasco, this should have been a great comic. Unfortunately, the printing is dire, and the colouring seemingly consists of nothing but pink and green. Nice Garry Leach covers, though.~DAR

STEEL STERLING

Red Circle: *1 issue (4) 1984*
Archie: *3 issues (5-7) 1984*

Arbitrarily continuing the numbering from *The Shield, Steel Sterling* is one of the craziest superhero titles around, especially considering when it was produced. Robert Kanigher's hero is an everyday kind of guy, superstrong and supermoral, but beset by ordinary doubts and fears. He drives around the USA in a van full of multicultural teenagers encouraging everyone to fulfil their potential and making inspirational feature films. Chiefly drawn by Eduardo Barreto in a hurry, Steel's adventures bring him into contact with ghosts, mysteries, mercenaries and more prosaic dangers like drunk drivers. 4 is one of the most unintentionally funny comics ever written: Kanigher's script jumps effortlessly from the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse to drink-driving statistics. After showing the perpetrator of a crash one of his victims' heads in a carrier bag *Steel* then starts in on a peculiar eulogy to macho women (which lumps tennis player Chris Evert in with Joan of Arc and the Amazons). It prompted responses from Robert Dole and Nancy Reagan! After becoming an Archie title the adventures of Steel's kid sidekicks, the Steelers, were emphasised, and the book padded out with other Kanigher material.~FJ

STEELGRIP STARKEY and the All-Purpose Power Tool

Marvel/Epic: *6 issue miniseries 1986-1987*

Steelgrip is an extravagantly muscled young construction worker, and one day he's offered the chance to work with the new Power Tool, the invention of the mysterious Mr Pilgrim and the first use of "Technalchemy". At rest, it's a small box, but when Steelgrip pulls the handle it builds itself into whatever form will suit the current task. In the first issue, this has a certain clean-limbed charm, but even then it is already obvious what we're in for: a problem occurs, Steelgrip pulls the handle, the machine solves the problem, Steelgrip gets called a hero. Boring.~FC

STEELTOWN ROCKERS

Marvel: *6 issue miniseries 1990*

Life has become tough in Steeltown since the steel mill closed, and Johnny dreams of leaving for California and becoming a rock star. Just as soon as he's finished paying for his guitar. In the meantime, he forms a band: the Steeltown Rockers. It's classic soap opera: the wildboy drummer, the problems at home, the jealousies...and it's written with great characterisation and pacing by Elaine Lee, and matched by Steve Leialoha's artwork. The six issues fly by and leave you wanting more, more, more, but that's good showmanship.~FC
Recommended: 1-6

STEVE CANYON

Kitchen Sink: *24 issues 1983-1989*

By the time *Steve Canyon* began, in January 1947, over two hundred newspapers had already signed up to take it, on the strength of its creator's name alone. Having left *Dickie Dare* to do *Terry and the Pirates* for the Chicago Tribune Syndicate, Milton Caniff had created an enormously popular strip but wanted more – ownership and editorial control. To get that he had to take the risk of creating a new strip and signing a contract with the Chicago Sun's Marshall Field.

Steve Canyon is an adventure strip in the mould of *Terry and the Pirates* but for an older audience. The basic idea is that Canyon is a flyer whose small company, *Horizons Unlimited*, undertake any assignment as long as it's exciting and perilous (and legal, of course). Caniff himself described it as a picaresque novel. It's got thrills, adventure and romance, all wrapped up in complex narratives. The action is always fast-moving and can take place all over the world – the more exotic the better, to begin with. Artistically, Caniff's style didn't change but he continued to exhibit his mastery of the techniques of cinema (longshots, close-ups, odd angles etc.).

Kitchen Sink's magazine reprints, in four-month batches, the first episode (including the Sunday strips, which could be read separately but which were part of the same story as the dailies). Each issue includes articles about Caniff and examples of his other work. Edited by Shel Dorf and including commentaries by Caniff himself, it's an excellent production.

The early adventures introduce Copper Calhoun, a rich, dangerous woman who wants to inspect properties overrun by the war; Happy Easter, an ornery old confederate who becomes a regular cast member, Madame Lynx, Dr Dean Wilderness (an attractive but very capable lady), Lady Nine and Convoy, who would eventually grow up to lead a group called The Black Widows. All of this took Canyon around Africa and the Middle East. 6 introduces Fancy and Cheetah in tropical-island and Hong Kong settings. With 8, the page count was increased and the magazine became squarebound. It features Canyon in a fighter plane group battling the Red Chinese, it introduced Summer Olsen, who would later become Mrs Steve Canyon. 9 has Canyon teamed with Doe Redwood for a dangerous undercover assignment, 10 brings back Madame Lynx (with Canyon pretending to be her husband), and in addition throws in the start of the serialisation of Noel Sickles' strip *Scorchy Smith*.

With 12 Canyon has rejoined the Air Force and has to track down a war profiteer with the aid of Cheetah. 13 has extra editorial pages; the first story features the death of Raven Sherman. 15 contains Canyon's proposal to Summer Olsen and 16 sees him fighting the Russians over the Aleutian Islands. 17 and 19 are special issues, the latter celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the strip and containing a full year's worth of storylines. With 'In Formosa's Dire Straits' (22), Kitchen Sink changed the format again, including the name of one of the adventures on the cover and increasing the size of the artwork. 'The Scarlet Princess' (23) features strips from 1955 and 1956, taking Canyon from the Cold War in the US back to the war in China. Unfortunately, the series ended with 24, with at least thirty-two years of Caniff's strip still waiting to be reprinted. *Comic Revue* magazine continue reprints.

The influence Caniff would have is hard to underestimate – from Frank Robbins and Lee Elias to Hugo Pratt and many others. His storytelling is remarkable. Though the circumstances might now seem strange, these strips are also a kind of social, cultural and political history, firmly set in the world as it was then.~NF
Recommended: 1-24

STEVEN

Kitchen Sink: *8 issues 1989-1990 (1-7), 1997 (8)*
Fantagraphics: *2 issues 1999*

Doug Allen's Steven is the ultimate nihilist. The first time he says "yes" in the strip is when his idiot friend hits him with a plank and reverses his personality. Allen's half-page gag strips (and the word "gag" is used loosely) first appeared in a local Providence newspaper. The Fantagraphics issues appear under the titles 'Steven Presents: Dumpy' and 'Steven at Sea' but are in fact just continuations of the collected newspaper strip, and unfortunately some of them are printed out of order. Steven's world is full of nursery-rhyme characters shakily drawn against detailed settings. There's a cleverness to some of the work (which is reminiscent of Peter Blegvad's cartooning both in style and in humour) but the persistent negativity of it all soon becomes boring.~FJ

STICKBOY

Fantagraphics: 3 *issues 1989-1990*
Revolutionary Comics: *2 issues (4-5) 1990-1992*
Starhead Comics: *1 issue (6) 1993*

Graduating from *Weirdo*, Dennis Worden compiled this occasionally published tirade of semi-philosophical and mock-political, surreal strips featuring the mouthy and irascible stick figure everyman. Not as incisive as Harvey Pekar or as passionate as Robert Crumb, although Worden would probably disagree.~WW

STIG'S INFERNO

Vortex: *5 issues 1984-1986**
Eclipse: *2 issues (6-7) 1987*

When Stig's piano lid falls on him he's ejected into hell, whereupon he comes across all kinds of demons and distressed souls. Excellently drawn by Ty Templeton, the amount of gags both visual and verbal packed into an issue is immense. Unfortunately, the effect is one long shaggy dog story. Full marks for inventiveness, but it won't be to everyone's taste.~WJ

STING of the Green Hornet

Now: *4 issue miniseries 1992*

A wartime adventure of the Green Hornet and Kato as they battle a slinky Nazi baroness and her tame supersoldier in an affectionate tribute to Captain America's origin. The Shadow cameos, amusingly, in issue 1. Perfectly competent, but by no means exceptional.~HS

STINZ

Fantagraphics: *4 issues 1989-1990**
Brave New Worlds: *1 issue (5) 1990*, series two 3 issues 1991**
Mu Press: *5 issues 1994-1997*
A Fine Line Press: *3 issues (6-8) 1998-1999*

Stinz is a centaur, whose people live in an isolated Geisel valley, but are not entirely cut off from interaction with humans. Having originally appeared in *The Dreamery*, Stinz' own first series has him joining the army. It covers training, which was hardly designed for four-legged recruits, promotion to squad leader, and a leave requested to visit and then marry his pregnant fiancé. Series two reflects on episodes from the war, and sees Stinz elected Mayor of his village. The Mu issues introduce Stinz' daughters, Siim and Reet, and tell some tales in the valley, before beginning a linked storyline involving the return of Stinz' army Captain, Gift, and the return to the valley of a human Baron, with his aristocratic wife. Against this background, the final issues explain how the war ended, why Stinz won't leave the valley when the Baroness tells him to, and what happened to what may be the only gun left in the world.

Donna Barr has created a complex environment for her hero, and doesn't stint in depicting the background detail required to make it believable, or from the comedy, emotions and minutiae of everyday life. Her heavily inked, ornate style is always at the service of the story and this is a rewarding series, once the reader becomes used to the German expressions littered throughout the dialogue. There is also a collection of the *Dreamery* episodes from Eclipse, called 'Horsebrush and Other Tales'.~NF

STITCH

Slave Labor: *4 issue miniseries 1999-2000**

Stitch is a rag doll. At least his body is. He's also an amnesiac who wakes up in a spooky bedroom with a collection of other talking toys. There's a pervasive aura of menace as he meets other amnesiac dolls and they share sketchy memories of five missing children... With compelling and moody cartooning from Tommy Kovac, this also contains the first appearances of the Skelebunnies, two cute little rabbits who are killed by a demon but refuse to stay dead.~WW

Sergio Aragonés STOMPS Star Wars

Dark Horse: *One-shot 2000*

Master cartoonist Aragonés is too clever to opt for the obvious method of satirising *Star Wars*. Instead he concocts a framing sequence where he and scripter Mark Evanier visit the film studio, and through jiggery-pokery Aragonés ends up participating in the movie. That said, though, after all this time new jokes about *Star Wars* are few and far between. Professional, without being compelling.~FP

STONE

Image/Avalon: *4 issue miniseries ('The Awakening') 1998-1999, series two 4 issues 1999-2000*

The Agimat stones are ancient sources of power and their wielders challenge each other in order to accumulate the power and soul of the loser. Gerry Alan is simply an arrogant TV star until he finds out he's also an Agimat warrior when he's attacked by several monsters. A dreary and uninspired fantasy from Brian Haberlin and Whilce Portacio.~NF

STONEWALL IN THE SHENANDOAH

The Heritage Collection: *One-shot 1996*

Another of Wayne Vansant's dry, detailed relatings of a pivotal battle during the American Civil War. This time it's one of the Confederacy's greatest victories, and a well-regarded piece of military strategy from General Stonewall Jackson. Historians aren't going to read comics, and this is too dull for the kids, so you wonder about its purpose.~DB

STORM

British European Associated: *1 Graphic Novel ('The Deep World')1982*
Titan Books: *2 Graphic Novels ('The Last Fighter', 'The Pirates of Pandarve') 1987-1989*

British artist Don Lawrence spent much of the 1960s painting chapters of *The Trigan Empire*, a magnificent futuristic adventure strip concerning two brothers ruling an empire based on the Roman Empire of old. Any British collection is worth searching out, particularly the Hawk Books *Tales of the Trigan Empire*. Lawrence's sumptuously painted artwork was appreciated far more in Europe than at home, where graphic novels were still twenty years away, and he began illustrating *Storm* in 1976.

Written initially by Paul Dunn, then from the second volume by Martin Lodewijk, there are now over twenty volumes in plenty of European languages, but few have been translated. Storm is an astronaut who returns to Earth in a state of suspended animation, and emerges to discover plenty of changes. He's now in a world in which Conan the Barbarian would feel at home, with minimal technology, but plenty of cut-throats. Once the absence of oceans has been explained in 'The Deep World', there are few references to the planet ever having been known as Earth, as Storm encounters assorted alien scenarios. He's accompanied by a gorgeous redheaded woman named Ember (except in 'The Deep World', where she's Red).

Storm proves extremely adaptable at coping with whatever and whoever is thrown at him, including escaping a gladiatorial arena in 'The Last Fighter'. Titan then skipped several volumes to the point where Storm and Ember are transported to Pandarve. Storm is of particular interest to the Theocrat of Pandarve as "an anomaly". *Storm* is high on fantasy and action, and low on character, dragging the reader along through fast-paced adventure, but the stories are very similar in plot and structure. As such they're almost old-fashioned, a feeling sometimes heightened by Lawrence's stunning but precise and illustrative painting, but it's the art that makes each volume worth a look. Lawrence has influenced plenty of British artists in his day, and in the 1990s assimilated the different styles of painted artwork in Britain and Europe. The January and March 1997 issues of *Heavy Metal* feature other *Storm* volumes, again jumping a few since 'The Pirates of Pandarve'. It's hoped that more will follow, as Lawrence's art for more recent *Storm* is ever more stunning.~WJ

STORM

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1996*

The X-Men's co-leader stars in her own miniseries by Terry Dodson and Warren Ellis. She's plagued by guilt that had she not neglected the Morlocks, the band of deformed mutants from the New York sewers she once led, she might have prevented them from becoming the terrorists Gene Nation. Storm searches for a way to say 'sorry', and finds herself transported into the other-worldly realm where her former followers now live. Okay, but by no means unmissable.~JC

STORMQUEST

Caliber: *6 issues 1994-1995*

Tom and Mary Bierbaum's lively attempt to establish a literal heroic dynasty, a multi-generational family in which adventuring is the family business, has potential, but comes unstuck due to the abysmal Image-style super-deformed artwork, which forces the reader's eyes away from the page.~HS

Before the Four:THE STORMS

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 2000*

Terry Kavanagh and Charlie Adlard delve into the past of Susan and Johnny Storm to tell their childhood adventures before they became members of the Fantastic Four. Unfortunately, as no-one would be interested in a comic about two kids doing their homework in between bouts of sibling rivalry, there's far too many unlikely supernatural coincidences going on. Before the Four, the Storms were simply ... not interesting. Bad premise for a series, really.~JC

STORMWATCH

Image/WildStorm: *50 issues, 2 Specials 1993-1997, one-shot ('Sourcebook') 1994, series two 11 issues 1997-1998*
WildStorm: *4 issues ('Team Achilles') + 2002 to date*

Stormwatch is a global anti-terrorist force operating from the orbiting Skywatch space station and controlled by Weatherman One, whose enhanced mental abilities allow him to keep an eye on what's happening globally. 1-3 introduce Battalion, leader of the main team, his brother (who later becomes Strafe) and baddies The Mercs and Regent. Backlash is introduced in 3 while 4 and 5 feature Daemonites attempting to take control of the bodies of the Warguard, a dangerous group in cryogenic storage on Skywatch for use as a doomsday weapon. In the next two issues, three previously captive members pop up (Flashpoint, Nautika and Sunburst), and Rainmaker and Ripclaw turn up in 8 as a prelude to Rainmaker joining Gen^{13}.

In a radical, if not entirely advisable, move Image released issue 25 immediately after 9, then returned to the regular schedule, thereby dropping hints as to the outcome of the various plots developed in the fourteen subsequent issues. The plots are very much standard superhero team fare: Battalion appears to be killed, Weatherman One is replaced by Synergy and the team starts falling apart, they take part in the 'WildStorm Rising' crossover (22). The Warguard are wakened again for a final showdown (23-27) that results in various members' deaths and the destruction of Skywatch. The next issues concentrate on introducing a new line-up for a battle with Islamic terrorists in 30-34. 35 and 36 are 'Fire From Heaven' crossovers with more membership changes, as a result of which Weatherman One splits them into three units: Prime to deal with superhuman threats, Black for covert operations and Red for 'deterrent, display and retaliation'. As the team takes a political stand, the various members are showcased in darker story-lines – policing the world isn't fun anymore.

46 features the team in a night out together, the Daemonites briefly return in 47, before The High gathers a team of heroes designed to change the world whether it wants it or not (48-50), prefiguring the direction of the next series, which begins with Stormwatch being banned from American soil when they come too close to that country's hidden agenda. 4-6 introduce The Midnighter and Apollo as rogue ex-agents of Stormwatch, while 7-9 depicts an alternate world viewed fighting the Kherans through the Bleed. 10 is a prologue to *WildC.A.T.S./Aliens* (unusually for such a crossover, not only does this take place in continuity, but it devastates the team), and 11 an epilogue as well as a prologue in its turn to The Authority, which begins where this second series ends.

Co-created by Brandon Choi and Jim Lee, who provide the stories to begin with, the initial strength of *Stormwatch* is in the dynamic illustrative style of its artists, Scott Clark (1-3, 6-8, 25) and Brett Booth, both inked by Trevor Scott. Matt Broome's similar but less ornate work (11-20) is best when inked by Scott, while Renato Arlem's artwork (22-24, 26, 30-36) is looser but craggy. Lee's decision to hire Warren Ellis as scripter from 37 onward was a gamble. Coupled with improved scripts, Tom Raney and Randy Elliott provided simple, but effective artwork with plenty of cold, hard inking. Oscar Jimenez took over from Raney for the new series (1-3), but was swiftly followed by Bryan Hitch (4-11). All the Ellis issues are available in collections, but he was taking Stormwatch closer and closer to the edge of the WildStorm universe, which was effectively shattered by the introduction of *The Authority*, after which, any other WildStorm series seems redundant and certainly lacks the pleasures that existed in it previously.

In 'Team Achilles', Ben Santini is putting together a new Stormwatch without super-powered members, but finds himself trapped with a couple of these new characters in the United Nations building when it's attacked by terrorists (1-3). He makes an exception in 4, however, when he brings in a telepath to help find the person who is triggering superpowers in terrorists. This is written by Micah Ian Wright and drawn by Whilce Portacio, and makes an unpleasant read.~NF

Recommended: 48-50, series two 4-9

STORMWATCHER

Eclipse: *4 issue miniseries 1989*

Writers Ian Abbinnett and Alan Cowsill produce a solid piece of fantasy that refuses to take itself too seriously, as alcoholic dwarf Atek Stormwatcher gathers his old band of heroes for one last adventure. Good fun well illustrated by Andrew Currie.~WW

THE STORY OF O

NBM: *3 volumes 1991-1992*

Guido Crepax produced his adaptation of Pauline Reage's dominant/submissive classic back in the mid 1970s. A young photographer, mesmerised by her lover, is introduced to a world of Masters and slaves at the chateau of Roissy, where she progresses from a submissive suffering for her lover's sake to a devoted acolyte. Crepax has an innate understanding of the ritualistic magic of power exchange relationships, and adapts Reage's twin novels intelligently. His stark, long-limbed figures and aptitude for capturing surfaces – the sheen of leather, the rich drape of satin, the dark weight of iron – are peculiarly appropriate to the story, which is far more than just another whips and chains fuckfest. The first two volumes split the original, long story, while the third contains the follow-up.~FJ

Recommended: 1-2

Friends of Lulu Presents STORYTIME

Friends of Lulu: *1 volume 2001*

Friends of Lulu aims to interest more females in comics, promoting the work of women creators and encouraging positive portrayals of female characters. So far so good. This anthology was compiled to promote the organisation and showcase the talents of the membership. Here is where it starts to go wrong. Stephanie Gladden, Joan Hilty, Michel Lacombe (credited as 'Michael'), Jen Sorensen and back cover artist Paul Sizer pull their weight. Living up to expectations are Donna Barr, the team of Trina Robbins and Anne Timmons, Sharon Rudahl and Phil Yeh. That, unfortunately, accounts for less than a quarter of the eighty-five story pages. The remainder lack spark, vision, and even in some cases, talent. That a dashed-off illustration from Bryan Talbot, far from his best work, outshines the majority of the content reveals volumes, as does the poorly designed cover. A Mary Wilshire illustration is enlarged to a size never intended, and no-one bothered to clean up the prominent splash of water on it. Admirable of purpose, this is likely to do Friends of Lulu more harm than good.~FP

STRAIN

Viz: *5 volumes 1999-2001*

Shunichiro and Shingo Kusaka are half brothers whose lives have been very different. Shingo became a Malaysian street thug while Shunichiro inherited a huge corporation. Mayo the Malaysian is a hitman and he and his friends are shielding a young girl street orphan, Shion, from the 'Organization' a mob that hired Mayo to kill her mother. Because of this change of heart Mayo becomes the top target of the mob and goes on the run from cop and criminal alike. Shunichiro has two drives. He wants to control all Southeast Asian oil, and he wants to eradicate anyone who shares his blood – his "strain". This complex and engaging thriller grows from crime caper to global conspiracy epic to grand tragedy. It's a stylish and gripping read from top notch creators Buronson and Ryoichi Ikegami.~WW

Recommended: 1-5

STRANGE ADVENTURES

DC: *244 issues 1950-1973*

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1999-2000*

Starting with an adaptation of *Destination Moon*, this soon settled on the generally imaginative and well drawn short science fiction strips that saw DC very nicely through the 1950s in a number of titles. Notable contributing artists include Alex Toth (17), Bernie Krigstein (32, 33), Murphy Anderson in almost any issue to 50, and Carmine Infantino in almost every issue to 150, and plenty of Gil Kane. The first ongoing character was Captain Comet, introduced in 9. Adam Blake's future identity was selected by his father, who watched a passing comet and told his infant son that this signified he was destined to become a great man. Exhibiting powers and a supernormal intelligence, Adam was born with abilities that wouldn't be common on Earth for 100,000 years. Of course, this being the 1950s, he adopted the identity of Captain Comet to protect Earth. Although one of comics' first mutants, this average science fiction stuff lasted until 49.

104 saw ongoing series reintroduced, initially tentatively with the Mike Sekowsky, then Infantino-drawn Space Museum, in which father and son visit said museum, prompting a Gardner Fox story about one of the artefacts therein. The début of Star Hawkins in 114 (who appeared sporadically until 185) instituted a permanently muddled future detective who relied on his robot secretary Ilda to pull his fat out of the fire. There was a curious romantic subtext on her part also. 117 introduced the best known ongoing feature to grace the title, John Broome and Gardner Fox's Atomic Knights, with lovely Murphy Anderson artwork. The story's set after an atomic war, and the knights bring law and order to lawless times wearing old-fashioned medieval armour that somehow also shields them against the prevalent "nuclear radiation". Inventive and beautifully drawn, the series ran until 160, and ran as reprints in 217-231. Animal Man arrived in 180 and ran sporadically thereafter, in an attempt to woo the superhero audience. Able to adopt the characteristics of any animal, he never caught on here, and was destined for better things in the 1980s. There's a case to be made for 187's débutante the Enchantress being the original bad girl, as mild-mannered June Moon transformed into the unrestrained sorceress, but the stories were half-hearted, and, once again, she would be destined for better moments in the 1980s *Suicide Squad*.

Strange Adventures is most remembered for Deadman, created by Arnold Drake. It starred a murdered circus acrobat whose ghost possessed living humans as he searched for his killer, a mysterious man with a hook replacing one hand. It's a mixture of *The Fugitive* and *Quantum Leap* (which it preceded by two decades). Neal Adams brought his distinctive and dynamic illustrative style to the ghostly detective, although Carmine Infantino drew Deadman's début in 205. The story, incomplete when *Strange Adventures* ousted all originated strips, was concluded in *The Brave and the Bold* after several Deadman guest appearances elsewhere.

With 217 DC finally made the obvious decision and moved their best-known space adventurer Adam Strange into *Strange Adventures*. Sadly, it was all as reprints from 217, although they provide a cheap way of obtaining some classic old stories, along with one final new Adam Strange story by O'Neil, Kane and Anderson in 222. 226-236 are all giant-sized issues with plenty of choice reprint shorts. All in all, with the exception of Deadman and the charm of Star Hawkins, there's nothing remarkable about Strange Adventures other than its consistency. Throughout the run it offered competently crafted material, and any issue sampled at random is likely to provide a diverting read.

The series returned under the Vertigo imprint where the emphasis was definitely on the strange now, with more adult themes. 1 features the talents of Brian Bolland, writing as well as drawing, Dave Gibbons, Bob Rodi and Frank Quitely, so you know you're onto a good thing. The rest of the series has nice contributions from Richard Corben (3), Klaus Janson (4) and Bruce Jones (4), but is hit and miss, although with enough different styles of art to satisfy all tastes.~HY

Recommended: series one117, 152, 155, 173, 176, 205-216, series two 1

STRANGE ATTRACTORS

RetroGrafix: *15 issues 1993-1996*

Caliber: *2 issue microseries ('Moon Fever') 1997*

Charming science fiction saga by Mike Sherman and Michael Cohen. Sophie, curator of the Museum of Lost Things on Sisyphus, meets and falls in love with a diplomat, E-Meson, who becomes influenced by a magic amulet and leaves to marry her best friend, Widow. At the wedding, however, he kills Widow's father, H.R. Widower, the richest, most powerful man in the solar system. From then on things become progressively stranger as Sophie finds herself drawn into a world of rebellion, where the actions of the resistance have been documented in code in her favourite comic, *Spicy Space Stories* through the 'real' adventures of Pirate Peg and her Moon Marauders. 'Moon Fever', still unfinished, concerns Pirate Peg's search for vengeance against a former comrade who betrayed the Marauders. *Strange Attractors* is a lively, witty story that is frustratingly incomplete. 1-7 are collected as Chaos Jitterbug.~NF

Steve Ditko's STRANGE AVENGING TALES

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1997*

There are two main themes to these short stories, ironic comeuppance and "the world owes me a living" liberalism. The first are illustrated in the sort of horror tales that Ditko drew for Marvel and Charlton, the second in one or two page gag strips. Whatever the subject, Ditko's lost none of his storytelling skills: here are doomed men whose final understanding of their fate is laid out in full before us. On a lighter note, it's worth mentioning that in the absence of any comment from Ditko himself, there are comments about him reprinted from *The Comics Journal* and an advert for that magazine with tag lines like "Aesthetic criticism that may infuriate Ditko". One day, we may get issue two but in the meantime...~NF

Recommended

STRANGE COMBAT TALES

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1992-1993*

Extremely dull series mixing war stories with anomalous elements. There are zombies in World War One, aliens in the Civil War, dragons menacing fighter pilots and Crusaders fighting the Hydra in Manhattan in issues 1-4 respectively.~FP

STRANGE DAYS

Eclipse: *3 issues 1984*

Billed as the first "truly New Wave comic", *Strange Days*, a collection of stories by Pete Milligan illustrated by Brendan McCarthy and Brett Ewins, certainly looked radical compared to the rest of Eclipse's output. Apart from the surreal, drug-fuelled Shockwave, for which McCarthy conjured up amazing watery landscapes above which floated huge vessels in the shape of famous people's heads, the other strips were firmly rooted in superhero tradition, but given enough of a spin to make them fun and cool. Unfortunately, Johnny Nemo, stylish future PI, and Paradax, the gaunt, gauche teen superhero, didn't catch on, although these characters survived the title's brief lifespan to appear in UK newsstand anthology *Deadline*, and the Paradax stories were collected as a one-shot.~FJ

STRANGE DAYS

Marvel: *One-shot 1995*

Adaptating the movie of the same name, this tells the story of an ex-cop, now pedalling black-market memories to those who wish to relive others' experiences. It's a sleazy life, and he's only just getting by until he's given a clip showing the murder of a high-profile rap star by the police. Now staying alive just got a lot harder. This is a decent adaptation of what was not a bad film, though the artwork is problematical with Mike McKone's pencils generally more attractive than this would lead you to believe.~DB

STRANGE EMBRACE

Atomeka: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

A criminally neglected masterpiece that comfortably sits alongside the most highly regarded comics of the past decade. As a study in malevolence and truly horrific obsession there's nothing to match *Strange Embrace* in comics. Writer and artist David Hine begins with the psychic Alex Steadman, who murders his parents before becoming a tenant in a vast house owned by the reclusive, broken Anthony Corbeau. Probing his mind as he sleeps, Alex learns of Corbeau's youth, seemingly one of callous indifference to those around him in keeping to a solitary indulgence. As more of Corbeau's family history seeps through, a tragic story is revealed, fleshed out by the hidden diaries of Corbeau's long-deceased wife. Magnificently plotted and considered down to the smallest observations, this deeply disturbing story is ideally matched by Hine's art. Jagged and dark, his choice of African tribal carvings as a recurring motif provides profoundly unsettling primal imagery to counterpoint the preposterously formal turn-of-the-century domestic structure. In a truly graphic novel that's part Joseph Conrad, part E.M. Forster and part Edgar Allen Poe, the shocking events depicted have resonance that remains long after the story concludes. If you're interested in intelligent adult comics you should spare no effort in locating this series, and that it's yet to be collected in more durable format by any publisher is a woeful oversight.~FP

Recommended: 1-4

STRANGE HEROES

Lone Star: *6 issues + 2000 to date*

Two strips share this comic, with seemingly only one living up to the title. 'Spellbinder' concerns an apprentice sorcerer under the tutelage of a master mage who lost a duel and is now a cat. Three good pencillers to date illustrate, and Bill Willingham's scripts are funny, creative and unpredictable, with 5's dealing with a nest of monsters in resourceful fashion particularly appealing. Willingham's coasting for 'Otherland', though. He's good enough that it's slightly better than standard lost land fantasy, but it hardly shines so far.~WJ

STRANGE KISS

Avatar: *3 issue miniseries 1998*, 3 issue miniseries (Stranger Kisses) 1999*, 3 issue miniseries (Strange Killings) 2002*, 6 issue miniseries (Strange Killings:'The Body Orchard') 2002*

Warren Ellis at his most excessive and gratuitous in these tales of William Gravel, defrocked SAS Sergeant Major and combat magician, as he reluctantly and periodically saves the world from the bizarre and the unknown. In *Strange Kiss* nasty lizard things are possessing the detritus of society in what Ellis treats as an exercise in vulgarity. In the sequel, an examination of deviancy and sexual excess, hookers undergo drastic physical modification as the debauched rich and powerful create new experiences for themselves. Gravel must deal with the threat of the kind of money that can turn an entire city against you. *Strange Killings* delves into Gravel's past in England where a prison riot has cost the Government a crack unit of SAS sent in to quell it. In 'The Body Orchard' Gravel's old SAS squad seemingly goes rogue. Is it what it seems or is it part of a plan to keep America destabilised? Once Ellis gets past a juvenile obsession with showing off how sick he can be, the stories are well paced horror thrillers, but Mike Wolfer's art is adequate at best.~WW

STRANGE PIRATE TALES

Big Hairy Ape Comics: *1 issue 2000*

Wally Wood is the acknowledged influence on creator Steve Mannion, and these are very silly pirate tales indeed, largely featuring the terrifying Brownhole Johnson and the beautiful Sea-Goin' Lil. Nice to look at, but without much in the way of substance, the effect is further diminished by wildly inconsistent art. Buy cheap only.~WJ

STRANGE SPORTS STORIES

DC: *6 issues 1973-1974*

This was editor Julie Schwartz's pet project: sports stories with a science-fiction base. While not up to the Olympic standards of the 1960s stories in *The Brave and the Bold*, this knockout comic sailed along quite well without needing a kick-start. It had lots of balls going for it, with stories and art down to a tee. A nice series to net, but even though it didn't dive in quality, it was just about worth racing or wrestling for. Any more sport puns for future editions will be most welcome.~HY

STRANGE SPORTS STORIES

Adventure: *3 issue miniseries 1992*

Much like an EC anthology, this title has a host, Hall O. Fame, who lives in the Museum of Sports History, Trivia and Oddity. With three short stories, written by Charles Marshall, in each issue, the mix of horror, science fiction and comedy seems to offer something for everyone. There's certainly some fun to be had in a basketball team that includes Abraham Lincoln, John Wayne, Martin Luthor King and Albert Einstein (2). However, there's a predictability to the scripting and the art of Mitch Byrd and Bruce McCorkindale, though attractive, offers no variation in approach to the different types of story being told.~NF

STRANGE SUSPENSE STORIES

Charlton: *Series one 77 issues 1952-1965, series two 9 issues 1967-1969*

One of Charlton's earliest anthologies, temporarily retitled *Lawbreakers Suspense Stories* in 1953 indicating the predominant crime theme in its pre-comics code contents. These first 22 issues feature an element of horror and are largely poorly drawn. Members of Al Fago's shop of artists such as Dick Ayers, Seymour Moskowitz and Tony Tallarico accompany some early Steve Ditko stories and covers from 1954. The sweating man in an electric chair on 19 is a fine example. These issues also feature some of Joe Shuster's last comics work. With 23 the title changed again to *This is Suspense*, reverting with 27 in 1955. Despite the hacked-out scripts from Joe Gill, Ernie Hart, Carl Memling and Ralph Newman some of the later 1950s stories were well drawn, particularly Ditko's in 31-41. Worthy of a mention are the eccentric 'Menace of the Maple Leaves' in 33, 'The Elixir', a fountain of youth story in 36 and 'The Desert Spell' in 34, one of Ditko's best jobs from the 1950s. His return in 1960 (most issues between 45 and 53) saw the brilliant artificial evolution tale 'His Brother's Keeper' in 47 and 48's strange story of 'The Human Powerhouse' with obvious similarities to later Spider-Man villain Electro. 50-74 are incredibly poor. With 75 the title began running Captain Atom reprints before the title converted to *Captain Atom* in 1965. In 1967 a one-shot initiated new numbering and dull mid-1960s

Charlton mystery stories. A year later the title continued and 2 featured 'Second Chance', a great Ditko time travel story.~SW
Recommended: Series one 34, 47, 48, series two 2

STRANGE TALES

Marvel: *Series one 188 issues, 2 Annuals 1951-1968 (1-168), 1973-1976 (169-188), series two 19 issues 1987-1988, one-shot 1994, series three 2 issues 1998*

The oldest Marvel title to survive to the superhero era. The first hundred issues exhibit weird and fantasy short stories, with the most notable for the modern reader being the introduction of Fin Fang Foom in 89. Thereafter, two ten-page features share each issue through to 168.

Human Torch in 101-134 takes the biscuit in the corn and hackney departments. Chill to the thrills as jocular Johnny Storm and his doll, dizzy Dorrie Evans, swing through this sixties scene. Stan Lee and Larry Lieber pitched plots and dialogue far lower than their intended juvenile level as they tried to encourage younger readers to identify with the junior Fantastic Four hotshot. Many endearingly laughable villains premiered here, including Eel, Plantman and Paste-Pot Pete. 124-134 co-star the Thing; these inevitably degenerate into continuous wisecracking bouts, written as only Stan the Man can. Ridiculous tosh. Horribly dated. Wonderfully nostalgic.

Doctor Strange began as a weird/fantasy back-up feature in 110 and quickly proved sufficiently popular to win his own continuing series a few issues later. His outstanding early adventure is the epic encounter with the Dread Dormammu, which ran virtually uninterrupted from 126-146, although the latter few issues are essentially drawn-out epilogues. The *Marvel Masterworks* reprint cuts off at 141. Lee's scripts are enhanced by Ditko's pencils; his eerie depiction of alien dimensions and his rendition of various spells are a major factor in the strip's success. Continued stories play a major role thereafter, but turn labyrinthine and turgid as writers and artists chopped and changed. The entire run is available as *The Essential Doctor Strange* Vol 1.

Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. started in the pits in 135 but improved constantly throughout the course. Nick Fury, established World War II hero, became Marvel's answer to James Bond as the current-day CIA colonel was promoted to director of espionage agency S.H.I.E.L.D. Plots hinge on a countless abundance of preposterous high-tech gizmos whipped up out of thin air. These serve as an amusing foil for Fury's blunt, coarse and raucous personality. Jim Steranko took control of art from 151 and plot from 154, and the strip soon became identified with his inimitable artistic style. 146-155 are reprinted as *Nick Fury and His Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*

After 168, the title fissioned into two comics: *Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and *Doctor Strange*, the latter inheriting the old *Strange Tales* numbering. However, in 1973 *Strange Tales* was revived as a showcase title with issue 169. First on stage was Brother Voodoo, aka Jericho Drumm, who for five issues mastered the voodoo arts to gain revenge on the Houngan who killed his brother. Plots are thinly disguised by voodoo decorations in one of Len Wein's poorer efforts. The storyline continued in *Tales of the Zombie* 6. 174, 176-177 spotlight the Golem, a legendary humanoid statue animated by a human spirit to serve the forces of good. He was finally laid to rest in *Marvel Two-In-One* 11. 178-181 feature Jim Starlin's first assignment on Warlock. Starlin immediately plunged him into a cosmic epic against the Magus, an alter ego of Warlock from five thousand years in the future. The strip shone with subtleties and hidden meanings, particularly as Starlin used it as a vehicle to express his dissatisfaction with the Marvel hierarchy. Spot the 'Cosmic Code' stamp of approval on 179's cover. The story continued in Warlock 9. Doctor Strange reprints from 130-141 serve as *Strange Tales'* swan song.

When sales on the second series of both *Cloak and Dagger* and *Doctor Strange* faltered, Marvel revived an old title with an old format in 1987. Both features ran ten-page strips in each issue. Writers Bill Mantlo and Terry Austin plus various artists recycled rites-of-passage dramas around the young teenage superheroes Cloak and Dagger. Forgettable, juvenile approach. Their story continued directly in *The Mutant Misadventures of Cloak and Dagger*.

Peter Gillis and a mixed bag of artists engaged Doctor Strange on a single storyline throughout this run. After a promising start, it descended into a routine pilgrimage which depended heavily on Gillis' final few issues of *Doctor Strange*. The Doctor's adventures continued directly in *Doctor Strange, Sorcerer Supreme*. The 1994 one-shot is a multi- flashback with the Torch, Thing, Nick Fury and Doctor Strange, composed in the early-1960s *Strange Tales'* style with a fittingly daft plot. The third series is a hasty resurrection of the 1998 *Man-Thing* and *Werewolf by Night* titles following their cancellations. Both storylines are continued in a sixty-four page anthology title with styles and creators unchanged. Marvel's ill fated *Strange Tales* imprint dives to an inglorious termination as this flagship title is prematurely chopped with issue two, leaving both main feature plotlines unresolved. Humiliation is complete as the ten page back-up similarly ends with the tag line "To Be Continued!"~APS
Recommended: Series one 126, 127, 130-141, 146, 178-181

STRANGE WEATHER LATELY

Metaphrog: *10 issues 1996-1999**

The first, magazine-sized, issue is a collection of busily illustrated shortish strips about everyman Martin Nitram. Subsequent standard U.S. comic sized issues, in a more confident style, painted in grey tones, tell one continuing story. It's all a curious mix of downbeat urban realism and excursions of varying wildnesses into coincidence and general weirdness. Martin isn't actually seen taking hallucinogenic drugs so maybe he's schizophrenic, or you are, or strange things really happen! Who cares? Workshy dopers and other slacker connoisseurs, probably.~GK

STRANGE WINK

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1998*

A less than unified anthology of paintings, strips, illustrated prose and poetry featuring artist John Bolton. The material is from the 1980s and early 1990s and all the strips were published (often in full colour) in UK titles such as *Crisis* and *Expresso*. There is an amusing series of pokes at famous painters including Picasso, Van Gogh and Bosch written by Graham Marks. One for the devotee.~SW

STRANGE WORLDS

MPI: *2 issues 1958-1959*
Male: *3 issues (3-5) 1959*

Despite the unfamiliar publisher names, this science fiction anthology was produced by the company that would within two years become Marvel. The standard of the artwork is high, with work by Steve Ditko in most issues, backed up by the likes of Jack Kirby and Al Williamson, but the stories are utterly forgettable. Still, if you're lucky, you may forget them so quickly that you don't notice that the plotlines are being reused even within the space of five issues. Is this a record?~FC

STRANGEHAVEN

Abiogenesis Press: *14 issues + 1995 to date*

Gary Spencer Millidge's self-published black and white series reads like a cross between *Twin Peaks* and *The Prisoner*, written by someone on valium. A man comes to a small, almost clichéd English village somewhere near the coast on Dartmoor and finds himself trapped there. All roads lead back into the village, and he soon becomes enmeshed in the ritualistic lifestyle the villagers lead. Gradually he realises that many of the inhabitants arrived by accident and, like him, seem unable to leave. Millidge throws in loads of mystical elements into a very English brew – the Masonic Knights of the Golden Light, ghosts, miraculous weather, and a murder mystery to boot. The art is heavy on detail and stiff with photo referencing but the overall effect is pretty. Quirky but commercial. Two collections are available.~FJ

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* Available in a collected edition

STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

Rip-Off: *1 issue 1989*

Excellent cartooning from Bruce Bollinger, but his stories of "an ageing hippie lost somewhere in the Bible belt" do no more than raise the occasional grin. It's seedy and it's offbeat, but it's not very funny.~WJ

THE STRANGERS

Malibu: *26 issues, 1 Annual 1993-1995*

The Strangers are a team of superheroes who all acquired superpowers at the same time when the Jumpstart effect hit a cable car in San Francisco, which is incredibly convenient. They start by pursuing an alien woman, Yrial, who lives on an island in the sky and whose leader claims to know why they got their powers. He's not about to just tell them outright though, is he? Grenade, Atom-Bob, Zip-Zap, Spectral, Lady Killer and Electrocute aren't the greatest names in superhero history, but Steve Englehart's scripts concentrate more on the people inside the costumes, ensuring that the code names aren't overused.

The Strangers help Hardcase and Choice against Aladdin in 4 and are then involved in the 'Break-Thru' crossover (7), which goes some way to explaining the origins of the Ultraverse. 8 begins the story-line that examines the mystery of Yrial and the island in the sky, concluding with 12. The introduction of villain Pilgrim, out to destroy the team, runs through to issue 18 and the first *Night Man* and *Strangers* annuals, wherein Atom-Bob betrays them and the Teknight (ancient warrior resurrected in futuristic armour) gets picked up before joining the team in 19. Taboo and TNTNT (a group of villains) feature in 23-24 and the final issues after Marvel acquired Malibu are part of the 'Godwheel' crossover – which effectively destroyed the credibility and quality of the entire Ultraverse.

Englehart's scripts and Rick Hoberg's artwork make this an enjoyable, different superhero series which quite effectively examines the problems and characters of people suddenly and inexplicably given strange powers. The personal relationships and family ties are well defined and Hoberg's tight pencils (fortunately in most, if not every issue) give *The Strangers* a distinctive feel. It didn't really have enough time to prove itself but might well have done so if Marvel hadn't put the boot in. 1-4 were collected in paperback.~NF

STRANGERS IN PARADISE

Antarctic: 3 *issue miniseries 1993-1994*
Abstract Studios: 14 *issues 1994-1996*
Image/Homage: *8 issues 1996-1997*
Abstract Studios: *45 issues (9-53) + 1997 to date, one-shot ('#93298') 1999*

The Antarctic Press series introduces Katchoo and Francine, two high school friends who are now, ten years later, sharing an apartment. Francine has a boyfriend, Freddy, with whom she won't sleep because she's afraid that that's all he wants from her. Katchoo has a king-size crush on Francine but meets David, who starts to take her thoughts in another direction. Then Francine catches Freddy with another woman and sets in motion a series of events that culminates in Katchoo getting arrested.

The Abstract Studio series starts two months later. 1-9 is a complex story looking at Katchoo's past while exploring her continuing relationship with David and Francine. Hitherto played for laughs, the stories take a more serious turn, as Katchoo reveals that she used to work as a call girl to female clients for Darcy Parker. David turns out to be Darcy's younger brother and there's the small matter of a dead Senator and a stolen $850,000. With the move to Homage (and then back to Abstract) the series leaps forward, as, ten years later, Francine, married to Brad and with a five year old daughter, Ashley, reminisces about the past. Darcy tries to blackmail Katchoo into returning to her for a final job (1-12), while the high school meeting of Katchoo and Francine is explored in 13-15. The plots of Rachel and Tambi, involving a complex criminal conspiracy, are at the heart of 17-38. More is explained about Katchoo's motivations and her relationship to Darcy Parker's girls, whilst, in the 'present', Francine's mother reluctantly summons Katchoo to a depressed Francine. 39-43 cover Francine's concerns over her forthcoming marriage, but everything the reader has been told to this point is thrown into the air with 43-44, which offer several different possible endings to the storyline. With 45, Francine returns to Houston, pregnant but having decided not to marry Brad, and two plots develop, one around whether Francine and Katchoo will manage to recognise their love for each other, the other about a police investigation prompted by the events of 17-38.

The first 14 (reprinted in 49) is the text story, with illustrations, of Molly and Poo, and creator, Terry Moore, often uses text pieces to tell more story or allow for longer dialogues. The one-shot is a collection of illustrated lyrics and poems. Moore writes in a very naturalistic style. Artistically, his simple lines are enhanced by rather ornate inking, but the whole can be very pleasing. The story and characters can be very involving as Moore has created some complex relationships and a suspenseful thriller, but the drawing out of the romance seems overly manipulative, with the frequent interruptions and re-starting of the relationships. These diversions tease the readers, but, perhaps, it's more important that Moore is committed to exploring all aspects of his characters lives and decisions.~NF

Recommended: 17-38

STRATA

Renegade: *5 issues 1986-1987*

An ambitious fantasy tale combining various schools of writing, from Edgar Rice Burroughs to Stephen Donaldson. Inspector Flambeau is transported from England to the floating world of Strata, peopled by a number of secret societies, all of which are at war with each other. Accompanied by two Zen Buddhist otters, Flambeau meets the Air Pirates and finds himself switching between London and Strata whenever his life's threatened. Regrettably, the series was never finished. Written by Joe Judt and drawn by Ray Murtaugh and Jim Brozman, Strata was witty and deftly structured; it could have been a cult hit given the opportunity.~NF

STRATOSFEAR

Caliber: *3 issues 1994*

Set in a futuristic Britain, elite operative and weapons specialist Metzger is partnered with an android to tackle Serious Crime. The android is a devout believer in the supernatural and spends a great deal of time trying to convince the world-weary cop that most of their current cases are part of a mystic influx. Paul Birch, Shane Oakley and Gary Crutchley deliver an above-average science-fiction police thriller.~WW

STRAW MEN

All-American: *8 issue limited series 1989-1990*

With its origins in the past of Dr Jon Stonewall and his son, Craig, this is a story about the creation of Craig's son, apparently through the genetic experimentation of his father, and their estrangement. Jon is one of the three heads of the Primacy Movement (Labs, Church and Party), which offers members longer lives and promises a future without disease or genetic defect. Craig, with a deformed hand, hides amongst circus freaks until a government agent convinces him that it's time to confront his father. Michael Vance and R. A. Jones' script is well considered, producing a downbeat story about the dangers of playing god when you're starting from a compromised position. Despite the time span of the narrative and amount of plot, there's some convincing characterisation, though no heroes as such, and the final denouement is not as convincing as it ought to be. Rob Davis' artwork is not flashy, and tells the story perfectly adequately without drawing attention to itself.~NF

STRAY BULLETS

El Capitan: *28 issues + 1995 to date*

With a past consisting of work on Valiant and Defiant comics, no one had any right to expect much from David Lapham's self-published *Stray Bullets*, but it's proved to be one of the finest titles of the 1990s. Each issue focuses on a different character, or set of characters, and is a complete story in itself, but each episode also relates to every other one, combining together to form a larger continuity. The comic also flits from year to year (1 was set in 1997, 2 in 1977, 3 in 1980 and so on). Early episodes were almost unbearably violent, but as the series progressed Lapham has allowed himself to concentrate far more on characterisation, which is a joy, since one of Lapham's greatest skills is an ear for dialogue.

Broadly speaking, *Stray Bullets* has three continuity strands. There's the violent, retarded Joey (1, 3), the troubled ménage à trois on the run from the Mob (Orson, Beth and Nina in 5, 8, 9 and 11), and, most impressively, the dysfunctional childhood of Ginny (2, 4, 7), though elements from all three strands overlap. 6 and 10 featured the exaggerated and goofy adventures of Amy Racecar, apparently a grown-up or fantasy version of Ginny. On top of delightful plotting, cinematic storytelling and gripping dialogue, Lapham's art is a revelation. It's expressive, kinetic and totally unique, making the comics an essential purchase.

With 12, the various strands were pulled together, climaxing in 15's bloody finale. It is to Lapham's credit that he was unafraid to kill off some of his major characters and that, in 16, he was willing to start all over again with a new cast and a new narrative. This next strand of characters included Hank, a nebbish suddenly invigorated by the accidental killing of a road-rage hoodlum, the white trash couple Kathy and Ricky Fish, and 'exotic dancer' Amelia. If anything, this second sequence was even more character-driven than the earlier issues, with Lapham revelling in his descriptions of low lives, losers and has-beens. In time, Beth and hitmen Scott and Monster were reintroduced, effectively making the comic one long, infinitely expanding, decade-shifting story. In addition to his regular narrative, Lapham also created further Amy Racecar stories from time to time, and released two *Amy Racecar* colour specials. The early promise he showed when the series started has been wonderfully realised, and Lapham is now unquestionably one of comics' most accomplished talents. Six collections to date reprint the entire series.~DAR

Recommended: 1-28

STRAY CATS

Slave Labor: *4 issue miniseries 1999*

Creator L.G.X. Lillian Mousli's first work to be translated from German. The misadventures of childhood friends Penny and Paul wander in an out of dreamtime, fantasy, past and present. Mousli's simply drawn artwork gives the reader the impression that the story is going to be childlike and straightforward, so the story's twists and turns are all the more surprising as a result. Crude, disjointed, but curiously charming.~SW

STRAY TOASTERS

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1988-1989**

Oddly compelling experiment by writer/artist Bill Sienkiewicz. A woman is killed by what may be a toaster. It mutilates her body as if trying to rewire a machine but gets a couple of wires crossed. A damaged psychologist, Egon Rustemagik, is called in by the police. He's been in a mental institution until recently and the trail leads him from the dead woman to her psychiatrist, an old lover of his called Abby. She, in turn, has taken in a small boy called Todd, who turned up on her doorstep and whose only words are 'toast and jam'. Sienkiewicz's artwork is nearly abstract in places; at other times he uses exaggeratedly cartoony images (like Ronald Searle), detailed brushwork or collage. It's frustrating reading but draws you in with its mystery.~NF

STREET FIGHTER

Ocean Comics: *4 issue miniseries 1986-1987*

Enjoyable masked crimebuster romp in the style of *The Shadow* or *Doc Savage*. Adam Ranger aims to smash the drug rackets whilst searching out the secrets of his own lost identity. Sparse, underplayed script from Ron Fortier aptly illustrated in a Steve Ditko style by Gary Kato makes this series worth a look.~WW

STREET MUSIC

Fantagraphics: *6 issues 1988-1989*

Anthology title with day-to-day life as a theme that promises more than it delivers from a list of creators including Rick Taylor, Mark Martin and Richard Sala. The majority of the material is written by Mark Burbey, and the meat of each issue is the eponymous title strip about a mixed relationship in a working-class area. It combines triumph and tragedy, but in a detached fashion, never really inducing the care factor necessary to make the strip work. Consequently the best contributors are Angela Bocage and Carol Tyler. Tyler's strips of appalling jobs she's had, and appalling characters she's encountered in the workplace, are by turns hilarious and distressing. Justin Green's return to Binky Brown stories in 2 would be cause for celebration were it not illustrated text. Green's a top comic creator, but a merely average writer. Buy *The Job Thing*, collecting the Carol Tyler stories, and investigate better anthologies before sampling this.~WJ

STREET POET RAY

Marvel/Epic: *5 issues 1990*

A series of 'hello trees! hello flowers!' poems illustrated with child-like drawings does not add up to an intelligent commentary on the state of the world. One wonders if it was a cynical joke, rather like the *Marvel Fumetti Book*, designed to test just how much crap we'd take if it came from the right company.~FJ

STREET SMELL

Bruce Mutard: *4 issues (0-3) 1994-1998*

In 'The Body' (0), a model has her head removed, because her agent is only interested in her body. Other strips feature a rant against Bikini competitions (1) and 'Bermuda Triangle' (2), in which two boys discover the naked body of a woman in a drain and debate what to do with it. The main strip in 1-3 is 'Love To Know You', about Brian, who wants to go out with waitress, Nancy, but cannot approach her, imagining instead how conversations might go in his head. The strip also covers his feelings about his job in a porno store and about women generally. Creator, Bruce Mutard, is concerned primarily with the exploitation and misinterpretation of women, but his satirical pieces are less telling than his more fatalistic and pessimistic social strips. He has a naturalistic approach to both the writing and artwork, which has similarities to Jaime Hernandez, but grainier.~NF

Recommended: 1-3

STREET WOLF

Blackthorne: *3 issue miniseries 1986*

Nathan Blackhorse is an urban avenger who'll deal with gangsters seemingly beyond the reach of the law. Reality-based, this seems to aim at the mood of a superior TV cop show, but the reach of the creative team exceeds their grasp. It doesn't work, because although fallible, our man's character is stuck on 'moody' with an overriding sense of moral justice. It works for Clint Eastwood, but not here.~FP

STREETS

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1993*

Turning-points in the life of hooker Jenny Masden are related in this *NYPD Blue*-style wannabe-noir miniseries. Writer James Hudnall's terse style evokes the grimy, hopeless environment admirably, and the three issues are cleverly constructed so each can be read as a stand-alone story. John Estes and Rob Ortaleza illustrate 1 and 2 well, but sadly John McCrea's tendency to make everyone look amiably loony makes him an inappropriate choice for the third issue.~HS

STREETWISE

Two Morrows: *1 volume 2001*

Having successfully developed a large niche market in nostalgia-led comics magazines, and inspired by a Jack Kirby autobiographical story that opens the book, John Morrow and Jon Cooke approached mainstream comic creators about producing true anecdotal stories. They inadvertently tapped a wellspring. These were stories people wanted to tell, and from

the fine Steve Rude cover of a young Jack Kirby inspired by pulp magazines this is a treasure trove of excellently drawn memories spanning five decades. A brief rundown of topics includes Sergio Aragonés recounting a disastrous performance, Barry Windsor-Smith's UFO encounter, Evan Dorkin's summer camp greed, Murphy Anderson's first shiner, Brent Anderson nearly drowning and John Severin illustrating Roy and Dann Thomas' safari. Then there's Joe Kubert, Gray Morrow, Nick Cardy, Sam Glanzman, Eddie Campbell, Paul Chadwick, Walt Simonson and plenty more. An embarrassment of riches. Two other contributions deserve special mention. Some might feel that with the illustrious line-up Alan Kupperberg is misplaced, but the run-through of his life with comics from child to professional should appeal to comic fans. Then there's Jeff Jones. It's a shame his name ranks so high that his faxed phone doodles saw print. Still it's the only poor page in the book. This is not only good autobiographical comics, it ranks among the best anthologies. In the manner of all zealots, comic fans are perennially searching for the comic that will convert non-enthusiasts. This is a good starter. Roll on volume two.~FP
Recommended

STRIKE

Eclipse: *6 issues 1987-1988*

Imaginative and brutal early Chuck Dixon and Tom Lyle strip for which they've concocted a past and previous owners for the force-field-emitting and strength-giving Strike harness. Fake 'reprints' accompany the main strip, and the story continues first in a one-shot *Strike vs Sgt Strike*, and then into *Total Eclipse*.~WJ

STRIKEBACK

Malibu/Bravura: *3 issues 1994*
Image: *5 issue miniseries 1996*

Rascal and Nikita Dragonryder are lovers and very happy ones at that, until Nikita's father sends bounty-hunters Doberman and Rotweiler to kidnap her. Rascal and new friend Midnight Devil set out to rescue her but are impeded by the likes of Red Ferret and the Golden Armadillo. What follows is a madcap escapade with plenty of action and humour, as Rascal learns just why the family's called Dragonryder. Written by Jonathan Peterson and Kevin Maguire, and drawn by Maguire, this is a fun series that doesn't make any big demands on the reader but which does have a lot of charm. The Bravura title remained unfinished, but the Image series contains the complete story.~NF
Recommended: Image 1-5

STRIKEFORCE AMERICA

Comico: *1 issue 1995*

Appalling super-team spin-off from *Elementals*, with none of the charm, originality or competence of either run. Mindless, derivative and easily forgotten.~WW

STRIKEFORCE: MORITURI

Marvel: *31 issues 1986-1989*

In a not-too-distant future outside regular Marvel continuity, Earth was losing a battle against invading aliens. A formula was developed which could give humans the edge but which would kill its recipients within a year. The novelty of the series was that it was planned to move in 'real time', creating a constant stream of disposable heroes who burned brightly and gave their lives for their planet. Perhaps predictably, characters created to last for an average of twelve issues were never going to be much more than throwaway ideas, which made it difficult for the series to build up much of a following. 1 has three pages of early Whilce Portacio art and he also inks some later issues.~JC.

STRIKER

Viz: *4 issue miniseries ('The Armored Warrior') 1992*, 4 issue miniseries ('Secret of the Berserker') 1995, 3 volumes 1998-1999*

High-school student, Yu Ominae, is code-named, Striker, an employee of a foundation dedicated to safeguarding and preventing the use of hidden technology. Empowered by an armoured suit, Yu clashes with CIA and KGB agents in Japan over control of volcanoes, then meets a giant robot awakened by English scientists. In stories first serialised in the *Manga Vizion* anthology, Yu's further adventures see him find Noah's Ark, the nectar of the gods and the Holy Grail. Written by Hiroshi Takashige, this is reminiscent of *Martin Mystery* in using myths and legends as plot springboards, but this is a much more physical series, with little depth of characterisation. The artwork by Ryoji Minagawa is clean, dynamic and not overly stylised. The three volumes contain both of the miniseries (the first was also collected separately in 1993) as well as the material serialised in *Manga Vizion*.~NF

STRIP AIDS

Willyprods/Small Time Ink: *One-shot 1987*

Don Melia organised this fundraiser, offended at a newspaper cartoon perpetuating ignorance about AIDS. He solicited contributions from cartoonists, magazine strip artists, small press creators and beyond. Thus you have Bob Lynch rubbing shoulders with Posy Simmonds, musician Tom Robinson's computer created strip, reprints of an acerbic If sequence from Steve Bell a few pages after tired old *Bristow*, the return of Brendan McCarthy's Paradax, and editorial cartoonists like Clive Griffin. The ignorant pub conversation related by Kate Charlesworth is good, and Hunt Emerson explains where condoms come from.~FP

STRIP AIDS USA

Last Gasp: *1 volume 1988*

This paperback lacks the eclecticism of its British inspiration by presenting mainly comic creators, albeit many distant from the mainstream. More pages produce repeated earnest activism, dissection and mourning. Condoms are popular, with both Terry Austin and Don Simpson original, and the idea of S. Clay Wilson advocating them astounding. Interesting analogies encompass a Bill Messner-Loebs *Journey* strip, Rebecca Huntington drawing Joyce Brabner's junior school experiences, and Steve Leialoha's Poe adaptation. The tale of Africa is more chilling as only the beginning, and history has caught Geof Darrow's Reagan strip. Jules Feiffer makes a telling point, Hal Robins produces an Edward Gorey style condemnation and detailed realistic rendering from Bob Fingerman is a novelty.~FP

STRIPS

Rip-Off: *9 issues 1989-1991*

The adventures of Zack, a horny student, preoccupied with the usual monomania of heterosexual seventeen-year-old males: scoring with the shapely co-eds of his acquaintance, and filling in the gaps between encounters with frenzied masturbation. Predictable and obvious? Well, no. As written and drawn by Chuck Austen, the characters of Zack, his girlfriend Shari, and Lee and Kenna, two fantasy objects of his acquaintance, are complex, engaging, self-contradictory masses of hormones, and hugely appealing to look at, too. The assured, trenchant dialogue makes this a rare sex comic you can enjoy reading two-handed, and Austen's cartoony, Mangaesque art is zany, funny and sexy. Light years removed (and improved) from his painfully constipated early superhero artwork. Sadly, its appearance coincided with the rise of the crazed Anti-Sex League in both the US and the UK, and the series was, as far as we can tell, bludgeoned into extinction by censorious cretins.~HS
Recommended: 1-9

STRONG GUY REBORN

Marvel: *One-shot 1997*

Guido Carosella is a mutant whose ability to absorb kinetic energy and convert it into muscle has turned him into a hideously deformed freak. After recovering from a cardiac collapse, he's at a loose end so his 'just good friend' Lila

Cheney (the most popular teleporting rock star in the galaxy) takes him on tour where he's kidnapped by one faction in an intergalactic war. It's fun and frolics – apparently – as Guido and Lila must end a millennia old conflict and get back on stage before the support band finishes. Just another *X-Men* cash-in comic, although a little less pompous than most, but it does pose the vexing question "if Strong Guy is so hideously deformed, why does he look like every other superhero in creation?"~WW

STRONTIUM BITCH

Fleetway/Quality: *2 issue microseries 1993*

Reprint from *2000AD* of the adventures of Durham Red, mutant, bounty hunter and vampire. Stylish and manic science-fiction tales spun-off from the seminal Strontium Dog series.~WW

STRONTIUM DOG

Eagle: *4 issue miniseries 1985-1986*
Quality: *One-shot 1986, 30 issues 1986-1989*

Johnny Alpha is one of the mutants despised throughout the galaxy. Largely normal-looking compared with some, it's his pupil-less eyes that reveal him, eyes that see through walls. He's a Search and Destroy agent, one of the few professions open to mutants, with the pejorative term Strontium Dog deriving from the SD on his official badge. The most inventive of Alpha's devices is the time bomb. On detonation the victim remains frozen in time and space for a fixed period while Earth continues its rotation. The result is one victim stranded in space without oxygen. Strontium Dog's companion is Viking warrior Wulf Sternhammer, and the only other major recurring character is Gronk, a timid furry alien.

The miniseries is a biography of Johnny Alpha, intertwined with the political campaigning of Nelson Kreelman, who is calling for mutants to be outlawed. The Quality series is largely a succession of missions. Alan Grant writes this as a relatively straightforward adventure strip, and Carlos Ezquerra draws almost every issue. He's a dynamic and imaginative action artist, but his sometimes almost pointilliste style isn't to everyone's taste.

In the story told over 20-25 Wulf Sternhammer dies, and Alpha is framed for his murder by gangster Max Bubba. It was a brave move by Grant, and one that works. With the old buddy act no longer a feature his plots are more creative, and more interesting supporting characters arrive. Middenface McNulty grows into a sardonic and resourceful cast member, and Durham Red, introduced in 26, became the most popular Strontium Dog. She's a vampire, as likely to feast on her victims as turn them in, and her début is during a plot involving the kidnapping of Ronald Reagan. Start with the final issues, and if you like what you read sample further.~WJ

STUCK RUBBER BABY

Paradox Press: *Graphic Novel 1995*

Stuck Rubber Baby is cartoonist Howard Cruse's masterpiece, and it's no exaggeration to label it one of the finest comics ever published. Its 210 pages trace the coming of age and coming out of Toland Polk, a teenager growing up in the fictional Southern town of Clayfield. Much of the story has an autobiographical feel, so unsurprisingly Toland's gradual awareness of his homosexuality is extremely convincing. Cruse's masterstroke, however, is to link Toland's sexual awareness with both the progressive emergence of the gay movement throughout the 1960s and the fight for racial equality. Many of the book's most powerful scenes involve the constant, almost institutionalised, racism of the South, exemplified by clashes between black protesters and police. For all its length and weighty themes, Cruse never once forgets that this is all meant to be entertaining, and the book is a delight from cover to cover. The art's good, too.~DAR
Recommended

STUPID

Image: *2 issues 1993*

Attempt at a *Not Brand Ecch*, *Mad*-style spoof comic, written and drawn primarily by Hilary Barta, who was mining much the same vein over in Marvel's *What The-?* at the time. Faintly amusing but overlong, and doomed to failure by contemporary Image fans' absence of a sense of humour.~HS

Peter Laird's STUPID HEROES

Next: *3 issues 1994*

Co-creator of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* Peter Laird tries his hand at Kirbyesque superheroics. It's third-rate imitation, and you'd be far better off sampling the genuine article.~WJ

STUPID, STUPID RAT-TAILS

Cartoon Books: *3 issue miniseries 1999-2000*

This very light and whimsical *Bone* spin-off is a frontier adventure of ancestor and explorer big-nosed Big Johnson Bone, a kind-hearted braggart. Your enjoyment of it is going to depend on your tolerance for gentle woodland creatures and comically pathetic rat-monsters but the work is unquestionably first-class. Both Tom Sniegowski's script and Jeff Smith's art are slick, cute and funny. The mice in 1 are particularly good fun.~GK
Recommended: 1-3

STYLISH VITTLES

Dementian: *1 volume + 2002 to date*

Tyler Page's *Stylish Vittles* chronicles the progression of his relationship with Nanette in excruciating detail. It sometimes seems no small moment is too trivial for inclusion, with Page not realising his experience is common to most of the western world. Fully a quarter of the book is given over to a self-indulgent opening sequence, and just as events become interesting with differences of opinion over religion driving a wedge between Tyler and Nanette there is the bitter phrase "to be continued.. " Page will develop into an excellent artist, but this is a frustrating volume.~FP

SUB-MARINER

Marvel: *72 issues, 2 Annuals 1968-1974, 4 issue miniseries (Prince Namor, The Sub-Mariner) 1984*

Continuing from the Sub-Mariner's feature in *Tales to Astonish* (after the one-shot stopover in *Iron Man and Sub-Mariner*), this was a well-crafted mainstream superhero comic with occasional bouts of inspiration. In 1-8 Roy Thomas and John Buscema produced solid entertainment that was almost proto-sword-and-sorcery due to its Atlantean setting. Subsequent issues never quite matched the momentum, though Thomas handed guest stars excellently, from the Thing (8) and Dr Strange (22) to the first, and unofficial, gathering of the Defenders in 34 and 35. Thomas occasionally used the comic to re-introduce 1940s characters, notably the original Human Torch in 14 and the Red Raven in 26. The comic only regained a sense of direction, however, at the end of Thomas' tenure from 36-39, where Namor marries his sweetheart, the Lady Dorma, who is then killed. At the time that was a daring move that resulted in his abdication and subsequent quest for his father, effectively relocating the strip to the surface world. Visually, Thomas was well served by Marie Severin (9, 12-19, 21-23, 44, 45), Sal Buscema (25-36) and Ross Andru (37-39), though the strip only really came alive again under Gene Colan (40, 43, 46-49). Thereafter Gerry Conway didn't do very much with the dangling quest plot, and eventually ended up killing Namor's father in 46.

50 saw the return of Sub-Mariner's creator (way back in 1939) Bill Everett, whose playful, perhaps simplistic, writing polarised the readers of the day. Artistically, however, he had never been better, and each issue is a finely detailed treat. Sadly, Everett was plagued with ill health, resulting in a number of fill-in artists (the superb Dan Adkins in 56, Sam Kweskin in 58-60), and portions of 61 were the last comic pages he drew. Illness also led to

back-up strips. There are 1950s reprints in 53 and 54, and a gem from Alan Weiss, again in 54.

Everett's successor, the normally excellent Steve Gerber, never really got to grips with the character, and he wasn't helped by uninspired Don Heck art. More interesting was Gerber's 'Tales from Atlantis' back-up strip, drawn by Howard Chaykin (62-64) and Jim Mooney (65-66), but cancellation was no surprise. The last issue, by Steve Skeates and Dan Adkins (hampered by Vince Colletta's inks), was notable for an early sympathetic portrayal of homosexuality, albeit somewhat disguised.

In an attempt to update *Sub-Mariner* the 1984 miniseries explored Atlantis in greater depth than before, and ultimately led to Namor being forced to abdicate the throne. Despite some quite interesting insights into Namor's rather haughty personality from writer J.M. DeMatteis, there's little outstanding here.~DAR

Recommended: 1-8, 50-58, 72

Saga of the SUB-MARINER

Marvel: *12 issues 1988-1989*

Prior to their relaunch of the Sub-Mariner in the ongoing series *Namor* in 1990, Marvel issued this 'guidebook' to his career so far. It covers his début in 1939 and takes him up to the present day, but while continuity maven Roy Thomas certainly tied up the threads, his obsession for detail led to a rather leaden pace. Informative, but very dull.~HS

SUB-MARINER COMICS

Timely: *42 issues 1941-1949 (1-32), 1954-1955 (33-42)*

Hybrid offspring of Atlantean Princess and American explorer, Namor the Sub-Mariner, belonging to both worlds but at home in neither, battles with his conscience. Will he join his father's people or conquer them? This dilemma occupied the first few years of the Namor stories, and as late as the start of World War II he wasn't quite sure. He eventually joined the allies, but perhaps it was out of expediency, and his amorality remained fascinating. Sadly, after the war his creator Bill Everett had less to do with the strip and the tone changed noticeably. From the brooding Atlantean figure of the past Namor became seemingly an American. His vast physical power stunted, he was reduced to a muscleman in trunks, albeit one with a triangular head. Fighting petty crooks and murderers he and his cousin Namora, a Janice-come-lately addition in 1947, looked out of place. Eventually the Great Beach Bully kicked sand in his face and he retired.

Like his contemporaries Captain America and the Human Torch, Namor enjoyed a 1950s revival, but unlike them he had the advantage of a revitalised Bill Everett, at perhaps the height of his creative powers, writing and drawing. A few stories pandered to the Commie-bashing mood of the day, but they were still exquisitely rendered, and most tales dwelt on his role as protector of the oceans. Eerie monsters, beautiful women and frequent visits to his Atlantean homeland filled the strip. A flawed, but lovely ten issues were released before he sank once more into the depths, later re-emerging as a supporting anti-hero in *Fantastic Four* 4.~HS

Recommended: 33-42

SUBHUMAN

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1998-1999*

Mark Schultz wrote and painted covers for these undersea adventures, very similar in tone to the *Xenozoic Tales* series fans the world over wished he'd continue instead. Roger Peterson's art is the difference between the two series. He's far from inadequate, but with Schultz writing, he falls short given the obvious comparison.~WJ

SUBSPECIES

Eternity: *4 issue miniseries 1991*

Adapted, allegedly, from a movie about a group of undead who are not made but born, their damnation decided before they ever arrive in the world. A mildly interesting concept, execrably executed.~HS

SUBURBAN HIGH LIFE

Slave Labor: *3 issues 1987, one-shot 1988*

Edited by Frank Cirocco, this is an anthology of short humour strips, mixing parody, photo montages, real and fake advertisements, 'true' facts and other oddities. Regular features include Rick Geary's 'Suburban Romance' one pagers, Norman Dog's 'Knuckleheads', and Cirocco's own 'Lost Episodes' series with parodies of the *Addams Family*, *Leave It To Beaver*, *Mr Rogers* and the Jetsons (by Scott Shaw!). Trina Robbins explains how to keep Spam fresh as a regular meal (1), while Scott Saavedra explains The Moderne Family (1), provides an episode of Java Town (3) and tours Uncle Fuji's Fun Factory (one-shot). Other contributors include Mark Martin (3), Tom Tomorrow (3, one-shot) and Joe Sacco (3). It's all quite strange, but usually a lot of fun too. The one-shot is magazine sized.~NF

Recommended: 3

SUBURBAN JERSEY NINJA SHE-DEVILS

Marvel: *One-shot 1992*

Presumably intended as a hilarious parody, though any comic that opens with a child murder can't be much fun, under any circumstances. This repulsive item rapidly becomes a standard Steve Gerber misogynistic, misanthropic tirade, with the attempted comedy elements, and Amanda Conner's artwork, looking way out of place. Once you've read the title, you've had the best there is in this comic. For curiosity seekers only.~HS

SUBURBAN NIGHTMARES

Renegade: *4 issue miniseries 1988**

Inventive retro look at the 1950s, continuing themes explored by Larry Hancock, John Van Bruggen and Michael Cherkas in *Silent Invasion*. Each issue has a chapter of The Science Experiment, a cautionary tale about a purpose-built community near an atomic testing site, a new short strip and one reprinted from *Silent Invasion*. The moods and art styles are varied, but all stories deal excellently with disturbing occurrences on some level.~FP

Recommended: 1-4

SUBURBAN VOODOO Comics

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1992*

A largely insubstantial collection of stories from Matthew Guest, this mixes teenage angst, high school religion and good old boys. Guest's dense, oppressive art is not exactly reader-friendly, and while not without merit neither is this an essential purchase.~DAR

SUBVERT Comics

Rip-Off: *3 issues 1970-1976*

The early work of Spain Rodriguez is an acquired taste. The heavy-handed political moralising and basic humour of his 1960s and early 1970s work is wrapped in stories looking like nothing so much as poorly drawn Marvel material. His Trashman character, starring in all three issues, is a heavily armed avenger, espousing right-on 1960s politics as he encounters the minions of fascist America and blows them away. Twenty-five years on it's very hackneyed, and issues of *The Punisher* have better confronted political issues.~FP

SUDDEN GRAVITY: A Story of the Panopticon

Caliber: *4 issues 1998-1999*

Greg Ruth's intense psycho-drama set in a nameless psychiatric institution in the heart of an urban sprawl. The action centres around a reluctant and burned out psychiatrist, recalled to treat the city commissioner who has just murdered her family and burned down her home. He develops a growing awareness that the staff are more disturbed than the patients and that many of the inmates would be better treated by an exorcist than a psychiatrist. Hard going, but worth it.~WW

SUE & SALLY SMITH, FLYING NURSES

Charlton: *7 issues (48-54) 1962-1963*

Our eponymous heroines, sisters and nurses with the Peace Corps, not only fly, but ski, trek – hey, these babes would pogo-stick to get to their patients if they had to! Supremely silly stuff, worth a look if you come across 'em cheap, but for God's sake don't pay big money for them.~HS

SUGAR AND SPIKE

DC: *99 issues 1956-1971 (1-98), 1992 (99)*

A marvellous humour series created by Sheldon Mayer. Neighbours Sugar Plumm and Spike Wilson were two infants who could walk but not talk. They communicated in baby talk, not understood by adults, of course. Although never a top seller, DC maintained Sugar and Spike to ensure a young entry-level readership to comics. The readers more often than not saw the world through the eyes of the youngsters, which is why adults are usually only seen as legs (though you do see what the tots' parents look like in 5). The loveable brats had amusing, yet somehow appropriate names for various objects, e.g., a mirror was a "magic window". The supporting cast also played an important part, the most surreal being Sugar's 125-year-old great-great-great-grandfather, who first appears in 24. Some of the tots' friends included Little Arthur, a four-year-old pest, Bernie the Brain, a clever little brat, Zelda, a toy robot, and, in the early 1970s, a black child, Raymond Smith.

1-63 featured several short pieces each issue, but 64 ran the first full-length story, edging the series into slapstick, more in tune with Mayer's 1940s *Scribbly* series (Scribbly made his first appearance in many a year in 30). Mayer's failing eyesight along with falling sales led to cancellation, although new stories were produced for foreign markets a decade later. A previously unpublished final issue arrived as one of the otherwise all-reprint *Silver Age Classics* in 1992, and a facsimile of the first issue was published in 2002.

Any issue is recommended as a sample, although copies in good condition are very hard to find. Besides being thumbed by grubby young fingers, many have the paper doll cut-outs cut out. Don't be put off by the childish appeal of the series: as with today's *Rugrats* (for which this was very much a forerunner) *Sugar and Spike* works on two levels. It's ostensibly for children, but older readers will appreciate the situations, and the finesse with which the characters are drawn. One thing will become quite obvious: as in real adult life, the bossy female, Sugar, was able to wrap the poor sap, Spike, around her little finger!~HY

Recommended: Any issue

SUGAR BUZZ

Amaze Ink: *9 issues + 1998 to date*

This anthology features numerous different strips all by the same creative team of writer Ian Carney and artist Woodrow Phoenix. Strips are also occasionally guest-written by Ian's eight-year-old son Jake, but this works surprisingly well, with most illustrated by guest artists. The art is spare but stunning, sort of "nostalgia retro", 1963's view of the future. Jetsonesque, but done with more care and attention than any animated show ever bothered with. As for the tone of the stories, imagine sitting through a classic Hanna-Barbera cartoon marathon stuffed to the gills with caffeine, mild hallucinogenics and Chocolate Frosted Sugar Bombs. It's very wacky stuff. There are usually three features to an issue ranging from fifteen or so pages down to snappy 'n' stylish one-pagers, no continued stories, and each issue can be read independently.

A plethora of imaginative characters have been introduced. Splash Girl (5) is a delusional superheroine who thinks everyone she meets, whatever their gender or species, is her missing husband Stan (who presumably fled screaming years ago) and expends her mighty marine-based powers trying to persuade them of the fact. Ultra Spacers (6) are geriatric former heroes of the galaxy on the verge of being compelled to retire. Can they avoid the twin menaces of forced redundancy and the treachery of an ex-comrade? Sugar Kat (3) is bored with her life as an international superstar and idol of millions, so decides to horn in on her twin sister Rebecca's detective agency. Armed only with her preternatural glamour and the uncertain, perpetually-dying cat Yearbook, they solve bizarre mysteries. The couple in 'Bad, Bad Monkeys' (4) are not named Ricky and Lucy Ricardo, but it is they. They decide to adopt, but instead of a grateful orphan, they get the world's wickedest monkeys! 'My Wife, The Robot' (4) is a flawless one-page tribute to *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie*, in which the robot wife causes chaos when hubby brings the boss home to dinner. A deeply poignant final panel. Pants Ant (2): "He's an Ant! He wears Big Pants! Armed with an endless supply of trouser-related weapons, he makes the world safe for trews-wearers of all persuasions!" The anthology format means that not everything will connect. 'Horse Eat Dog!' (5) is repetitive and tedious, 'Precious and Percival' (7) confusing and a real downer, and do we ever need to Upchuck Duck (1) again? The twisted, gonky humour has a real appeal, though, and the few misfires are offset by the many, many gems. Early issues are available in a collection.

Very few of the series ever repeat, as Carney and Phoenix have far too many new ideas to display, but a couple have spun off into other comics. Sugar Kat has starred in a three issue series and a crossover with *Skeleton Key*, and Pants Ant, who gained his own Trouser Hour special. He also has a pilot for the Cartoon Network on the way, while Sugar has been optioned by Warner Brothers, so those two, at least, are the unqualified pick of the litter. But there's so much more! The Holiday Heroes, with the Whitsun Table Lamp (4)! Bubblegum popsters Batchelor Speedbump (9)! Jesus' Two Dads (8)! I want it all! I want it now! I.... think I need to go adjust my medication...!~HS

Recommended: 1-9

SUGARVIRUS

Atomeka: *One-shot 1993*

The promise of art team Martin Chaplin and Garry Marshall shines through this gratuitously unsavoury vampire story, hampered by overwritten first-person narrative as a storytelling device. Writer Warren Ellis would progress to better ideas.~FP

SUICIDE SQUAD

DC: *Series one 66 issues 1987-1992, series two 12 issues 2001-2002*

A preposterous name belies an interesting premise and the first series is excellent superhero adventure. Supervillains imprisoned for life can have their sentence commuted by undertaking a government mission. The catch is that the mission could result in their death.

1-2 are as good as any, introducing those who carry a large portion of the run. They're largely flotsam and jetsam who'd been knocking around for years, but about whom no one really cared. Given almost blank slates, writers John Ostrander and Kim Yale transform the likes of Nightshade, Deadshot, Nemesis, Count Vertigo and Captain Boomerang into memorable characters. The integral costumeless supporting cast are also particularly well conceived and handled. The finest creation is Amanda Waller, the formidable squad leader who manipulates, coerces, blackmails and just plain stamps her authority all over everyone. She's a one-person lesson about the corruption inseparable from absolute control, yet alongside the powers-that-be as portrayed in the series she's almost virtuous. Ostrander and Yale have favourites, but generally remain true to the concept, resulting in a turnover that keeps the interaction, and therefore the title, fresh. There are also well-considered plots for the Squad's missions, and sympathetic artwork from pencillers Luke McDonnell, John K. Snyder and Geof Isherwood. They're not the first comic artists to come to mind, but all can adapt to suit action scenes or quieter moments of introspection and interaction. Some issues (8, 19, 31) are little but. For the best early action issues see 5-7, in which a rescue mission to Russia goes catastrophically wrong.

39 wraps up the first portion of *Suicide Squad* as official sanction is withdrawn, leading to the Squad working on a freelance basis. The major difference is that there's no one pulling Waller's strings, resulting in her becoming even more forceful and a more active member of the team. From 52 the

costumes are little in evidence, more in keeping with the covert overseas operations undertaken (although you wouldn't know this from the covers). Representative of later missions, 'The Dragon's Hoard' (53-57) is a complex thriller with various parties interested in obtaining a cache of weapons hidden in Cambodia.

The revival is okay, but doesn't match the previous series. Keith Giffen adopts warped humour and a bleak tone from the off, signalled by the decimation of characters he seemed fond of during his Justice League run. Paco Medina's stylised art won't appeal to all, but there are guest shots from Russ Heath (4) and John Severin (10) dealing with the post World War II past of the Squad's leader, Sgt Rock. Familiar faces return, with Deadshot in 5 particularly good. The new cast have a spark, and Giffen's method of storytelling (follow the dialogue closely) is well chosen. The best issues are the finale in 11-12, adding a twist to the entire series that will mean little to anyone who hasn't read the remainder.~FP

Recommended: Series one 1-8, 10, 13, 17-20, 24-26, 31-33, 38-43, 46-49, 51-57, 59-66

THE SUIT

Virtual Comics: *3 issues 1996*

Considering this was a launch title from a new company there's astonishingly little creative effort here. Perhaps it was hoped the high production would conceal the artistic deficiencies. Only writer Dan Chichester emerges with a little credit, with a half-decent idea about alien armour that constructs genetic duplicates of compatible people to host it. Beyond that, rubbish.~WJ

SUN DEVILS

DC: *12 issue limited series 1984-1985*

Intergalactic space opera with a war against saurian tyrants who, oddly enough, seem to have purchased Nazi strategy plans. There are four three-issue story arcs in the series, the best of which is 7-9, as a traitor puts the entire group at risk, but chief writer Gerry Conway works similar ideas far more adroitly in *Atari Force*.~FP

SUN RUNNERS

Pacific: *3 issues 1984*
Eclipse: *4 issues (4-7) 1984-1985*
Sirius: *2 issues (Tales of the Sun Runners) 1986*
Adventure: *1 issue (3), 1 special 1987*

Why so many companies considered this science-fiction adventure with a far future energy-distribution team so compulsive is a question for the times. Damning with faint praise, 1-5 have the best Pat Broderick art you'll find, but are otherwise unremarkable. Better by far is Roger McKenzie and Paul Smith's daft back-up strip in 2-4, Mike Mahogany, a hard-boiled detective with a difference: he's a ventriloquist's dummy. This works better than it sounds.~WJ

SUNBURN

Alternative Comics: *One-shot 2000*

A man meditates on his body and mind and their part in the grand structure of life in James Kochalka's personal statement of optimism and acceptance, using simple images of the body, an apartment and flowers.~NF

SUNDANCE KID

Skywald: *3 issues 1971*

Appalling cowboy strip by Len Wein and Dick Ayers, fronting reprints designed to cash in on the renewed popularity of westerns in film and TV. A companion title *Butch Cassidy* was also released. These comics have nothing to do with the Robert Redford / Paul Newman film and should be avoided at all costs, although Kirby fans might be interested in 2's *Bullseye* reprint.~WW

SUNFIRE & BIG HERO 6

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 1998*

Sunfire and Silver Samurai form Japan's answer to The Avengers, with child prodigy Hiro Takachiho the emotional focus of the story. Hiro's idol Sunfire is convinced his power is killing him while Silver Samurai is written to be the fish-out-of-water man of the past (their Captain America). Everyone else has practically no dimension. GoGo runs fast, Honey Lemon is a blonde babe with an amazing handbag, Hiro's mum is kidnapped and Baymax is a mountain of muscle who fills the backgrounds. This is homogenised late 1990s Marvel fare phoned-in by writer Scott Lobdell for Gus Vazquez to draw on autopilot.~SW

SUNGLASSES After Dark

Verotik: *5 issues 1995-1996*

Nancy Collins adapts her first vampire novel with art by Stan Shaw and Jason Pearson. Goth icon Sonja Blue comes to terms with the modern consequences of vampirism whilst being menaced by the mandatory sinister tele-evangelist, the wittily named Catherine Wheele. Fans of her *Swamp Thing* work might be disappointed by this sub-standard showing of raunchy blood-letting.~WW

SUPER COPS

Red Circle: *One-shot 1974*

Before *Starsky and Hutch* there was this police adventure TV pilot. This comic tie-in features several short strips starring police officers Dave Greenberg and Bob Hantz. Marv Channing wrote the material, and there was art from Gray Morrow, Frank Thorne, Carlos Pino and Vincente Alcazar under the pseudonym 'V.Hack'.~SW

SUPER DC GIANT

DC: *15 issues (13-27), 1970-1971 (13-26), 1976 (27)*

These are sixty-four-page, largely reprint comics, each with a different theme: Western, mystery, UFOs or occasionally specific superheroes. There's little of note. 24 has four Supergirl stories from Action 295-298, and delightful nonsense they are. *Challengers of the Unknown* in 25 contains three Jack Kirby stories, of which 'Captives of the Space Circus' has its moments, but the four heroes are, frankly, a dull lot. The Westerns (14, 15, 22) contain some nice Gil Kane stories, with some outstanding artwork in 'Stand Proud the Warrior Breed' (in 15), a rare new story. Also worth a look is the Metamorpho origin story in 16, with lovely artwork by Ramona Fradon.~FC

Recommended: 15, 16, 24

SUPER FRIENDS

DC: *47 issues 1976-1981*

Based on the popular animated TV series, this proved a hit with the older DC fans, although primarily aimed at a younger audience, with simple stories written by E. Nelson Bridwell and illustrated by Ramona Fradon. Although the title is seemingly set in a universe on its own, Bridwell constructed the stories to fit within mainstream DC continuity, and featured little-used characters such as Black Orchid, Wonder Woman's black sister Nubia, and, from the Golden Age, T.N.T. and Dyna-mite. In some ways it was more *JLA* than *JLA*. Bridwell also created the Global Guardians, an interesting range of international superheroes, who in later years would play major roles in the *Justice League* titles. Well worth sampling perhaps via the recent collection.~HY

SUPER HERO HAPPY HOUR

GeekPunk: *1 issue + 2002 to date*

Where do superheroes go to wind down after that long battle with their arch-enemy? To the pub, of course. The ensuing conversations are little different from those heard down your local, but have the same mix of trivia and humour. This raises a smile in places, and the art by Chris Fason is good, but it all comes over as an inferior copy of its inspiration, *Powers*. A rapid injection of originality is required.~WJ

THE SUPER HEROES

Dell: *4 issues 1967*

Four teenagers visit a museum staging an exhibition of superhero statues. There's Kona, Nukla... all the Dell stars are there. Coincidentally a set of four super powered androids are also on show and an atomic mishap transfers the minds of the children into the bodies of the 'fab 4'. The team comprises laser-powered El, hypersonic Hy, freezer-powered Crispy and mini-skirted Polymer Polly. With villains like Mr Mod and The Coal Man (sentient fossil fuel!) plus some execrable art from Sal Trapani you can see why Marvel and DC began discouraging anyone else using the term 'superheroes'.~SW

SUPER-HEROES BATTLE SUPER-GORILLAS

DC: *One-shot 1976*

It was a 1950s publishing maxim that covers with gorillas sold comics, hence the assorted super-apes that plagued DC's superheroes. Sales on *DC Special* 16 bearing the same title prompted this reprint one-shot, but it was the last thrash for super-gorillas until 1989's *Secret Origins* 40. See Batman take on 'The Gorilla Crime Boss of Gotham City', Flash go a round with Gorilla Grodd and Superman meet the 'Super Gorilla From Krypton'. Much fun.~WJ

SUPER HEROES STAMP ALBUM

DC: *10 issue limited series 2000*

To observe the millennium the US Post Office issued stamps celebrating American events, achievements or people, fifteen from each decade of the 20th century. DC use their superheroes to provide background on the events commemorated on each stamp, providing a place to stick the stamp that incorporates the image into the artwork. It's a wonderful idea for children, well executed, and even without the stamps, they're informative and entertaining.~FP

Recommended: 1-10

SUPER MANGA BLAST!

Dark Horse: *27 issues + 2000 to date*

This manga anthology is aimed somewhere between the orientation of *Animerica Extra* or *Smile* and the more adult strips of *Pulp*. 'Oh! My Goddess' strips not printed as part of that series appear in 1-12, replaced by Makoto Kobayashi's 'Club 9', an entertaining comedy about Haruo, a young, naïve, provincial woman, who becomes a club hostess to help pay for her tuition. The strip depicts her misadventures as her natural charm helps her to be successful. Kobayashi's better-known strip (at least in the West), 'What's Michael', the clever and very funny tales of an everycat, are in each issue. Also continuing from previous appearances, the horror adventure series, 3x3 Eyes, by Yuzo Takada, begins with an adventure in Hong Kong (1-7) then sees Yakumo pursuing an amnesiac Pai in China (8-15), before they set off in search of the sacred land and an incense burner.

In 'Seraphic Feather' Apep Heidemann is on the moon investigating a recently discovered alien starship and its connection to three powerful Emblem Seeds. This can be rather confusing, but Hiroyuki Utatane's sleek artwork makes it a pleasant experience at least. Mohiro Kitoh's 'Shadow Star' by contrast, also has polished artwork, but is told in a clearer style. It's the story of young girl Shiina Tamai who finds a strange starfish-like creature that can fly and has morphing powers. She calls it Hoshimaru and then, investigating its origins, meets the shy, Akira, who has her own star creature, Ensof. Masamune Shirow's confusing, but kinetic and occasionally breathtaking *Appleseed* returns in 25, with Deunan and Briareos still working for Olympus city's police force.

Kobayashi's two strips are both excellent, while 'Shadow Star' is the better of the science fiction strips (though Appleseed will have its fans). All of the strips are being issued in collections after enough material has appeared here.~NF

SUPER POWERS

DC: *5 issue miniseries 1984, 6 issue miniseries 1985-1986, 4 issue miniseries 1986*

A tie-in to promote a line of DC superhero toys. More superheroes than you could shake a stick at team up against Darkseid and his anti-social plans: the most fiendish (in the 1985 series) involving seeds whose roots are burrowing down towards the Earth's core, and which send you back in time if you try to attack them! Profoundly stupid, but at its best, in the first two series, by Jack Kirby, propelled by a narrative drive so raw and powerful that you haven't got time to care.~FC

Recommended: miniseries two 1-6

SUPER SOLDIERS

Marvel UK: *10 issues 1993-1994*

It seems that the formula used to create Captain America was shipped to Britain, and applied there as well. The five tedious, fight-crammed issues uniting those who survived its application ought to have prompted any sensible reader to pack the title in, but from 6 matters improve. The soldiers start to act as a government-sanctioned response team, and there's an injection of humour, making for a readable title. 7's martial arts tournament is the best indicator.~FP

SUPER-TEAM FAMILY

DC: *15 issues 1975-1978*

Despite a silly name, this giant-sized comic featured better-than-average and more unusual superhero team-ups. 1, 4-7 were all reprint and all good stuff, the most notable being 4's reprint of the Justice Society of America tale from *All-Star Comics* 32. All-new material began in 8 with a well-produced revival of the Challengers of the Unknown. 11-14 have team-ups connected with a storyline involving the Atom, and 15 offered the Flash and the New Gods.~HY

SUPER-VILLAIN TEAM-UP

Marvel: *17 issues, 2 Giant-Size 1975-1980*

Starting out with a reprint in Giant Size 1, the second issue featured a new teaming of Dr Doom and the Sub-Mariner who joined to foil the plans of Andro the artificial Man before launching into their series. The quality varied as did the creative teams with four writers and eight artists in 1-10. Doom's constant conniving to have Namor join him seems forced and eventually he begins to share the title with other bad guys such as the Red Skull and Magneto. 9 is part of a crossover with *Avengers* 154-155, pencilled by Jim Shooter, better known as a writer. Eventually the series just fades away, running out of steam long after the readers ran out of interest.~WW

SUPERBOY

DC: *Series one 196 issues, 1 Annual 1949-1973, one-shot 1980, series two (The New Adventures of) 54 issues 1980-1984, series three 22 issues, 1 Special 1990-1992, series four 100 issues, 4 Annuals 1994-2002*

Superboy first appeared in *More Fun Comics* 101 in 1945, and the adventures of Superman as a youngster were popular in several titles thereafter. The stories were set in Smallville, somewhere in Kansas, and supporting characters included Ma and Pa Kent, who'd found the rocket containing Superman as a baby. 10 introduced Superboy's childhood sweetheart Lana Lang, who, like a junior version of Superman's Lois Lane, was always attempting to discover Superboy's identity, convinced he was Clark Kent. Her snooping was the catalyst for many a story. 1-16 were fifty-two pages, but even when the comic shrank to thirty-two pages it still provided three intricately plotted eight page tales with plot prioritised over characterisation and continuity, exactly the reverse of today's material. There was also an innocence leading to the covers of 55 and 75 featuring spanking!

Superboy 5 featured a character called Supergirl, not to be confused with his cousin, introduced later in the 1950s, and 8 offers the first story of Superbaby! As with other Mort Weisinger edited titles, imagination was paramount. 68 provided the origin and first appearance of Bizarro, an imperfect duplicate of Superboy. The less well-remembered Beppo, the Super Monkey arrived in 76, while 78 featured the origin of the imp from the fifth dimension, Mr Mxyzptlk, and 80 has Superboy meeting his cousin Supergirl for the first time. 104 has the origin of The Phantom Zone, the strange dimension where Kryptonian villains were imprisoned. In 124 Lana Lang rescues a passing alien, and in gratitude she's given a ring enabling her to change into any insect she desires, letting her become Insect Queen, a role she unfortunately didn't assume too often. It made a change from her periodically requiring super-powers. The Legion of Super-Heroes also appear, and in 86 their guest spot introduces Smallville schoolboy Pete Ross, who discovers Superboy's secret identity in 90, but keeps it to himself. 89 has the first appearance of Mon-El, originally thought to be Superboy's long-lost older brother from Krypton. Similar to Superboy in all but costume, he would be a mainstay of the Legion of Super-Heroes, and have his own title as *Valor* in the 1990s. 98 debuts another Legion member, Ultra Boy, and in the same issue Pete Ross is accepted as an honorary member. Naturally enough, Insect Queen is also soon accepted.

Throughout the 1950s George Papp, Curt Swan and (primarily) John Sikela were the main pencillers, with pleasing, open styles. Lack of credits makes the identification of writers far more difficult, but Otto Binder was a mainstay, writing the first Bizarro story. As the years passed we learned more about Krypton. Superboy started as the planet's sole survivor, but more and more Kryptonians popped up, making Smallville an unofficial space-port. Assorted Kryptonian artefacts also provided plots. And there was Krypto the Superdog. He was hidden in the same rocket that brought Superboy to Earth, and had the same powers as his master, and, luckily, a strange sort of intelligence for a dog. He couldn't talk, but his thoughts were distinctly human at times! He even joined his version of the Legion of Super-Heroes in 131, The Space Canine Patrol Agents, a superpowered group of dogs in space. They included Chameleon Collie, Tail Terrier, with a stretchy tail, Tusky Husky, who could transform one of his teeth into a long tusk for prying things open; and who could forget Hot Dog, able to heat himself up like a furnace? The main artists during the early 1960s were George Papp, Al Plastino, and the great Curt Swan. None were recognised for dynamic art, but their styles were perfect for the friendly tone of the series. The giant-sized 147 reprinted many older Legion of Super-Heroes tales along with a new story recounting their previously untold origin.

At the end of the 1960s there was an attempt to make DC titles more dramatic. Newcomer Neal Adams, with his realistic graphic style, became the main cover artist, and this reflected a slight change of mood inside as well. In 145 Ma and Pa Kent shed twenty years, now looking more Superboy's parents rather than his grandparents. With 149 Murray Boltinoff became editor, and replaced the long-serving artists with the far more dramatic style of Bob Brown from 150 (further improved by Wally Wood inking 152-155 and 157-161). The stories, while keeping their charm, also received a boost through the writing of Frank Robbins. Boltinoff used many elements introduced by Weisinger, but wasn't as concerned with continuity, running a story in 158 in which Superboy discovers his Kryptonian parents in suspended animation. This tends to be ignored by Superman fans. Lana Lang matured, though Krypto retained his human intellect, and Superbaby stories were never more than a few issues away, with 167's introduction of Murphy Anderson inks to Brown's pencilling an excellent combination.

By now a standard twenty-four pages of stories incorporated a longer Superboy story and a shorter back-up, a slot The Legion of Super-Heroes occupied periodically from 172. That was an uneventful story, but succeeding in reviving interest in the group. The Superboy stories at the time were unmemorable, even with the return of Weisinger-era mainstay Leo Dorfman to the writing, and it was the occasional Legion back-ups from Cary Bates and George Tuska that grabbed the attention. 184 introduced artist Dave Cockrum. He'd been an assistant to Murphy Anderson, whose style was initially very apparent in his work, and Anderson joined his protégé in 188 and 190. Cockrum's flair and stylings transformed the Legion, bringing the strip up to date with a 1970s version of the future rather than the 1950s version used since their introduction, and with 193's redesigned costumes the team finally looked as if they belonged in the 30th-century. 195 introduced Wildfire, and without warning 197 was titled *Superboy starring the Legion of Super-Heroes*, the Legion having almost usurped Superboy's comic, doing so completely with 259. Although it's always imaginative, there is a repetitive quality to *Superboy* material, and readers wanting to sample material from the 1940s to the mid-1960s are best advised to pick up one of the reprint collections. These are 129, 138, 147, 156, 165, 174 and the hundred-page 185. The 1980 one-shot was the first comic produced by a major company specifically for the comic-shop market.

The 1980s series attempted to emulate the fun stories of the 1960s, the period in which it was set, with writing by Cary Bates and art from the great Kurt Schaffenberger. Superboy was sixteen, in keeping with a policy of ageing Superman and Superboy concurrently. This was a strange title for the times, looking back and recycling old scenarios when everything else was geared to moving forward. It was a pleasant enough, and definitely intended for younger readers. The 'Dial H For Hero' feature moved from *Adventure* to this title, between 28 and 49, and became the longest-running back-up. Readers designed brand-new superheroes, into which the lead characters transformed, with the strip written by E. Nelson Bridwell or Bob Rozakis. Superboy's creative team changes to Paul Kupperberg and Alex Saviuk with 36, but the style remains the same. The only issue of note was the giant-sized 50, featuring an entertaining story by Kupperberg, with art by Schaffenberger and framing sequence by Keith Giffen, starring Superboy and the Legion of Super-Heroes, and a young, bald, Lex Luthor. A must.

The next *Superboy* comic tied-in with the TV series, and the continuity bears no relation to the regular comics. Clark Kent and Lana Lang attend Shuster University (a nice homage to Superman's artistic creator Joe Shuster) and Superboy has more or less just discovered his powers and origin, and starts his career at college. Clark is no longer a wimpy schoolboy and Lana is no longer a snoop. Writer John Moore and artist Jim Mooney (later Curt Swan) produce an adequate title, restricted by TV continuity, although 5 features three strange characters from the thirtieth century. The special ties up all loose ends.

Continuity revisions at DC dispensed with the original Superboy (having Clark Kent begin his career as an adult), so the 1990s model is a clone created by the genial scientists at Project Cadmus as a replacement for Superman when the world believed him dead. Introduced in *Adventures of Superman* 501, he simulates Superman's abilities through "tactile telekinesis". Superboy settled in Hawaii without a dual identity, considering himself as a media star rather than a superhero. The supporting cast are Superboy's manager and his daughter, and Dubillex, an alien-looking telepath and telekinetic who also escaped from Project Cadmus, and who looks after a scruffy little dog named Krypto. Superboy is very popular with the girls and was given a contemporary look with shades, leather jacket and a kinky leather belt around his right thigh. 1-30 are largely the work of Karl Kesel and Tom Grummett, inked by Doug Hazlewood, and are a thoroughly entertaining run. 2 introduces Knockout, a red-headed Amazonian with great strength, and 8, as part of the *Zero Hour* crossover, has this Superboy meeting his 1960s counterpart. It's a sad story that pulls the plug on the old Superboy once and for all. Fans of *Suicide Squad* should check 13-15, and history repeats in 18 and 19, with the new Mon-El, now Valor, arriving. 25-30 feature a major story involving Knockout and those Apokolips favourites the Female Furies, with even the new Supergirl looking in for 28. The turbulent relationship between Knockout and Superboy comes to a head in the final chapter. From 31 Ron Marz writes slightly more seriously, but Ramon Demado's more abstract art didn't mesh well. Marz's best effort is 38-41 where young Supes gets a spot, and another and another. Rather than adolescent acne, his DNA is breaking down, and the eventual conclusion ensures he'll never become Superman. Kesel and Grummett return with 50, starting a story based on Kamandi, The Last Boy on Earth. Our young hero finds himself on an island inhabited by intelligent animals. Some would play supporting roles in later issues. Superman bestows a Kryptonian name, Kon-El, on his young protégé in 59, while 60-64 introduce the concept of 'Hyper-Time' to the DC Universe. With the main setting now Project Cadmus, Kesel and Grummett reintroduce other elements of Jack Kirby's *Jimmy Olsen* stories, with his 1940s character, the Guardian, playing a major role. They depart with 79.

After a slight dip in quality, writers Jimmy Palmiotti and Dan Didio take over with 94, with artist John McCrea, now going over the top with the humour. They end the series in good form with Superboy becoming a superintendent of a building. Cue kooky neighbours and situations with the building becoming a catalyst for various misadventures. Unfortunately, this approach wasn't allowed to develop. Overall the series was a decent enjoyable comic, with the best of the annuals being 1995's 'Year One' story dealing with Superboy's origin.~HY

Recommended: Series one 193, 195, series two 50, series four 8, 13-15, 25-30, 50-53

SUPERBOY AND THE LEGION OF SUPER-HEROES

DC: *62 issues (197-258), 1 Treasury Edition 1973-1980*

In 1973 The Legion of Super-Heroes evicted Superboy's feature from his own title. Short strips written by Cary Bates had been appearing periodically, gradually growing in popularity, particularly since the artist had been Dave Cockrum. With 197, and little warning, the cover-title became *Superboy Starring the Legion of Super-Heroes*. With more pages at his disposal, Bates introduced a greater depth, and when combined with Cockrum's excellent storytelling, wonderful sense of design and bright, clear style, there was a renaissance for the Legion. Cockrum also redesigned the 30th-century world occupied by the Legion, giving it a real futuristic look for the first time. 200's wedding was an early pinnacle, signifying that the Legionnaires were getting older and there was a progression to the strip. Sadly, Cockrum only lasted until 202, being lured away to jump-start a similar revival for *X-Men*.

His replacement, was another new artist, Mike Grell, who made an effort to assimilate Cockrum's style before establishing his own look. 203 was also significant for a death, an unpredictable move despite the large cast. The ties with the past remained as the Legion regularly made trips back to the past to visit Superboy, still nominally the star of the comic. After a while, Bates seemed to lose interest, but a shot in the arm was provided with 209, when the writer responsible for many of the Legion's previous glories in *Adventure Comics* returned. Initially, Jim Shooter didn't seem entirely at ease with the new format. Human-interest stories had been his forte, and in 211 he turned in his best when Element Lad, the sole survivor of his planet's destruction, confronts and nearly executes the person responsible. Shooter sparked Bates, and they alternated on scripts, which did produce the occasional clunker such as 217's introduction of an appallingly stereotyped black character with a huge chip on his shoulder. Luckily he wasn't around for too long, and future stories showed a racially integrated society, so perhaps the mistake was for the best. Shooter and Grell both left with 224, Shooter not having lived up to his previous work, and Grell clearly losing any interest. DC's *Legion Archive* editions have now reached this point.

225 introduced a new creative team of Paul Levitz and Jim Sherman, inked by Bob Wiacek. Sherman's graceful figurework suited the strip, and Levitz, formerly a notable fan of the feature, set about making changes. He killed-off an old character, and in 226 introduced Dawnstar, unfortunately another character with a chip on her shoulder. But he did develope individual personalities for each of the Legionnaires, which, considering there were over two dozen of them, was no mean feat. 231 is a particularly good Levitz story, featuring the return of their deadliest foes The Fatal Five, and is a good issue to sample from the late 1970s. There's a new burst of creative energy in 230-240, inspired by Levitz and Sherman, but also from the unlikely team of Gerry Conway and Ric Estrada. Many noted creators dropped by for guest shots, including Walt Simonson (237, not well inked by Jack Abel), Jim Starlin (239) and Howard Chaykin (240), but Mike Nasser's Adamsesque styling was also notable on 231 and 235. Also issued at this time was the oversize treasury edition in which Lightning Lad and Saturn Girl are married. It's not one of Levitz's best scripts, and the art by Grell and Vince Colletta is abysmal. Don't be tempted.

Levitz departed with 245, but his final story in 241-245 was the best Legion epic for years. The Legion had to battle assorted intergalactic races, culminating in the reappearance of a major adversary, Mordru. It's Levitz at his best; a well-paced story packed with action and intrigue, although Sherman left with 242, replaced by Joe Staton. Perhaps not the ideal artist for the feature, he did at least start on a high note. In 248 Gerry Conway marked his lack of imagination with a dull story featuring a creature from the sewers. He sharpened some characters, but this wasn't a golden era. His run was interrupted by 250-251, although Jim Starlin chose to operate under the alias Steve Apollo, not happy with what was produced. He needn't have been ashamed: it was a decent story, with nice artwork, as a Legionnaire becomes totally insane, leading to some interesting later plots. It was also an oasis of quality in a mediocre run. Staton was distressed by a parade of unsuitable inkers, and possibly by a succession of inane plots from Conway. The lack of quality didn't affect sales, and it no longer required Superboy's presence, so from 259 the title became *The Legion of Super-Heroes*.~HY

Recommended: 197-203, 230, 231, 233, 236, 239, 241-245

SUPERBOY AND THE RAVERS

DC: *19 issues 1996-1998*

At the invitation of the mysterious Kindred Marx, Superboy becomes a regular attendee of The Event Horizon, a dimension-hopping party frequented by super powered beings from all known planets. The winner of the 'Worst Name For A Comic Since *Speedball*' Award, this tragic attempt at a 'Youth Culture' comic had its heart in the right place. Any series that attempted to revive the career of Rex the Wonder Dog and Dial H for Hero couldn't be totally evil, but good intentions alone could not save it. Inattentive, unfocussed storylines and decreasingly incompetent substitutes for original artist Paul Pelletier killed it before its second year ended.~HS

SUPERBOY PLUS (The Power of Shazam!), (Slither/Scare Tactics)

DC: *2 issues 1997*

The first issue is dreadful as Captain Marvel Junior hangs out with Superboy, swapping girlfriend and partner stories. 2, by Len Kaminski, Anthony Williams and Andy Lanning is a solid piece of work featuring Slither, as the snake-boy's continuing mutation drives him to infiltrate the Cadmus genetic research Project. Here Superboy is seeking a cure for his own curse of being permanently 16 years old! Unprepossessing fun.~WW

SUPERBOY'S LEGION

DC: *2 issue microseries 2001*

This postulates that Superboy wasn't found until 2987, and so raised in the 31st Century. Rebelling against his adoptive father, R.J. Brande, and the repressive Earth regime, he forms a team of teenaged champions to protect the galaxy. Mark Farmer's script shows an astute grasp of the essential characters, and some novel changes on established faces; his take on the Ranzz twins, Lightning Lad and Light Lass, as bored aristos, is particularly amusing. The pidgin dialogue attributed to the team's only non-human member is unfortunate, and the identity of the villain-behind-the-villains disappointing, but overall the story is very strong, an affectionate homage to the *Adventure*-era Legion without being a slavish copy. Artist Alan Davis is on dazzling form, particularly given the multitude of characters and the necessity of cramming everything into two issues. This is one series that really cried out for a third volume.~HS

Recommended: 1-2

SUPERCOPS

Now Comics: *5 issues 1990*

Abysmal nonsense from Chuck Dixon and Peter Grau as genetically enhanced clones are used as a super S.W.A.T. team to battle crime in the near future. Two rogue clones team up with a 'real' cop to ferret out a conspiracy at the supercop factory, but it's all just a silly excuse for macho posturing and lots of shooting. Predictable and dull.~WW

SUPERFLY

Michael Hunt Publications: *2 issues 1999-2000*

Mike Diana's is an appalling story. He was successfully prosecuted for obscenity in Florida on the basis of his minicomics, forbidden to draw and subject to regular searches of his house to ensure he obeyed. In the midst of the outcry among the comics community about this injustice, the question of whether or not Diana produces anything worthwhile has never come up. He doesn't. His art's as crude as his topics, and the joke name of the publisher qualifies as high wit among the material on offer.~FP

SUPERGIRL

DC: *Series one 10 issues 1972-1974, series two, 23 issues 1982-1984, one-shot ('Movie Special') 1985, one-shot ('...and Team Luthor') 1993, 4 issue miniseries 1994, series three 80 issues, 2 Annuals, one-shot (Supergirl +) 1996-2003, one-shot ('Wings') 2001*

Following lengthy runs in *Action Comics* from 1959, and *Adventure Comics* from 1969, Superman's cousin finally headlined under her own name. Unfortunately, Cary Bates' scripts were mawkish and simplistic, casting Kara as a naïve ingénue rather than the sophisticated career girl she had been in Adventure. In retrospect, the garish covers and silly captions ("I may be the mightiest girl in the world, but I still can't get a date!") have a kitsch appeal, but at the time they were embarrassing. Zatanna the magician backed-up 1-4, and in 5, co-starred with Supergirl as the two of them vie for the affections of the Abominable Snowman. Oh dear, oh dear. A guest-appearance by Prez appropriately terminated this run of tat, and the title was merged with *Lois Lane* and *Jimmy Olsen* to form *Superman Family*.

When that was terminated Supergirl was given another try solo, but with a creative team of Paul Kupperberg, Carmine Infantino, and Bob Oksner, it was doomed from the start. Tepid soap-opera plots and mild-mannered superheroics turned over without ever warming up, and 16 showed any inventiveness with a guest-appearance by Ambush Bug. He jumped to the conclusion that Kara was her cousin Kal after... a certain surgical procedure. Risque for the period, and quite funny. There was a stay of execution preceding 1985's *Supergirl* feature film, but when that tanked, Kara's number was up, and following the movie adaptation, our heroine was killed in *Crisis on Infinite Earths* 7.

The concept was too popular to lie fallow, however, and a new Supergirl, a.k.a. Matrix, a shapeshifting protoplasmic being from another dimension, was introduced in Action Comics 674. The creation of that dimension's heroic Lex Luthor, her limited experiences caused her to fell in love with the malevolent Luthor, She became his super-powered stooge as a member of his task force, Team Luthor. The 1994 miniseries by Roger Stern and June Brigman examined, and eventually terminated, the relationship between Supergirl and Lex, when she discovers his plan to clone her and create a legion of super-slaves.

DC faced a problem in that they perceived a following for a Supergirl, but the one they had, an alien chameleoid blob, didn't generate much in the way of empathy. They resolved this by fusing the Matrix Supergirl with dead teenage bad girl Linda Danvers, to create a composite being. One aspect was a former delinquent whose reformation caused almost as much confusion among her family as her resurrection did; the other was a super-being who, while losing some of the powers she possessed (no longer able to change her appearance beyond switching from Linda to Supergirl, for example), gained others of a mysterious celestial origin. Theology is a difficult subject to tackle in popular media, and it's long been a paradox of comics that evil, and even Satanic, topics, can be portrayed more easily than their divine counterparts. When it's been attempted the results have frequently been awkward. Writer Peter David, who authored the new Supergirl throughout, walked a skilful tightrope between the banal and the offensive. Supergirl is clearly of divine origin despite her specific genesis being a Satanic ritual gone awry, and is accompanied in her adventures by Buzz, a demonic character who is first her enemy, then her ally, with the potential to be something more. Spike to her Buffy, as it were. David lures us in with resurrected DC characters – Chemo, Gorilla Grodd – but is constructing a much more elaborate canvas than simple battles-of-the-month. Gary Frank (1-8*) and then Leonard Kirk (most issues to 74) provide excellent naturalistic artwork, coping admirably with the low-key scenes of characterisation and conversation that are essential to a work of this nature, but well able to pull out the stops when pyrotechnics are required. It has, however, the flaw of very few jumping-on points. It is involved, convoluted, features multiple characters with similar appearances (questions of identity are pivotal to the series), and can actually deter people. 23, a powerful illustration of the necessary evils of freedom of speech, is virtually the only issue in the first 50, barring the debut, that you don't need a degree in the series to 'get'. It's generally excellent work, but unless you're there from the start, you're out of the loop.

In 50, Linda/Supergirl's powers are substantially diminished as her celestial aspect is sundered. Reduced to old style abilities like leaping tall buildings in a single bound, she adopts a new costume based loosely on the animated version, and sets off on a quest to "pull herself together". This continues, rather longer than it ought to have, until 74, and while there is much fun to be had (particularly with recurring guest star Mary Marvel, with whom she's also teamed in Supergirl +), even the most devoted fan eventually starts muttering under their breath, "Get ON with it, will you?". With 75, there is a dramatic change of pace, as Linda/Supergirl discovers, well, Supergirl; a young girl in the classic 1950's costume, possessing vast powers and claiming to be a survivor of Krypton. Seeing contemporary Earth through the eyes of this naïve young visitor, and watching the baffled reactions of Linda and chums as they attempt to help her and solve her mystery, has given the series a real shot in the arm. The very appealing art by Ed Benes (vastly improved since his dismal days as a Mike Deodato impersonator) helps considerably. This new direction is charming entertainment.

The most recent *Supergirl* is a difficult series to recommend. Most issues deter new readers, but read in sequence, the bigger picture becomes clear, and it is a rewarding endeavour. There is intelligence and purpose on display, and Peter David's humour, which he has been criticised for overdoing, is held in check here and used for contrast and relief only. It cannot be wholeheartedly endorsed as 'the absolute best ever', but if a substantial run comes your way, give it a try.

Brief mention should also be made of the Elseworlds one-shot, in which J.M. DeMatteis and Jamie Tolagson take the earth Angel concept and beat readers over the head with it until their ears bleed, in DeMatteis' usual subtle manner. Avoid that.~HS

Recommended: Series three 1-8, 23, 75-77

SUPERMAN

DC: *Series one 423 issues, 12 Annuals, 2 Specials, 1 Spectacular 1939-1986, series two 185 issues +, 12 Annuals, 3 80-Page Giants, 3 Secret Files 1987 to date*

Created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Superman was the first superpowered costumed superhero, spawning generations of imitators. To this day he remains among the most recognisable global cultural icons. After a year's appearances in *Action Comics* had made the comic a runaway bestseller, Superman was given his own quarterly title. It originally featured reprints from *Action*, but soon switched to all new material. There's an undeniable crudeness and simplicity about the early stories, but they had a presence seldom seen in the contemporary comics industry, with Shuster and his assistants producing some fluid work. Siegel never bored the reader, writing well-plotted stories, often with a social slant and well defined characters. By the time of this series the core Superman cast had been established, with *Daily Planet* (initially *Daily Star*) employees Lois Lane, Jimmy Olsen and Perry White (initially George Taylor) all having débuted in Action. The villainous Lex Luthor, still with red hair, made his second ever appearance in 4. By 10 he was bald and resembling the figure we're used to. You can follow all these early exploits in DC's *Superman Archives* series.

The Lois and Clark rivalry was an early element, with the very capable Lois often annoyed and puzzled at being scooped by the seemingly slow Clark Kent. She had no time for Clark, but loved his alter ego, although it wasn't too long before she began suspecting they might be the same person. She was featured in a back-up strip between 28 and 42: simple tales, but they clearly established her tenacious character. The covers were very striking from the start, and the US entry into World War II brought a parade of symbolic patriotic illustrations. One of the best was 14's Superman standing in front of a Stars and Stripes shield with an eagle perched on his shoulder, drawn by Fred Ray. Inside, Superman often showed the Axis powers what for.

30 introduced Mr Mxyztplk, a mischievous magical imp from the fifth dimension who returned to taunt Superman every ninety days or so. That was the length of time he had to remain in the fifth dimension after Superman tricked him into saying his name backwards, the only means by which he could be returned against his will. Superman became more powerful as the series progressed, kept in good shape by the artists from the Shuster studio, including Leo Nowak, Fred Ray and John Sikela as well as Paul Cassidy and Wayne Boring. An important artist was Jack Burnley, whose Superman was chunkier, and whose art had a more polished look than his peers. In 45 Lois gained superpowers for the second time, the first being in *Action* 60, and this was an indication of the direction the *Superman* titles were taking, with whimsical fantasy gradually edging out more reality-based stories.

53's tenth anniversary special expands Superman's originally very short origin story. The infant Kal-El is rocketed to Earth by his parents in order that he survives the destruction of his home planet, Krypton, Earth's yellow sun endowing him with superpowers. Wayne Boring, now becoming the primary *Superman* artist, drew the story, and writer Siegel seemingly forgot Superman's career as Superboy, despite the character having run in *Adventure Comics* for two years by that point. And not let's forget all those Superbaby tales! Superman's Kryptonian heritage would come to play an increasing role, with 61 introducing green Kryptonite, a mineral fragment from Krypton that was deadly to Superman when he was exposed to it. 65 featured some villains who'd also survived Krypton's destruction, and with the amount of Kryptonians who'd turn up throughout the 1950s it sometimes seemed those who died were the minority. 76 was another landmark, featuring the first teaming of Superman and Batman, who within two years would pair regularly in *World's Finest Comics* (where, at this point, they occupied separate strips).

The 100th issue was celebrated by our hero appearing in a full-length story rather than in three separate stories. The stories may have been light on characterisation in today's terms, but the amount of plot and action packed into eight pages forms a lesson in economy that many contemporary writers might benefit from learning. A prototype of Superman's cousin, Supergirl appeared in 123, a temporary creation made possible through magic, but the real thing would débul a year later in Action 252. Other long-running supporting characters introduced in the late 1950s included Lori Lemaris (129), the mermaid from Atlantis, and Titano (127) the giant super-ape. Both appeared well into the 1960s. Time-travel tales had also become popular, and 141 is notable for a Siegel story in which Superman visits Krypton before it exploded and romances a film star.

Long-time editor Mort Weisinger exerted a tight control, and was heavily involved in plotting the stories. Via additions to the mythos he ensured Superman's continuing popularity. Issues from the early 1960s pioneered the 'imaginary' story, where the writers could place Superman into situations that would otherwise compromise continuity. A classic of its time is 149's 'The Death of Superman', in which Lex Luthor succeeds in poisoning Superman with Kryptonite. It features some marvellous scenes, particularly the procession of mourners passing Superman's body as it lies in state. 162's 'The Amazing Story of Superman Red and Superman Blue' is also fondly recalled. Superman is split into two people, one of whom wears a red costume, and the other a blue costume. One marries Lois Lane, and one marries Lana Lang (Superman's childhood sweetheart), thus solving the problem of which of them he really loved. In 170 there's a story in which Luthor travels back in time before Krypton explodes, in order to wine and dine Superman's mother, but luckily the marriage is stopped just in time. That issue also contains a story featuring John Kennedy and intended for publication before his assassination, with Kennedy stressing the importance of physical fitness and exercise.

If you can tune in to the peculiar world that had evolved around Superman there are a number of other classics. 'The Last Days of Superman' (156) has Superman apparently dying of a Kryptonian plague, and is a heart-tugging homage, while 161 features the death of Superman's adopted parents, Ma and Pa Kent, and 164 has a showdown between Superman and Luthor, introducing a world where Luthor would become a hero. By now Curt Swan was the major *Superman* artist, a perfect storyteller whose work was raised even further when inked by George Klein. Wayne Boring still has his moments, though. One of them is 'Krypton Lives Again' (189), where Superman once more returns to Krypton before it's destroyed. 199 is the first race between Superman and the Flash, and 204's cover, by Neal Adams, heralds a new era. In 205 villain Black Zero claims responsibility for the destruction of Krypton. It's been disregarded by fans, but stands as a decent story. Editor Mort Weisinger bowed out with an imaginary story in 230-231, with Clark Kent as a killer and Lex Luthor superpowered.

233 was the most dramatic turning-point since the inception of the *Superman* title. New editor Julius Schwartz appointed Denny O'Neil as writer, and while retaining Swan as pencil artist, formed an inspired team by introducing Murphy Anderson as inker until 270. The story has the transformation of all green Kryptonite on Earth into iron, thus wiping out at a stroke a recurring old plot. Of course, this left Superman almost invulnerable to harm, but that was also dealt with as an other-dimensional creature seeped off some of Superman's powers, thereby limiting his activities. Clark Kent was also modified and transferred to TV reporting. O'Neil wrote some decent stories about a Superman who now had to expend some effort, with Cary Bates, Len Wein and Elliot Maggin chipping in. It was Maggin who wrote one of the best stories of the era, 247, where Superman is taken to task for interfering too much with humanity's destiny. New characters from this era with a lasting appeal included Steve Lombard, sports correspondent and practical joker, and Terra Man, a Western-themed villain introduced in 249. 241-253 were at least forty-eight page comics, with back-up strips including 'The Private Life of Clark Kent' and 'The World of Krypton', and plenty of good 1940s reprints. 245 and 252 are 100 pages, with the latter of particular note. It reprints very early Lex Luthor appearances, and two strips by Lou Fine, whose work is as legendary as it is unavailable. His dynamic graphic design and flowing figures were startling in the 1940s, and continue to influence to this day. This period was a well-considered attempt by DC to force what was still their top selling title into the 1970s.

Writers Bates and Maggin were rarely outstanding, although Bates' Star Sapphire story in 261 was a treat. Maggin's best returned the flavour of the 1960s with a story about Krypto the Super-Dog in 287. The essence of the early 1970s restoration was lost by then, and Superman was again all-powerful, with only magic able to affect him. When teamed, though, Bates and Maggin did produce excellent stories, each obviously sparking the other. 296-299 have Superman losing his abilities when in Clark Kent mode, leading to some interesting situations and a redefinition of Kent, and their 300 has a story of Superman in the 21st century. 'The Second Coming of Superman' in a 1977 Spectacular has a teaming of the villainous Brainiac and Luthor and involves an alien race that regard Superman as a God. It's a well-paced story by Bates, assisted by Martin Pasko, who contributed to 310-335. Pasko's stories worked by treating the superheroics as secondary to the soap opera content, with Lois having given up on Superman to start a relationship with Clark Kent. 314 has a story in which Clark proposes marriage, and Lois accepts on the condition he admits to being Superman, but he doesn't. Lana Lang also plays a larger part, complicating matters, and she's more assertive than previously, and there's a professional and personal rivalry between her and Lois. For those who wanted to see Lois and Superman married, 327 began the back-up strip 'Mr And Mrs Superman', starring the 1940s Clark and Lois, who married and are now designated as living on Earth 2. In 330 Pasko tackles the topic of how Superman has disguised his identity all these years with just a pair of glasses. It's to do with super-hypnosis affecting the subconscious mind of all who encounter Kent. It's all mumbo-jumbo, and the fans refused to believe it, but it's merely a blip in Pasko's efforts, which remain an underrated run.

Assorted writers from 336 maintain a level of competence. The romantic situations between Clark/Superman and Lois and Lana run through most permutations, with the occasional surprise provided by Lana's alien would-be suitor Vartox, who's based on Sean Connery's *Zardoz* movie character. The Cary Bates written 365-368, featuring The Superman Revenge Squad, stand out from the surrounding issues, as do 385-387, which continue from *Action* 554. Beginning with the retirement of Lex Luthor, it's a powerful story that eventually transforms him into an even more vengeful villain. 400 is an excellent anniversary issue, written by Elliot Maggin and featuring pin-ups and stories by some of the best comic creators then working, including Frank Miller, Al Williamson, Mike Kaluta and Jim Steranko. 411 is a personal tribute to editor Julius Schwartz on his seventieth birthday, illustrated by the old art team of Swan and Anderson, and 414 has Superman dealing with the death of Supergirl (killed in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*). Supergirl's death was a symbolic end to an era, or would have been if not for the superb Alan Moore and Curt Swan story that concluded the run. 423's 'Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?'* was the ultimate imaginary story, featuring almost everyone in the Superman legend, written by Moore in nostalgic and reverential fashion. It ends with the apparent death of Superman. Or does it? The story continued in *Action* 583*, and one couldn't ask for a better finale.

This wasn't the first Superman story written by Moore, though, as he and Dave Gibbons had produced annual 11, another imaginary story showing what might have happened had Krypton not exploded, leaving Kal-El to be brought up there by his family. Other specials of note are the first in 1983, written and drawn by Gil Kane, who also drew annual 10. Anyone wanting a flavour of *Superman* through the decades can't do better than pick up the DC/Titan collection *The Greatest Superman Stories Ever Told*. Once Superman had been overhauled, the numbering continued as *Adventures of Superman*.

Following his revamping of Superman in the *Man of Steel* miniseries, *Superman* was restarted with a first issue. John Byrne wrote and drew 1-22 (though Mike Mignola pencilled 18 and 23), maintaining a high standard throughout, helped by inkers Terry Austin and Karl Kesel. Byrne tried to take Superman back to basics, taking a lead from *Superman: The Movie*. Clark Kent never became Superboy as his powers began to manifest during his late teens, and he was definitely the only survivor of Krypton. Gone also is the mild-mannered Clark Kent. This worked at first, but in hindsight was a major mistake. A fundamental appeal of the strip was the bumbling Clark Kent that everyone could identify with being Superman. Now he was successful in both personas, with Kent redefined as an ex-college football star – i.e. Superman with glasses! Lex Luthor was the recipient of a major workover as well, and this has been a sustained success. He's no longer the mad scientist, but now a rather ruthless billionaire industrialist who resents Superman presence in Metropolis. While presenting an acceptable public front, he's not above the kidnap and torture of Lana Lang in 2 to find more information about Superman. Luthor is the star in perhaps Byrne's strongest story, a back-up in 9 where Luthor offers a waitress a million dollars to come back to Metropolis with him for one month. The poor girl has the dilemma of whether to go or stay with her husband.

Byrne's version of the Joker in 9 is also good, and his run is littered with updated versions of old heroes and villains. 11 returns Mr Mxyzptlk, who causes all kinds of mayhem, yet fits this new Superman's world as easily as he did the old. Mermaid, Lori Lemaris is reintroduced in 12, and 18 is a touching story, in which Superman returns to Krypton and dreams of the world that he has lost. 22 features a new Supergirl, and caused outrage among older *Superman* readers because Byrne had Superman execute three Kryptonian villains from another dimension. Superman had not killed since his early appearances, but when the villains threatened to destroy Earth he saw no other option. His anguish at this deed, however played an important part in his development and reaffirmed the reasons why he'll never kill again. While establishing the old Superman was gone forever, this confirmed to some that Byrne's understanding of the character didn't coincide with theirs.

With 23 Roger Stern takes over as scripter and produces little of note. He's helped through his first issue by the lovely art team of Mike Mignola and P. Craig Russell, and from 24 the art is in the capable hands of Kerry Gammill. Story quality increases as Jerry Ordway writes from 34, and when he starts drawing from 36 as well, there is some genuine distinction. 37 offers a homage to Jack Kirby's run on *Jimmy Olsen* with an appearance by the Newsboy Legion, and Olsen as Elastic Lad. Jimmy soon becomes a major supporting character again. There's a distinct upheaval in 49-50, when Clark, after waiting over fifty years, proposes to Lois Lane, and Lois says "Yes".

From 51 editor Mike Carlin introduced cover triangles. Carlin had reintroduced Weisinger's system of stories plotted editorially given to the creative teams, except portions now appeared in each *Superman* comic. Entire stories continued from one title to another, leading to confusion among readers. The numbered cover triangle indicated the sequence to follow. While the system provided a four or five part story over a single month, different creative teams on each chapter led to contrasting interpretations of characters, particularly artistically. In 'Time and Time Again' (54-55*) Superman is bounced backwards and forwards through time. The action is fast-paced and very well planned, and in this title there's a memorable World War II tale and a meeting with the Demon in Camelot. It's also the final Jerry Ordway story, and from 58 Dan Jurgens is writer and penciller, introducing Agent Liberty in 60. He becomes a solid supporting character and alternative Metropolis superhero. Jurgens also gives old supporting characters, Pete Ross and Lana Lang a new lease of life.

'Doomsday' (74-75*) affected all Superman titles, as the infamous 75 sees the death of the world's greatest hero. Drawn in one-panel pages, the action is gripping, with the ending living up to the promotional hype. It was a well thought-out and executed plot, and there hasn't been a better story in this title since. It propelled *Superman* back to the attention of the comic-buying public, and received enormous media attention. 'Funeral for a Friend'* and 'Reign of the Supermen'* then run through all *Superman* titles, featuring four characters who may or may not be Superman, each title concentrating on one of them. Here it's the cyborg Superman, whose methods were not only harsh, but prompted by ulterior motives, revealed in 81. The climax features the return of a certain red and blue clad hero. Well, you just can't keep a good character down!

90-91 have Luthor wrecking Metropolis, and Clark Kent is slowly hunted down by an old nemesis leading up to 'The Death of Clark Kent' in 100. By this time most stories were being made available as collections after a while. 106-108* have Superman blamed for Krypton's destruction. The death of a major supporting character prompts Lois to reconsider becoming Mrs Superman and, after lots of soul-searching, off she goes in 115. Superman tracks her down in 118 where after lots of soul-searching she changes her mind. So after nearly sixty years Clark (Superman) Kent finally marries Lois Lane, although it's in the one-shot 'Wedding Album', and the world lost one of its enduring love triangles. And it's been downhill ever since.

After marrying Superman off, how do you keep interest? Give him new powers and a costume of course, dragged out far too long in 123-135. There's a homage to the old Superman Red/Superman Blue tale from the 1960s, but far more interesting is the birth of Luthor's daughter, Lena, who will play a major role. In 142 Superman decides he hasn't time to be Clark Kent anymore, so it's Superman full-time aided by his super-robots, who decide it's time for a new world order. Jurgens' last issue is 150 and he was successful in keeping all the crossover storylines going. Walt Simonson's homage to the classic 'Kryptonite No More' from 233 in the 1992 special is worth mentioning, but most annuals are based on the company-wide theme of the year, and read like fill-ins. The best in 1998 explores the issue of Superman executing the villains in 22. The two 1999 80-Page Giants offer a wide variety of tales and art styles and are worth looking at.

Jeph Loeb starts well in 151 by having Lois make a secret deal with Luthor, but the pseudo-manga art from this point is totally unsuitable, leaving penciller Ed McGuinness terribly miscast, and not helped by the self-indulgent colouring. The title sometimes bears the hallmarks of the kid with the new paintbox, and it's a hideous mess. Still, if you really concentrate, Loeb writes a few good stories. Due to a Y2K virus Metropolis is transformed into a space-age looking city, Luthor becomes President of the United States, and Superman's newer origin is now in doubt with the emergence of the old style Krypton. And Krypto the super-dog is back. After the events of the 'Our Worlds at War' crossover, Superman adopts a slightly darker costume to reflect the sign of the times, which was an unfortunate coincidence given the September 11th attacks of that year. One bit of good news is there's no longer a need for cover triangles from 177. Loeb ends his run in 183 by having Clark Kent fired from *The Daily Planet*. New writer Geoff Johns starts off with the first part of a 'Return to Krypton' crossover (sigh). Followed by yet another (yawn) crossover, 'Ending Battle'. What's it all about? Who cares? The art, now by Pascual Ferry, hasn't improved, and currently the only interesting thing about *Superman* is the continuing machinations of Lex Luthor. The average issue now sells fewer than 35,000 copies, which is disgracefully low for an internationally recognised icon. Still, it's nothing to be surprised about.~HY

Recommended: Series one 53, 141, 149, 156, 162, 164, 168, 170, 189, 205, 233, 247, 249, 261, 296-299, 385-387, 400, 423, 1977 Spectacular, series two 9, 75

The Adventures of SUPERMAN

DC: *187 issues + (0, 424-609) 9 Annuals 1987 to date*

With the relaunch of Superman in 1987 the original *Superman* title was renamed, but continued its numbering. Clark Kent is back at *The Daily Planet*, learning to work with Lois Lane all over again, but initially courted by single mother, Catherine Grant. Other changes include having Clark's foster parents, the Kents, still alive on their farm and Lex Luthor as a corporate leader, whose authority and plans are undermined by the appearance of someone who provides support to Metropolis without charging for it. *Daily Planet* editor Perry White has a troubled son, who's used by Luthor to undermine both Perry and Superman, and there's a new champion of the underdog in Metropolis, called Gangbuster, in reality social worker Jose Delgado, who is also seeking Lois' affections.

Initially these stories are told by Marv Wolfman and Jerry Ordway (to 435), then by Byrne and Ordway (436-442), until Ordway becomes writer and penciller with 445. His stocky, slightly stiff figures create a link to the Superman of the past, whilst depicting his new life in Metropolis and the DC Universe. This includes, for example, Batman and Superman swapping secret identities in 440 and the unfolding mystery of Supergirl (from 439) A hint of things to come appears with 444, which is part of the concluded Supergirl story in *Superman* 21 and 22.

With 455, the series begins to be associated much more with the other *Superman* titles (*Action* and *Superman*, at first, then *Man of Steel*), following the introduction of the Cleric, the Eradicator, Mongul and Warworld. At the same time, Dan Jurgens becomes regular penciller before also picking up the scripting as well with 460 (until 478). One major storyline was the attempts by the Eradicator to recreate Krypton on Earth, while Jurgens even slips in a homage to the Fantastic Four (466), in which things don't go as well for the adventurers, but Clark's engagement to Lois happens off-title. From 474 (1991), an extra number was added to each of the Superman titles, ordering them sequentially through the year. Though this didn't immediately mean all stories continued into the other titles (the Linear Men are introduced here, with Superman meeting the Legion of Super-Heroes, 476-478), issues like 480 ('Last Son of Krypton') and 484-485 (two parts of 'Blackout') were soon more common than not.

Ordway returned to write 480-500, and Tom Grummett became regular penciller (to 506), covering storylines such as 'Panic In The Sky' (488-489), in which Brainiac attacks Earth with Warworld, leaving Matrix as Supergirl at the end of it. Others involving Blaze and Lord Satanus (493), Kismet (494), and Doomsday and the Death of Superman (497-500). 501-504 cover the 'Reign of the Supermen', starting with Superboy, but closely linked to the master story throughout the titles. Karl Kesel is writer from 501, beginning his association with Superboy, but from this point on there are even fewer single-issue stories. A major villain, Conduit, is introduced in the zero issues, threatening Superman's friends and family, with the storyline continuing into the regular issues, concluding in 523-525. Barry Kitson (507-513, 515-519) and then Stuart Immonen (from 520), become regular pencillers, the latter staying until 550, though there are a number of fill-ins during his run. After Grummett's return to draw 551-556 and 559-562, attempts to keep a regular creative team on the title are abandoned for a couple of years. As far as the plots were concerned, Lori Lemaris shows up in Clark's life to complicate his relationship with Lois and in 545 Superman turns blue (not with cold, unfortunately, but as his powers change). For a while we have both Superman Red and Superman Blue, leading into the 'Millennium Giants' storyline (556) and the *Superman Forever* one-shot. From 564, Superman, under the influence of Dominus, takes a more pro-active approach to crime, trying to prevent it, rather than stopping it after the event, and this leads to the 'King of the World' one-shot. 572 introduces Strange Visitor, a female version of Superman Blue, 574 features Obsession claiming to be Mrs Superman, and 576 is part three of 'Y2K', which sees Metropolis being transformed into a futuristic city by Brainiac. 583 is part of the 'Emperor Joker' storyline, as the Joker remoulds the world to suit his desires and 584 is the start of Lex Luthor's run for the Presidency.

With 586, the *Superman* titles revert to more self-contained tales, though keeping the annual numbering, with 586-588 featuring Lord Satanus by J. M. DeMatteis and Patrick Zircher, 592-596 featuring 'Strange Visitor', by Joe Casey and Mike Wieringo and 603-605 pitching Superman into battle against Brainiac with help from Superwoman and Owlman. 589, 591 and 593-595, however, are parts of 'Return to Krypton', 'Infestation' and 'Our Worlds at War' respectively. Casey appears to have settled as regular writer (from 588), working with artists Derec Aucoin (590, 597, 608-609), Wieringo (592-596, 600) and the excellent (though arguably unsuited), Carlos Meglia (603-605) amongst others.

Quite apart from the plots generally crossing over into the other Superman titles, Adventures additionally shoehorns crossovers with major DC events. The first Annual, by Jim Starlin and Jurgens has a dull "alien comes to Earth to eat brains" plot, the second, written by Jurgens and illustrated by half-a-dozen different artists crosses over with the *L.E.G.I.O.N. '90 Annual* and the third is an *Armageddon 2001* crossover by Louise Simonson and Brian Hitch, telling of an alternate future, in which Superman succumbs to Maxima's charms. In keeping with other DC annuals, 4-9 follow that year's theme, with only the last, featuring stories and artwork from John Rozum and Alcatena, Mike W. Barr and Dale Eaglesham, Paul Grist and Enrique Villagran, on the topic of weird westerns, at all interesting.

Jurgens, Grummett, Kitson and Immonen all produce satisfying interpretations of Superman, more or less polished, depending on the inkers, but equally unremarkable, maintaining something of 'house' look for one of DC's more important characters. Since 570 and in the *Superman* titles generally, artists with more of a manga style have been hired, creating more diversity, but also some controversy, along the way. After its first few years, *Adventures* exists only as part of a family of *Superman* titles, with only the artwork (sometimes) to distinguish it. Whether or not this is a problem for potential readers, depends on their willingness to embrace all those titles or wait for stories that will be started and completed here. Many issues appear in collections, but these generally gather all segments of a particular story from the various titles it's seeped into.~NF

SUPERMAN ADVENTURES

DC: *66 issues, 1 Annual 1996-2002*

Based on the Warner Brothers animated TV show, this Superman's adventures are not set in DC continuity. Clark Kent and his friends get the pared-down cartoon design treatment, as do familiar adversaries like Luthor, Brainiac, Metallo, Toyman, General Zod, Mr Mxyzptlk and The Parasite as well as new villains like Livewire. 1 is written by cartoon show director Paul Dini with art by Ty Templeton, after which Scott McCloud provides an excellent run in 2-13 drawn by Rick Burchett and inker Terry Austin. Their initial flair is supplanted by plot driven stories that any number of scripters can easily achieve. The art mainly falls to either Neil Vokes or the fluent Aluir Amancio. Vokes clearly doesn't want to draw in cartoon style and so delivers a series of unchallenging superhero stories, broadly-inked by Austin, where the main character's head is shaped like a flat-iron. Among the more notable writers there's Mark Evanier in 14, 15, 42, 53, the latter two guest-starring Mr Miracle, Dean Motter in 51, 54, 55 and the team of Evan Dorkin and Sarah Dyer write the one-off *Supergirl Adventures* (21) along with 39, 65 and 66. Mark Millar fans might want to check 16, 41, 52, and most issues between 19 and 38. The Annual guest-stars Zatara and Doctor Fate, and is by Hilary Bader with art by Joe Staton. 1-6 are available as a collection, but this is often less than super after 13.~SW

SUPERMAN FAMILY

DC: *59 issues (164-222) 1974-1982*

This giant-sized comic continued the numbering from *Jimmy Olsen*. From 164-181 it was mostly reprint, with a new lead feature alternating between Jimmy Olsen, Lois Lane and Supergirl. On becoming a dollar comic with 182, it was new material all the way, starring the three previous leads, with new ones such as the witty Krypto (182-192), Nightwing and Flamebird (182-194), set in the bottle city of Kandor, and the most impressive Mr and Mrs Superman (from 195), starring the Golden-Age Superman and Lois Lane, set in the 1950s.

The three main features were disappointing on the whole, lacking the charm of their 1960s tales, with the exception being a Supergirl/Doom Patrol team-up in 191-193. While the title used many of the elements which made the Superman mythos such a success, it didn't add anything.~HY

SUPERMAN Graphic Novels and One-shots

Superman's oversize and expensive one-shots generally offer a poor return, many not matching the contemporary standards of his regular titles. The fault can be squarely laid at the feet of writers content to coast, while the art is generally of a high standard.

The format of choice for 1970s specials was the oversize "treasury". These were largely reprints, but beware *Superman Salutes the Bicentennial*, with Superman on the cover and Tomahawk inside. 1976 provided a landmark as Superman teamed with Spider-Man, the first inter-company crossover. Gerry Conway concocts a workable plot fully involving the respective characters' supporting casts that brought out the best in artist Ross Andru, who delivered a sense of scale commensurate with the format. The slightly smaller sized sequel written by Jim Shooter wasn't as good. Exclusively at DC Superman encountered Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel, then cover-featured as "Shazam", and Mohammed Ali. The best by far, and a beacon to this day is *Superman vs Mohammed Ali*. Denny O'Neil's plot is enjoyable hokum about a contest to determine Earth's champion to fend off an alien invasion, but the art produced by Neal Adams at the peak of his enthusiasm still impresses. Adams even drew well over a hundred and fifty ringside likenesses of celebrities and fellow comic creators for a wraparound cover. It would be 1988 until the next Superman graphic novel, 'The Earth Stealers'. It's curiously old-fashioned nonsense from John Byrne and Curt Swan complete with goofy looking aliens and Earth being, well, stolen.

Adaptations of the third and fourth *Superman* movies, neither considered the best of the canon, reflect the films themselves and seem to have been created in a hurry. *Under a Yellow Sun* is partially presented as a thriller novel by Clark Kent, juxtaposed with and reflecting Superman's attempts to prevent Luthor smuggling weapons into Metropolis. Eduardo Barreto turns in some nice pages for the novel sections, and John Francis Moore's writing ranks this among the better one-shots. Michael Gilbert's cartoony Superman won't be to all tastes, but Mann and Superman is a simple story well told. A small-time hoodlum exchanges bodies with Superman, and the experience conforms to neither's expectations while imparting some lessons about life. Life lessons also feature in the resolutely ordinary 'The Odyssey', an untold tale of Clark Kent's early adult life.

Superman for Earth aimed to increase ecological awareness, but is so relentlessly hectoring that conversions must have been few. The inside cover specifies the recycled paper content of the comic, leading one to wonder about the recycled content of regular DC comics. Mark Millar writes 'For the Animals' attempting to discourage kids from cruelty to animals. It's hardly compulsory reading. Despite the title, 'Save The Planet' has no ecological message. A new owner purchases *The Daily Planet* newspaper, seemingly intent on closing it down, as Superman has to deal with a potentially planet destroying meteor shower. The obvious simile is indicative of the overall quality. The best feature is Kevin Nowlan's acetate overlay cover on the pricier edition. It's one of several *Superman* one-shots since the early 1990s tying into the continuity of his regular titles. 'The Wedding Album' has the preparations for Clark Kent's wedding to Lois Lane, and the ceremony itself. It covers all nuptial bases, rids Kent of his ridiculous ponytail, and those who consider the Superman cast old friends will enjoy ninety-one pages of well produced soap opera from over thirty creators. If only the same could be said of 'Y2K', a dull lead-in to a story in the regular titles about an advanced Brainiac. 1998's *Superman Red Superman Blue* splits Superman into two beings. It's very ordinary, but comes with a pair of 3-D glasses to view the 3-D cover and a reprint of the daft 1953 *3-D Superman*. That's not to be confused with *Superman 3-D* from 1998, by which time the effects have improved considerably, making for a nifty novelty on a mediocre story. Even the normal pages view well through the 3-D glasses. The split Superman is restored in *Superman Forever*, the highpoint of which is the well designed lenticular animation cover of Clark Kent switching identities, drawn by Alex Ross. Inside then regular Superman creators take turns at a plot largely concerned with locating Luthor's baby. If you liked the regular titles in 1998, you'll like this. Luthor's baby also cranks the plot in the hardback 'End of the Century', set at the millennium with roots in the previous millennium. It's largely the work of Stuart Immonen, whose yellow and brown toned pages depicting the past are excellent, but it hardly delivers a level of entertainment commensurate with the $25 cover price.

Secret Files offer short stories and pin-up pages with text background information on characters, and are united by the fact that Superman's most prominent participation is generally his name on the cover. *Team Superman* delves into the backgrounds of Steel, Superboy, Supergirl and their friends and foes, while Metropolis showcases the architecture of Superman's hometown as it was in 2000. *Our Worlds at War* is only notable for ten pages of impressive art by Alberto Saichann, a blend of the Filipino style, early Image and Frank Miller. The best *Secret Files* treatment is *Superman Villains*, which details the origins of the villains comprising the Superman Revenge Squad, plaguing Superman in 1998. Writer and artist Stuart Immonen portrays the origins in the form of Little Nemo in Slumberland, making for a charming gimmick. As a bonus there's Evan Dorkin's presentation of the Toyman's novelty catalogue. Toyman is the subject of another one-shot, decently drawn by Immonen, the slim *Superman/Toyman:* 'Playing Rough'. Seemingly issued to promote a new line of Superman toys, it's unremarkable. 'King of the World' has Superman establishing a virtual dictatorship while his robots search for a villain able to alter reality. Hmmmm, perhaps all is not what it seems. Artist Dougie Braithwaite is good, but this is otherwise ordinary. 'Where Is Thy Sting?' is wretched. It features the tedium of Superman purging his inner guilt and Lois Lane's height changing from panel to panel among many sloppy pages from coasting artist Liam McCormack-Sharp. Not that he had much to work with.

Post Spider-Man, Superman has largely avoided associating with other characters for single issue specials. *Superman Plus* teams Superman with the 30th Century Legion of Super-Heroes, temporarily stranded in 1997, but it's uncharacteristically unimaginative from Tom Peyer. Superman and Savage Dragon team twice. 'Metropolis' has the ghost of Jack Kirby hovering throughout. While not bad, it recycles Kirby ideas, lacks his imagination and offers more to *Savage Dragon* fans than *Superman* lovers. The treasury sized *Superman Fantastic Four* has a cosmic powered Superman, Galactus and the Eradicator, but is the usual Dan Jurgens combination of decent art and ho-hum story.

Elseworlds stories star alternate Supermen and were called "imaginary stories" in the 1960s, when they occasionally graced Superman's regular titles rather than being premium-priced items. They broadly fall into two groupings: those where Superman arrived on Earth during an earlier time, and those where he arrived on another world. A subset of both has Superman's story merged with another familiar scenario such as *Speeding Bullets*, a daft effort where the infant Superman is raised by Bruce Wayne's parents to become Batman. They're disappointing, largely replaying a recognisable story with a paucity of imagination, and on the rare occasions when the tale moves a step beyond a reflection of Superman's established history, originality is at a premium. 'Distant Fires', for instance, while displaying fine art from Gil Kane and Kevin Nowlan, is writer Howard Chaykin not bothering to extend himself beyond science-fiction clichés. José Luis García-Lopez draws *Kal*, Superman re-cast in Medieval times, while A Nation Divided offers Civil War action, and in The Superman Monster a Viktor Luthor creates Superman. None of them impress. Roy Thomas is blessed with Ted McKeever as artist splicing the Superman cast into *Metropolis*, creating a dark and gloomy world that matches Lang's film, and with good art from Michael Lark in re-telling the Superman story in the context of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*. Both are the upper end of the quality scale for Superman Elseworlds. 'At Earth's End' continues from the *Kamandi* miniseries of the same name. Kamandi is absent, and while it doesn't rely on the familiar myth, it's hardly compelling. *Superman Inc*, has excellent art by Garcia-Lopez and Mark Farmer, but what lifts it above all other Elseworlds *Superman* is a decent plot. Steve Vance casts one Clark Suderman parlaying sports star status into becoming a media tycoon who creates a superhero TV show. The primary elements of the Superman story are present and correct, but deftly twisted by Vance in a good read. *Son of Superman*, is also a good read, although co-writer Howard Chaykin has covered similar territory better elsewhere. In the near future Superman has disappeared, but solar activity awakens abilities in his son. Terrorists wage war against a totalitarian government in Superman's name, the Justice League is federally funded and Luthor is up to his neck in old tricks. Solid art from the team of J.H. Williams and Mick Gray round off a decent package, but not so good you should buy the hardback edition.

The flip of Elseworlds is *Realworlds*, a story about how the fictional Superman legend might impact on the real world. Here a man's life is shaped by a Superman symbol. It's the weakest of the *Realworlds* stories (the others starring Batman, the JLA and Wonder Woman), playing out in predictable fashion beyond the shocking first appearance of the symbol. The real world is also the theme of 'Peace on Earth', a return to the treasury format. It's the answer to an often-posed question: If Superman is all-powerful, why doesn't he sort out Earth's continuing problems, like hunger? Alex Ross provides a wealth of iconic images, overlaid by Paul Dini's first person narrative and the eventual conclusion is neither cop-out nor fantasy, although a sad comment on mankind. 'Peace on Earth' was aggressively, and possibly over-promoted on release, increasing sales at the cost of undermining integrity. It shouldn't be an easy read, and in keeping with the tone Ross donated the profits from selling the original artwork to charity. Good on him.

The hook for 'The Last God of Krypton' was artwork by renowned fantasy painters Greg and Tim Hildebrandt. Thankfully they can tell a story, but while it's diverting to see Elvis cast as Superman their art is so heavily reliant on posed photo-reference it has a static gloss. Furthermore frozen exaggerated reaction is both laughable and distracting, occasionally drawing the eye away from the focal point of a panel. Walt Simonson's story about a threat from Krypton isn't his best either.~FP

Recommended: *Superman Inc, Superman vs Mohammed Ali*, 'Peace on Earth'

SUPERMAN: The Man of Steel

DC: *6 issue miniseries 1986, 135 issues (0-134), 6* ***Annuals*** *1991-2003*

When DC revised Superman in 1986, they suspended publication of both *Superman* and *Action Comics* and replaced them with *Man of Steel*. This miniseries rewrote the Kryptonian's history in such a way that much of the copious back-story was sidelined rather than simply deleted. John Byrne, both writing and drawing, detailed Superman's history from first appearance to discovering his origins, and laid some highly specific groundwork for the relaunch. He also formally acknowledged the power of the traditional supporting cast. Each issue takes the viewpoint of a different figure from the mythology and spotlights a key event. 1 introduces the new interpretation of Jor-El and Krypton, then gives way to the modern representation of America's heartland and the Kents who reared the boy who would become Superman. 2 introduces Lois Lane and shows Superman's first public feat. 3 has the first meeting with a decidedly hostile Batman, 4 the first clash with a much more evil Lex Luthor, and 5 is an especially poignant reworking of the original Bizarro story, discarding years of slapstick nonsense. In 6 Lana Lang and Pa Kent save Superman from falling victim to his own Kryptonian heritage. It's a smart and thrilling series that still serves as a reminder of what a good Superman comic can be. When publication of the regular Superman comics resumed, with the addition of a third title, despite being all-new, the character was established as still and already the World's Greatest Hero.

The title was retained for the first expansion of the Superman franchise since Byrne's relaunch, enabling DC to present to all intents and purposes a Superman adventure every week. It also shoe-horned itself into the peculiar double numbering "triangle" system adopted in the interests of clarity with subplots crossing between the various Superman titles. *Man of Steel* 1, therefore, was also 1991's nineteenth instalment of *Superman*. Although a putatively pedantic point, it is the root cause of the seeming lack of cohesive identity typical for so long of many Superman tales. Creators Louise Simonson and Jon Bogdanove start impressively enough, introducing new characters and Cerberus, a major new villain, and a subplot about a strike at *The Daily Planet* that harks back to a more socially relevant time for the character. A *War of the Gods* crossover intrudes in 3, but otherwise the creators are left pretty much alone to settle in before the perpetual overlap of plot threads from the other titles draws them in. 6, for example, is part 3 of 'Blackout'.

Kieron Dwyer gives Bogdanove a seasonal break for 8's Christmas adventure, before a long run of striking illustration begins with the first part of the epic (length) 'Panic in the Skies' (9). The Cerberus storyline climaxes in 13 and after that almost all stories are part of the greater continuity. Whilst not necessarily a guarantee of poor quality, this reliance on extended, multi-title storylines does make for an unsettled read, and often the highly charged scripting and evocative, powerful drawing of the title overwhelms preceding and succeeding chapters. The relevant segments of 'The Death of Superman' (18-19), and the follow-up, 'Funeral for a Friend' (20-21) are both excellent, whilst the following chapters elsewhere pale by comparison. The introduction of African-American John Henry Irons as a super-armoured Man of Steel for the 'Reign of the Supermen' (22-27*), led to the character – now called Steel – getting his own title, and was Bogdanove's last issue for some time.

The editors tried to rekindle the ballyhoo of Superman's death and resurrection with even tighter cross-continuity, guest shots (such as a daft fight with Lobo in 30), an intercompany crossover (with Milestone in *Worlds Collide* parts 1 and 10) in 35-36 and DC's own *Zero Hour* event (37, 0, 38). It was all much of a blur, though, with a welcome change of pace in 47. Here a flashback tale relates how *Daily Planet* owner Franklin Stern and editor Perry White foiled a Eugenics scheme by white supremacists to breed a "Super-Man" before it's back to the continuity treadmill. 'The Trial of Superman' (50-52*) is followed by another unremarkable procession of tales although there's a chuckle or two when Mr. Mxyzptlk tries to play cupid to the temporarily estranged Lois Lane and Clark Kent (56). This later turns into absolute laugh-out-loud gold in the follow-up, 'Death of Mr. Myxzptlk' in 75, the ultimate parody of 'The Death of Superman', written and drawn by Bogdanove.

With 87 a new editorial policy severely curtailed the inter-title links and Mark Schultz and Doug Mahnke became the regular creators. If too close ties with the other Superman publications was detrimental, the deregulation policy was instantly worse, with what appeared to be four different versions of the character blundering about, acting like a simplistic, testosterone-drenched, musclebound simpleton in one comic and a calculating genius in another. There were still some big crossovers (such as 'Y2K' part 4 in 98 or 'Condition Critical' part 3 in 102) but they now alternated with multi-part stories exclusive to *Man of Steel* alone. 115-117 were part of the ambitious 'Our Worlds at War' event and when all the dust settled there was a tentative move to re-establish those lost links. As artists came and went and story quality stalled, a fill-in that ought to be compulsory reading for Superman scripters slipped by everybody. 129, by Chuck Austen and Pascal Alixe managed a fresh look at the character and a truly moving view of his relationship to the ordinary cops in Metropolis that sadly seems to have been lost in the fuss over the overblown multi-part inter-title fistfight 'Ending Battle'. The more things change…~WW

Recommended: Miniseries 1-6, 1, 2, 18-22, 75, 129

SUPERMAN: Man of Tomorrow

DC: *15 issues 1995-1999*

Even with Superman starring in four titles a month there were still four weeks a year with no new *Superman* comic on sale. *Man of Tomorrow*, a quarterly to plug these gaps, produced the closest thing to stand alone tales during a period of intense inter-title continuity, at least at the start. Roger Stern, Tom Grummett and Brett Breeding kicked off with stories that reintroduced and in many ways starred, arch-foe Lex Luthor. There were guest stars aplenty with the Alpha Centurion (2), Captain Marvel (4) and a segment of the DC crossover event 'Underworld' in 3. Luthor's wedding in 5 is something of a turning point however, and from then on the exigencies of tight continuity diminish much of the identity. From 6 Paul Ryan becomes penciller and a succession of fights replace the intrigue of the early issues. Louise Simonson becomes scripter with 11 and moves more of the focus back to Luthor, but the damage is done and each issue becomes just more pages of someone else's storyline. J. M. DeMatteis, Ryan Sook and Jeff Gan close out the series with a maudlin tie-in to the *Day of Judgement* crossover. A competent superhero outing with nothing to actually inspire or remember, and of course, Superman readers don't really have any choice, do they?~WW

SUPERMAN Miniseries

DC: *4 issue miniseries ('The Secret Years') 1985, 3 issue miniseries (Superman/Doomsday) 1994*, 4 issue miniseries (Superman/Wonder Woman: 'Whom Gods Destroy') 1997, 2 issue microseries (Superman:Silver Banshee) 1998, 4 issue miniseries (Superman For All Seasons) 1998*, 3 issue miniseries ('The Dark Side') 1998*, 3 issue miniseries ('The Doomsday Wars') 1999*, 4 issue miniseries (Superman & Bugs Bunny) 2000, 3 issue miniseries (Superman/Gen^{13}) 2000*, 2 issue microseries (Last Son of Earth) 2000, 4 issue miniseries ('Day of Doom') 2002-2003*

DC/Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries (Superman vs Aliens) 1995*, 3 issue miniseries (Superman Madman Hullabaloo!) 1997*, 3 issue miniseries (Superman vs Predator) 2000, 4 issue miniseries (Superman vs Terminator) 2000, 3 issue miniseries (Superman/Tarzan: Sons of the Jungle 2001, 4 issue miniseries (Superman vs Aliens II: 'Godwar') 2002, 3 issue miniseries (Superman vs Predator II) 2002*

'The Secret Years' deals with the college experiences of Superboy before he set up shop in Metropolis in a selection of solid, entertaining tales that were later excised from the continuity. Bob Rozakis, Curt Swan and Kurt Schaffenberger craft a Rite-of-Passage journey that epitomises the best of the previous incarnation of the Man of Steel, and Frank Miller drew some spectacular covers to set it off.

Elseworlds are stories of alternate realities where events and situations are changed from mainstream continuity, lending themselves easily to iconic characters such as Superman and high concept stories. In 'The Dark Side', the rocket from Krypton lands on Apokolips, planet of the evil Darkseid, who raises the child to be a super-stormtrooper. John Francis Moore writes a heavy-handed parable of redemption, but Kieron Dwyer's impressive drawing is a saving grace. There's no such escape for Steve Gerber's lacklustre 'Last Son of Krypton', where the journey is to the high-gravity world and our hero faces a childhood of torment on cold, hard, Krypton. Worst of all is the awful 'Whom Gods Destroy' where the Nazis developed Atomic weapons, forcing Superman to become an isolationist for fifty years. When septuagenarian Lois Lane stumbles into a game played by

Olympian Gods and is turned into a good Wonder Woman to battle an evil Nazi one, all vestige of sense departs. Among the worst things Chris Claremont has ever written and the art is no reward.

The Dark Horse teamings all fall under the 'Elseworlds' banner, and are generally disappointing. When a Terminator team is sent back to our era with knowledge to thwart its own defeat, Superman is sucked into a future Metropolis to battle the genocidal mainframe on its own home ground. In *Superman vs Predator*, the team sent to recover a crashed spaceship in the South American jungle stumble across a scheme to wipe out Earth's genetically flawed and inferior. Enter a Man of Steel infected by a space virus and a Predator determined to keep his race's visits to Earth a secret and you've got an above average thriller from David Michelinie and Alex Maleev. Chuck Dixon and Carlos Meglia's tale of what might happen if Kala the She Ape opened that rocket from Krypton and John Clayton grew up an English Gentleman in 'Sons of the Jungle' is an insubstantial, if pretty moneyspinner that doesn't stand up to a rereading. The art for the first adventure with the Aliens by Dan Jurgens and Kevin Nowlan looks great, but once again the convolutions of making a scary monster a match for an invulnerable hero squash whatever tension there might be. 'Godwar' is somewhat of a departure. The role of the Alien is practically non-existent, in what is essentially a tale of the New Gods, albeit one magnificently drawn by Jon Bogdanove and Kevin Nowlan, where the sight of Jack Kirby's noblest creations dying to prevent the infestation of New Genesis is genuinely stirring.

Superman For All Seasons is Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale's reworking of the Boy to Man to Man of Steel myth. It's a vivid and charismatic delight that comes the closest yet to capturing the essential wonder of the character, but Silver Banshee, from Daniel Brereton and Joyce Chin is nothing more than a padded Halloween campfire tale that wouldn't work as a back-up, let alone command its own title. With the huge commercial success of 'The Death of Superman' it's no surprise that DC would want to revisit both the characters and the premise itself. Sadly, 'Hunter/Prey' is an over-priced piece of nonsense from Dan Jurgens using the origin of Doomsday as an excuse for lots of big punch-ups. Furthermore, 'The Doomsday Wars' is a convoluted and saccharine tale wherein Superman has to choose between saving a premature baby or rescuing the Justice League from a Doomsday possessed by Brainiac. It's a surprise and relief, therefore, when 'Day of Doom', with Bill Sienkiewicz adding gravitas with the inking, is a strong tale dealing with the victims and aftermath of Doomsday's rampage across America.

In 'Hullabaloo!' Mike Allred tells a disappointingly timid tale that has Frank Einstein transported to Metropolis and the Man of Steel diverted to Snap City, each absorbing the other's characteristics. Cue lots of confusion and sly allusions to glory days gone by as their respective mad scientist friends and significant others work to set things right. By contrast, Superman and Bugs Bunny is wonderfully engaging as Superman and the JLA team with classic Warner Brothers cartoon characters to save their respective dimensions from destruction. Mark Evanier and Joe Staton create a gloriously funny adventure that balances the screwball antics of Bugs and Daffy with tongue in cheek jibes at comics icons. Pepe Le Pew scores with Wonder Woman, Bugs is Super Rabbit, and you must beware as the Duck Knight Returns! A natural gem, unlike *Superman Gen*^{13}, which tries hard, but is little more than a good-looking, forced farce from Adam Hughes, Lee Bermejo and John Nyberg. The stacked and superstrong Fairchild is hit on the head whilst vacationing in Metropolis, leading her to conclude that she's Supergirl with amnesia. At least it doesn't take itself too seriously, which is clearly very easy to do if when adding to the canon of the world's foremost comic icon.~WW

Recommended: *Superman And Bugs Bunny* 1-4, *Superman For All Seasons* 1-4, *Superman*:'The Secret Years' 1-4, *Superman vs Aliens II*: 'Godwar' 1-4

SUPERMEN OF AMERICA

DC: *One-shot 1999, 6 issue miniseries 2000*

In the ho-hum one-shot, with Superman's mind on other matters, Luthor forms a new team of Guardian Angel types headed by a cadre of teenage superheroes, ostensibly to deal with the problem of teenage gangs. Fabian Nicieza writes the miniseries and the pencilling is as sterling as ever from Dougie Braithwaite. Nicieza knows how to crank up both mystery and tension issue by issue. The individual team members have some serious problems and unrevealed secrets, Luthor's up to no good, but in over his head, and one of the heroes has a big surprise heading their way. That's dealt with in unpredictable fashion in the final issue amid some wishy-washy (and plot convenient) moralising, but all in all the miniseries is very satisfactory.~WJ

SUPERNATURAL LAW

Exhibit A Press: *13 issues (24-36) + 1999 to date*

In order to reflect the name of a film in development based on the series, Batton Lash's *Wolff & Byrd*, 'Counselors of the Macabre', changed title with 24, but in all other respects, this is the same series. There are parodies of TV shows (*Ally McBeal* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in 24), other comic characters (Hulk in 29 and Cerebus in 32-33) alternated with occasional issues of shorter stories and fresh looks at the supernatural. 27 has a strip inked by Steve Ditko reprinted from *Satan's Six*, while 35 is a gorilla story told in homage to Carmine Infantino. 36 is the clever tale of a horror author in a coma, being prosecuted by his creations with Alanna having to stay asleep to represent him while dreaming. The strip benefits too, from strong, believable and likeable characters and several running jokes.~NF

SUPERNATURAL THRILLERS

Marvel: *15 issues 1972-1975*

One of many 1970s mystery comics, this one differed from the norm by initially adapting classic horror stories. Theodore Sturgeon's *It*, and *The Invisible Man*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *The Headless Horseman* in 1, 2, 4, and 6 respectively were decent, if not thrilling. Far better was Robert E. Howard's lesser-known *Valley of the Worm* in 3, an out-and-out sword-and-sorcery strip feeling somewhat out of place here, retold to great effect by Roy Thomas, Gerry Conway, Gil Kane and Ernie Chua. 5's original story, *The Living Mummy*, has a slave of noble origins who has been mummified by an oppressive pharaoh reawakening centuries later to track down his murderer's descendants. It proved popular enough to spawn a series beginning in 7. Originally by Steve Gerber and Rich Buckler, the writing was taken over by Tony Isabella, Len Wein and John Warner, while Val Mayerik and Tom Sutton (in 15) drew it. Never near Marvel's top strips, it was always entertaining, and remains worthy of a look.~DAR

Recommended: 3

THE SUPERNATURALS

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1998-1999*

Appallingly misguided reworking of Marvel's horror characters, and for some reason the Black Cat, by Brian Pulido, who recasts them all as teenagers. Pulido left the actual writing to Mark Andreyko (who would later redeem himself elsewhere), and the sales to Marvel who charged double their regular price for a twenty-two page comic because it included a crap character mask, and $3 for their promotional leaflet. This was the final thrash for the arrogant Marvel machine of the 1990s.~FP

SUPERPATRIOT

Image: *4 issue miniseries 1993, 4 issue miniseries ('Liberty & Justice') 1995*, 4 issue miniseries ('America's Fighting Force') 2002*

A supporting character in *Savage Dragon*, Superpatriot is a cybernetically enhanced soldier. The first miniseries opens with one of the most shocking scenes ever presented in a comic, but it's all downhill from there. The second series is a better proposition all round. Dave Johnson's art has improved, and there's a decent story from Keith Giffen that sees Superpatriot manipulated and introduced to the children he was unaware he had, and a contrary pair they are. Throw in would-be global guardians The Covenant and you've got a well-plotted action romp. The third miniseries is the best yet, with artist Cory Walker a real find, although more backgrounds would be nice. This time Superpatriot can deal with criminals easily, but coping with civilian life is a problem, as are the kids. Robert Kirkman delivers a funny plot, incorporating Superpatriot's past, throws in some old Savage Dragon foes, and confounds expectations along the way. If the quality curve continues, the next miniseries should be a masterpiece.~WJ

SUPERSTAR

Image: *One-Shot 2001*

The idea of a superhero who literally depends upon the adulation of the public in order to sustain his powers is half-baked to begin with, and writer Kurt Busiek doesn't do anything to make it work here. For your money you also get a few predictable, half-hearted jabs at media manipulation and the emptiness of celebrity, oodles of tedious fight scenes and some attractive, pseudo-realistic artwork from Stuart Immonen.~AL

SUPERSWINE

Fantagraphics: *One-shot ('Christmas with Superswine') 1989*
Caliber: *2 issues 1991*

Gary Fields' cartooning is excellent. His stories leave something to be desired. Superswine is an all-drinking, all-belching pig in a cape and mask, who, whisper it, isn't really heroic at all. Of these issues the first is marginally better, as Fields combines the origins of Batman, Spider-Man and Superman to give our hero an origin. It's nowhere near as funny as it thinks it is, although there are plenty worse comics. Anyone whose funny bone is tickled should also hunt down *Kaptain Keen*, which Superswine shares, and issues of *Critters*.~WJ

SUPREME

Image/Extreme: *43 issues (1-30, 0, 31-42), 3 issue miniseries (Legend of Supreme), 1 Annual 1992-1996*
Maximum Press: *6 issues (43-48) 1996-1997*
Awesome: *9 issues (49-52a, 52b-56) 1997-1998, series two 6 issues ('The Return') 1999-2000*

For Supreme substitute Superman, with the only element of originality being his return to Earth in 1, having left in the 1940s. The majority of 1-40 is wretched, with creator Rob Liefeld seemingly letting anyone who rang his doorbell have a try at the comic. Shawn McManus' presence pencilling a bunch of early issues is a mystery, but he's as bad as the rest in illustrating a preposterously muscled goon unencumbered by plot. Only writer Gary Carlson (22-24, 26-31) made any effort until 41, leaving the annual setting Supreme against a mad Nazi a slight cut above. It still won't count among Keith Giffen's career highlights. Better is Giffen and Robert Loren Fleming's writing on the miniseries, filling-in Supreme's origin and having him deal with everyone who participated in his creation.

Writing from 41, Alan Moore effected an immediate quantum leap in quality sustained until almost the end. All the more remarkably, Rick Veitch excepted, this was achieved with very ordinary artists until the arrival of Chris Sprouse with 53 (although he also drew 50). Wanting to provide the type of stories he enjoyed during childhood, Moore cultivated the charm of the 1950s and 1960s Superman via flashback sequences in most issues. They were largely illustrated by Veitch in suitable style on pages toned to resemble browned old comics. Their simplicity is deceptive, requiring considerable imagination. The adopted style is the only derivative factor and they serve to foreshadow modern day plots, often issues in advance. Contrasting these with activities set in the 1990s, Moore placed Supreme in a wider context. He introduced dozens of alternative versions, assorted allies, some new, some drawn from the previously established history, and even instigated the conceit of having him adopt a civilian identity as a comic artist. Among it all, he toyed with the structure of superhero stories, their constant revisions, and egotistical creators amid an excellent adventure comic with a broad streak of humour. The humour was sometimes knowing, often parody and occasionally very black. 50 is a good sample issue. The flashbacks investigate the outcome of potential marriages while in the present there's a tension as Supreme has fallen in love. For unknown reasons a planned oversize issue concluding 'The Supreme Story of the Year', which had been running since 41, was split into 52a and 52b. Any issue can be read and enjoyed individually, though. The second series continues directly from 56, delayed by financial problems, which caused Sprouse's departure after 1, and returned to effect a seemingly final cancellation. By this time Moore was recycling some ideas to amusing, but diminishing effect. Perhaps fittingly the final issue was a tribute to Jack Kirby. After several false promises from others, Checker Books has published a collection of the now rare early Alan Moore written stories, with a second volume promised for summer 2003.~FP

Recommended: 41, 42, 44-52b, 55, 56, series two 1, 2, 5

SURGE

Eclipse: *4 issue miniseries 1984-1985*

Among fans Mark Evanier has never had a particularly high reputation as a writer, perhaps because his non-humour work has chiefly been on lesser-known superhero titles. Yet *DNAgents* was a clever series, exploring the idea of humanity through a group of heroes grown in tanks by the evil Matrix corporation. In this spin-off Surge hunts his girlfriend's assassin and is put on trial for murder in the great superhero tradition. Only the man who captured him can provide the evidence that will prevent his execution. Utilising supporting characters from the main series, Evanier and co-scripter and artist Rick Hoberg examine the nature and function of revenge. Each issue also contains a back-up featuring one of the other DNAgents, all written by Evanier. 3's Sham story is drawn by Mike Sekowsky and in 4 Steve Rude draws the Rainbow short.~NF

THE SURGEON

Rough Cut: *2 issue microseries 2000, one-shot 2001*

A soulless, butchering monster who navigates time using living bodies to manufacture his vehicle. Investigative reporter Alice Duncan arrives at Westfield Hospital, notorious for being haunted, to collect her wayward brother Chris. The shady Doctor Blythe and his team run by Murray Coleman are there to exorcise the hospital. The Surgeon's craft arrives and all hell breaks loose. Put together from a film screenplay, John Dorans' script and plotting are tight and well paced. The artwork's atmospheric chiaroscuro comes courtesy of penciller Jaeson Finn. The one-shot features a cartoony visit to the gladiatorial arena of Rome and an excellent Surgeon short written by inker Colin Barr. A superior horror comic.~SW

SURVIVE

Apple: *1 issue 1992*

Seemingly very early work in five-page segments from Don Lomax, by 1992 well ensconced at Apple producing the decent *Vietnam Journal*. This extrapolates what might occur following World War III. "Want to see more? Then write!" pleaded the concluding type. We obviously didn't.~WJ

SURVIVING SASKATOON

Drawn & Quarterly: *One-shot 2000*

David Collier continues his unique mixture of personal narrative combined with historical events, this time relating the story of David Milgaard, a teenager in the wrong place at the wrong time convicted of a murder he didn't commit in 1969. Collier illustrates in his Crumb-lite style, and at the conclusion provides updates on all the major players. It's a miscarriage of justice well told, and little known outside Canada, and Collier provides a compulsive read.~WJ

Recommended

The SURVIVORS

Spectrum Comics: *4 issues 1983-1984*
Prelude Graphics: *2 issues 1986**
Burnside Comics: *1 issue 1987**

In the 4010 nine humans launched into space after World War III, awake two thousand years later than planned. Gail Thurston's husband, Karl, is missing. Lynn Merrill has been killed in suspended animation and her husband, Roy, is killed while in a rage by Zachary Brewer. The six remaining then become the target of bounty hunter, Shrek 65 and Dreadlord, who both want them as body parts for The Old One in his undersea city, where they find themselves caught in the middle of a war. The final issues see jealousy over Kate creating friction between Zachary and Dominic, until Alexis' evil side (the women have been granted superpowers while asleep) threatens them all.

The series, created by Steve Woron, began in *Spectrum Comics Previews* and looked promising, but never really managed to find its feet. It features Woron's early, Paul Gulacy-influenced, good-girl artwork, though Bob Lewis' inks throughout (Darren Goodheart becomes penciller after two issues) are more important to the consistently smooth appearance of the strip. The Illustration Studio collected the final three issues in one volume in 1989.~NF

SUSPIRA

Chaos!: *4 issue miniseries ('The Great Working') 1997*

Felicia Chavez, raped and pregnant, is driven into the arms of a religious cult leader, who, it turns out, is really the demonic Epitaph. Seeking magical vengeance for his sacrifice of her child, Felicia is pulled into a limbo between Heaven and Hell, until returned to Earth thirty-three years later. There she finds Epitaph preparing another sacrifice to summon Chorzon, so that he might gain his own revenge against Lady Death. Writer Philip Nutman tries too hard to create an eventful story, leaving the whole convoluted and characters undeveloped. Mike Okamoto's pastel-painted artwork, however, is attractive.~NF

SWAMP THING

DC: *Series one 24 issues 1972-1976, series two 127 issues, 6 Annuals 1982-1993*
DC/Vertigo: *44 issues (128-171), 1 Annual 1993-1996, one-shot ('Roots') 1998*

Len Wein's creation of an intelligent bog monster unable to communicate with people who fear him on sight provided a pathos well served by Berni Wrightson's moody and evocative art, for which the initial run is remembered. 9's alien encounter is a good sample. Wrightson replacement with 11 was Nestor Redondo, who relished depicting the lush swamp vegetation in complete contrast to Wrightson's penchant for gloomy horror, but was equally accomplished. There are notable moments after the departure of the original creative team, but overall it was a slow decline to cancellation. All Wein and Wrightson issues were reprinted in four issues of *Original Swamp Thing Saga* and five issues of *Roots of the Swamp Thing*, and there was a dry run for the feature in *House of Secrets* 92 (reprinted in 33 of the second run).

Initially titled *Saga of the Swamp Thing*, the revival was to tie in with the release of the 1982 b-movie based on the character, and the team of Martin Pasko and Tom Yeates delivered a sprawling epic in 1-15. Encompassing corporate greed, ex-Nazis, witchcraft and an assortment of stock horror characters, the story rambles in places, but only really suffers in comparison with what was to come. The latter-day vampires in 3 provide a particularly chilling tale, and are revived by Pasko's successor Alan Moore. The art team of Steve Bissette and John Totleben arrived with issue 16, and their talent for genuinely gruesome creations was more suited to the tone of the title. Moore quickly, but respectfully, concluded Pasko's plots in 20 and from his supporting cast retained only the recently returned Abigail Arcane, Swamp Thing's tragic love from the original series.

Moore discarded the idea that Swamp Thing was in any way human in a startling story titled 'The Anatomy Lesson' (21), and eventually developed him into an Earth elemental able to materialise any vegetated area. Under Moore *Swamp Thing* encompassed horror standbys as manifestations of human problems and cruelty, and as it had done in the 1970s, redefined what a horror comic could be. Almost every issue by Moore, Bissette and Totleben (and subsequent artists Rick Veitch and Alfredo Alcala) can be recommended, and the variety of approach and storytelling methods is astonishing. As samples try four very different stories: the tale of a toxic hobo in 35 and 36, the examination of menstrual pain in 40, Gotham held hostage by Swamp Thing in 52 and 53, or the horrific return of Martin Pasko's supporting characters in 54. 34's psychedelic coupling is much championed, but lacks the linear coherency of Moore's best work here. The Moore-written issues to 56 have belatedly been collected by DC, while eleven Titan black and white collections were issued in the 1980s, and 20-43 were reprinted in black and white under the 'Essential Vertigo' label.

As both writer and penciller from 65 Rick Veitch produced some memorable issues, and no later writer was as consistent, although Mark Millar tops his peaks. His story of a doomed airliner in 70-71 is noteworthy, as were Swamp Thing's encounter with Superman (79) and a surprisingly good tie-in with the cross-company *Invasion* story (81). Having Abby and Swamp Thing conceive was an interesting idea, although standby stud John Constantine was required for the actual deed. Veitch then sent Swamp Thing travelling through time, but sadly, editorial qualms about a scene involving the crucifixion of Christ led to his resignation with 87. Doug Wheeler's best was a tale about a musician (94), garnished by Kelley Jones' Wrightsonesque art, but he wrote dull stories thereafter, accompanied by dull illustration. From 110 horror novelist Nancy Collins returned Swamp Thing to the Louisiana swamps, and the art team of Scot Eaton and Kim DeMulder (from 117) was the best since Veitch and Alcala. Although the run isn't bad, any sense of horror is outweighed by cosy domesticity (except in Collins' final issues) and any social commentary is hammered home. For a flavour, 121-123 feature environmental protesters and the return of the Sunderland Corporation from early issues.

A revitalisation was heralded when Mark Millar and Philip Hester joined DeMulder with 140, but it's slow in coming. Their initial story (co-written by Grant Morrison) starts with a surprise but descends into muddy symbolism. Issues to 150 stretch credulity by having the invincible Swamp Thing manipulated and on the run. Where Millar scores is by returning emotional despair, horror and unpredictability to the title. His next effort is much improved, a story in individual chapters sending Swamp Thing into an assortment of alternate worlds. The best is a Nazi-controlled USA, stunningly illustrated by Chris Weston, in 153, but 154's alternate Abby Arcane, 157's story of the woman who destroys a chain letter and the tale of a boy and his dog in 159 are also excellent. The art, though, never matches former heights, with the problem appearing to be DeMulder's inks not suiting Hester's angular pencils. Gradually obtaining mastery over all the elements, Swamp Thing becomes a challenge to God, and from 166 the final tale encompasses almost every character who's been influential during the course of the series. It tugs at and unwinds fixed conceptions of the cast and their alignments in masterful fashion, with arch-enemy Anton Arcane's unpredictable return for a philosophical debate in 168 typical of the story. Although not the best chapter, the conclusion to *Swamp Thing* is a natural progression, with an upbeat ending, which is what most would have wanted. Sad, then, that the memory is sullied by Jon J. Muth's one-shot, marked by some fine, bleak painting, poor storytelling, much padding, hardly any Swamp Thing and the most pretentious writing this side of a Candida McWilliam novel.~FP

Recommended: Series one 9, Series two 3, 21-32, 35-42, 44-55, 57, 58, 63, 64, 70-72, 79, 81-84, 153, 154, 157, 159, 165, 168, 169, Annual 2

SWAMP THING

DC/Vertigo: *20 issues 2000-2001*

Mary Conway awoke from a coma three years ago and has been living a typical teenager's life since. However, when her boyfriend betrays her with her best friend, Mary's true personality violently re-asserts itself as Tefé Holland, disgruntled daughter of the original Swamp Thing, also possessing the powers of an Elemental. From this opening, the series explains how Tefé became Mary and introduces a couple of travelling companions as she sets off to discover her place in the world: destroyer or saviour? Chasing Tefé are her parents, the sadistic agent, Romero, trying to kill everyone who's ever known Tefé, Kudzu, a samurai assassin and two agents from the Department of Agriculture. Tefé has long conversations with John Constantine (10) and her father (18). There's an issue of stories about fathers (9, with guest artwork from Steve Lieber, Guy Davis and Paul Pope) and when Tefé kidnaps Senator Culler Strand's daughter, Heather, the scene is set for a climactic encounter (11-17). Brian K. Vaughan's portrayal of Tefé isn't always heroic, but he captures a sense of isolation and abandonment that drives the story of her search for an identity. Roger Petersen (1-11) and Giuseppe Camuncoli (12-20) have a similar, stylised approach in the artwork, but Camuncoli's is sharper, more angular, non-naturalistic and motif rich (like a less ornate P. Craig Russell). It's surprisingly effective in contrast to the organic nature of the script.~NF

Recommended: 9-18

SWEET

Adept: *5 issue miniseries 1998-1999**

Leyland Myrick's bleak stories are completely at odds with any interpretation of the title, but this is a promising and well-received debut. Particularly pleasing is that Myrick's stories are completely removed from the genre obsessions mined by comics over the decades. Love is the unifying theme, be it the gaoler's obsession with his charge in 2, or the faux Victorian horror of 5, and the unconventional (although never obscure) storytelling is a definite rarity to be encouraged. To carp, these are very brief reads with not enough artistic detail to flesh them out, but Myrick will improve.~WJ

SWEET XVI

Marvel: *6 issues, 1 Special 1991-1992*

Writer/artist Barbara Slate attempts to recreate her *Angel Love* success, but comes badly unstuck with an overly cute, wilfully anachronistic attempt to set up a bunch of *Archie*-type teens in Roman days. Cutesy, cluttered and irritating rather than charming.~HS

SWEETMEATS

Atomeka: *One-shot 1992*

A John Bolton cover of a female vampire smearing blood across the wall is an appropriate welcome for the contents, which begin with a strip showing a callous twenty-something vampire paying money for sex with a young girl. Writer Steve Tanner and artist Pete Venters appear to feel the twist ending justifies the sordid premise, and, unbelievably, it's downhill from there. The longer second story is of an alluring sixteen-year old high-security hospital patient with a taste for blood, who captivates all who come in contact with her. It's an exploitative, voyeuristic piece offending on numerous levels, finishing off with a bit of lesbian fantasy canoodling for the lads. While there's absolutely nothing wrong with stories about sex, context is everything; these are appalling.~FP

SWERVE

Amaze Ink: *2 issues 1995-1996*

With the Earth destroyed, leaving only a belt of garbage, Agent 23 is the last human. In his ship, The Indigo Rayburn, 23 becomes a champion racer, until forced into exile by enemies. Now he's back to win a coveted third title. This has some visual attraction, though there is a tendency for lines to bleed together. The attempt at cool writing, however, by creator, Kyle Hunter, isn't successful: 23's grandstanding and posing seem juvenile rather than hip. The story remains unfinished.~NF

SWIFTSURE

Harrier: *18 issues 1985-1987*

A companion to *Conqueror*, early issues had a space-opera and fantasy line-up, usually with a curiously 1950s feel to them, with the solo stories of Conqueror's Lt Fl'ff, illustrated by Steve Yeowell, amongst the best of them. An anomaly, though a welcome one, was Lew Stringer's guest Brickman strip in 6, humorous Batman parody. With 15, new editor Rob Sharp attempted to revitalise the title with three new series, but despite a suddenly improved line-up, *Swiftsure* had lost too many readers, and folded a couple of issues later.~HS

Batman: SWORD OF AZRAEL

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1992-1993**

The story that introduced Jean Paul Valley to his destiny as the avenging angel Azrael and set him on the path to taking on the mantle of the Batman. Azrael's father is killed trying to assassinate Lehah, ex-treasurer of the Order of St Dumas, who has set himself up as an arms dealer and is now out to destroy his old partners. When Batman investigates a gun battle he finds himself caught between Lehah and the Order in Switzerland where, as Bruce Wayne, his identity becomes known to Azrael. Apart from the reasoning behind Batman's secret identity being blown (isn't it enough that practically everyone works it out in the films?) and the need to set Azrael up for 'Knightfall', this is a reasonable Batman adventure, full of intrigue and even some detection, as written by Denny O'Neil. What really pushes it above many of the contemporary *Batman* stories is the artwork by Joe Quesada. His cinematic layouts are given a boost by inker Kevin Nowlan, whose tight, smooth technique gives the whole a sharp, dynamic feel.~NF

SWORD OF DAMOCLES

Image/WildStorm: *2 issues 1996*

Like *Sigma*, this is part of *Fire From Heaven*, but here there's a tighter link between issues, telling the story of the title character without really digressing into the wider storyline. The Sword is the servant of Damocles, whose attempt to recreate his own world at the expense of Earth is one of the two main plotlines running through 'Fire From Heaven'. He's conned into attacking Winter in 1 and killed by his counterpart, Union in 2. Warren Ellis' script is sparse and does the job but Randy Green's artwork is simplistic and unattractive.~NF

SWORD OF SORCERY

DC: *5 issues 1973*

Certainly one of the best sword-and-sorcery series produced for comics. It starred Fritz Leiber's Fafhrd the Barbarian and the Gray Mouser. The contrast of the two main characters inspires entertaining stories from Denny O'Neil. Fafhrd is a red-haired giant of a man, with more brawn than brain, while the Mouser is a wily schemer. If you like sword-and-sorcery with a touch of humour, and want a change from *Conan*, then give this a go. With impressive early art from the likes of Howard Chaykin, Walt Simonson and Jim Starlin, you can't go wrong.~HY

Recommended: 1-5

SWORD of the ATOM

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1983, 3 Specials 1984-1988*

Conceived by Gil Kane and Jan Strnad, who then respectively drew and scripted the series, this isn't such a radical reinvention of the Atom, more a change in direction. Discovering his wife Jean in the arms of another man, Ray Palmer (The Atom) takes a job in South America, crashes over the Amazon, is stuck at six inches tall and discovers a lost alien race that happens to be the same size as him. From then on the story is worthy of a *Conan* epic as the Atom aids a princess and some rebels against her father, contending with various jungle threats like soldier ants along the way. The series ends with the Atom back at regular size but determined to re-find the princess, Laethwen. The first special is the story of Ray and Jean splitting up. The gimmick is that the special is excerpts from Ray and Jean's book about their break-up. The second special is something of a retread of the miniseries, though there's some fun in the size-changing antics of Jean and her new lover Paul as they too get to visit the jungle. The final special is still by Strnad, but Kane is replaced by Pat Broderick, whose similarities to Kane merely highlight the fact that it's not Kane. This is more of a horror tale, as the Atom visits another of the aliens' cities, which is in the middle of a plague that causes the dead to return to life after burial. Strnad's scripts are fine as far as they go but it hardly matters that it's Ray Palmer in these Burroughs/Howard-inspired tales. Kane's artwork is at its best on the miniseries, though the first special contains some of his latter-day minimalism.~NF

SWORDS OF TEXAS

Eclipse: *4 issue miniseries 1987*

Scout spin-off as the Swords accept a contract to ship some arms to Mexico, but get more than they bargained for. There's also some good old boy roister-doistering with the 'Dogs of Danger' back-up strip.~WJ

SWORDS OF THE SWASHBUCKLERS

Marvel/Epic: *Graphic Novel 1984, 12 issue limited series 1985-1987*

Preposterous stuff. Space pirate Raader's mother was an 18th-century Earth pirate, so Raader speaks with a "ho ho Jim m'lad" accent. You know it's proper space opera because characters have apostrophes in the middle of their names, and most aliens are biped humanoids, many based on earth animals. Raader's race has pointy flaps of skin extending from their temples. It's meant to be light-hearted and fun, but is dull and derivative.~FP

SWORDS OF VALOR

A+: *3 issues 1990*

Anthology reprinting often obscure short strips drawn by the good and famous for Charlton, ACG and 1970s Atlas titles. The muddy black and white reprinting of stories originally in colour is less than desirable, but for those wanting to search out the early work of John Buscema, Jim Aparo and Walt Simonson among others this is a cheap place to begin.~FP

SYNDICATE

N-Studios: *2 issues 1996*

In 2017, with Britain controlled by the Japanese after losing the Corporation War, Charley Valentine is a policewoman, who likes nothing better than a fight in a bar with her pool-hustling boyfriend, Harvey, after a hard day blowing away the bad guys. Unfortunately, when she accidentally learns who killed her father a year ago, she ends up on the other side of the law. Nigel Raynor's high energy thriller doesn't really convince because the setting isn't used for anything more than a character's racist remarks and there's no explanation for the gung-ho, gun-crazy attitude of criminals or cops, though the less-cluttered artwork of 2 does improve the storytelling.~NF

SYNTHETIC UNIVERSE

Hardcut Publishing: *1 issue (3) + 2002 to date*

Continuing the numbering from a minicomic, this is a collection of odd short strips by Alison Elizabeth Taylor, including the continuing tale of thrift in the 2020s, when hair is considered unclean, and a couple of stories written by Andrew Hunter and drawn by Taylor. The overall effect is one of discomfort, that nothing is quite right, but there is also a sense that that's all there is to find. Perhaps the issue makes more sense, if you've read the minicomics. Taylor's style is reminiscent of Al Columbia, though much more open and, as yet, not as accomplished.~NF

SYPHONS

Now: *7 issues 1986-1987, 3 issue miniseries 1994*, 3 issue miniseries ('The Sygate Stratagem') 1994, 3 issue miniseries ('Countdown to Armageddon') 1995, 1 Annual 1995*

Pedestrian superhero adventure as four orphans gain superpowers from an alien spaceship and become embroiled in an intergalactic war between barbarian aliens and superpowered humanoids called Syteams. Predictable from page 1, although the miniseries have some adequate to excellent artwork from Mark Beachum and industry workhorse Rich Buckler. For undemanding die-hard superhero fans only.~WW

THE SYSTEM

DC/Vertigo: *3 issue miniseries 1996**

Peter Kuper is probably best known for his *Third World War* comics or his *New York* album. Both are intensely political works and though *The System* doesn't have the same focus, it too is about politics. Experimentally told without word balloons, it's a series of vignettes, much like Robert Altman's film *Short Cuts*, as a number of individuals cross paths as they go about their daily business in the city. Though the characters have their own stories there's an underlying terrorist plot and a political scandal that threatens all their lives. Kuper's artwork is minimalist but carries the story along at a brisk pace, though careful reading is required because of the lack of dialogue.~NF

Recommended: 1-3

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* Available in a collected edition

TABOO

SpiderBaby: *3 issues 1988-1989*
SpiderBaby/Tundra: *4 issues (4-7), 1 Special 1990-1992*
Kitchen Sink: *2 issues (8-9) 1995*

Lavish horror anthology founded by Steve Bissette. Despite a tendency to indulge its creative teams, *Taboo* stands head and shoulders above other horror titles since the demise of *Creepy* and Eerie. Bissette as editor explored the parameters of how and why things upset us and frequently triumphed by persuading creators not known for working in the horror genre to contribute. Notable for running major series such as Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's 'From Hell' (from 2) and Moore and Melinda Gebbie's unfinished erotic what-if? 'Lost Girls' (5 onwards).

Stories range from schlock horror to disturbing mood pieces. Many of them are experimental in both form and content, challenging the reader. You may feel that much of the content ultimately fails, but they fail in an eye-opening way. Of particular note are Rick Grimes' stories, set in a sardonic world of tortured lines and sick humour, and Jeff Nicholson's downbeat stories of office life in a weird, inexplicably sinister corporation.~FJ

Recommended: 2-4

TAD MARTIN

Caliber: *5 issues 1991-1993*

Uncompromisingly brutal and utterly amoral, therefore compelling, all the more so for having the feel of autobiographical confession about it. Tad Martin is ironically subtitled "Average American teenager" on the cover of the first issue, and the comic covers the twin teenage obsessions of sex and violence, with the crude drawing matching the crude text. 4 is text with a few illustrations. Creator Al Frank's apparent misogynism is disturbing, but don't let that put you off sampling the comic world's answer to punk music: loud, simple, and in and out in three minutes.~FP

TAILGUNNER JO

DC: *6 issue miniseries 1988-1989*

A renowned geneticist is given cybernetic implants and merges the personality of his dying daughter Jo into him. She spends most of her time in a convincingly portrayed fairytale cyber-reality while her father attempts to exact restitution from the corporation that transformed him and still holds his wife. The title refers to Jo operating her father's cybernetic implants while he's occupied with other matters. Peter Gillis turns in a stunningly bizarre concept that works very well, and sank almost without trace in the days when DC published adult material, but didn't quite have a handle on how to promote it. Successfully avoiding the twin traps of becoming either too twee or too testosterone-influenced, *Tailgunner Jo* both delights and excites, much of the credit being due to the art of Tom Artis. He switches from one locale to the next with aplomb, never short-changing the children's fantasy elements for the more popular action sequences. The series sags a little in the middle, which is odd as the ending might have been expanded, and prospective readers should be warned that the story really has to be read in sequence to make sense.~WJ

Recommended: 1, 2, 5, 6

TAKEN UNDER

Caliber: *1 issue 1992*

Very much the taster for a series that never materialised, as this makes absolutely no sense in isolation. Characters slouch about muttering portentous dialogue amid mysterious happenings. Michael Lark's fractured imagery is appealing in isolation, but hardly attempts to tell a story.~FP

TAKION

DC: *7 issues 1996*

These days no superhero would drop an aircraft carrier on a skyscraper or three to deal with a problem. In 1996, though it was okay for a being of pure energy embodying the source of all life. Scientific mumbo-jumbo sees Earthman Josh Saunders transformed and able to instinctively manipulate the fundamental energy of the universe. For all that, he's rather a fuckwit, bumping through space and time into battle scenarios. Confusing, non-linear and with an irritating stream-of-consciousness narrative, *Takion* ties into Jack Kirby's *New Gods* concepts. Perhaps preferable to diluting those stories still further, *Takion* is nonetheless a mess.~WJ

THE TALE OF ONE BAD RAT

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1994-1995**

Rumour has it that when Dark Horse supremo Mike Richardson signed this Bryan Talbot miniseries he thought he was getting the second part of Talbot's *Luther Arkwright* epic. He can't but have been delighted by what he did get: a multi-award-winning story of Helen, a young runaway whose only friend on the street is her pet rat. Her love of Beatrix Potter takes her on a pilgrimage to the Lake District, where she finds the resources to come to terms with the paternal sexual abuse that drove her from home in the first place. In an astoundingly well written final scene she confronts her father, who's looking for forgiveness. Talbot avoids preaching or editorialising about this most difficult subject, producing a work more powerful for its lack of conclusions.

One Bad Rat is an excellent introduction to comics, and ought to be put before a much wider audience. The plot is intelligent, the writing sensitive and the art clear but detailed. Talbot produces an excellent Potter pastiche and uses other English illustrative techniques – most notably the simplified figures and detailed background style Alfred Bestall used to such effect on *Rupert* – to enrich his style, finally getting beyond the stiffness that characterises much of his earlier work.~FJ

Recommended: 1-4

TALES FROM GIMBLEY

Harrier: *One-shot 1987, one-shot ('More Tales') 1988*

Gimbley is Phil Elliott's spinner of way-out yarns, his balding present incarnation as the pub raconteur, narrating stories about the magnificently quiffed youthful Gimbley, collected from various early 1980s small press comics. These are odd stories, occasionally seeming to be without purpose, but also quite capable of reaching down into you to tweak a long-hidden emotion. Phil Elliott's art improved from story to story here (sadly, they're not collected chronologically) and would improve still further, but the basics of his European clair ligne style are present and correct. Those not expecting slam-bang action and a pay-off on every page could do worse than seek these out.~FP

TALES FROM THE AGE OF APOCALYPSE

Marvel: *2 issues 1996-1997*

In 1995 all X-titles were briefly replaced with issues about an Earth where Professor X had died before forming the X-Men. This presented untold tales of that world. 1 sees a heroic Magneto and his X-Men plan to assassinate Apocalypse, but it's really about how seeds of rebellion were planted in Cyclops, a fanatical supporter of Apocalypse. 2 develops the theme as Cyclops and his brother Havok track down their real father, who carries a secret that could destroy the world. Competent enough if you're a fan but a little bewildering if you're not.~WW

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* Available in a collected edition

TALES FROM THE BOG

Aberration: *7 issues 1995-1997*, one-shot ('Director's Cut') 1998*

Charming tales of a close-knit bayou community. The characters are portrayed in a style very influenced by Dave Sim's *Cerebus* and appear to be spoonbills. Later issues have pencils from Scott Roberts but it's really writer/creator Marcus Lusk's show. Due to the deliberately langourous pacing the 7 issue run gives the series too little space to really spread its wings, although each issue nevertheless has its own sparkle of well-observed humanity. The 'Director's Cut' of 1998 is a slight reworking of 1 and is also numbered 1. Delicious and over too quickly.~SW

TALES FROM THE CRYPT

EC: *27 issues (20-46) 1950-1955**
Gladstone: *7 issues 1990-1991*
Russ Cochran: *6 issues 1991-1992*
Gemstone: *30 issues 1992-1997**

Continuing its numbering from *Crypt of Terror*, *Tales from the Crypt* was the horror comic template, spawning hosts of imitators, outraging the parents of a generation, inspiring countless artists, and resulting in a TV series thirty years after publication. That the material is still reprinted today speaks volumes for the high editorial standards employed: EC horror titles stand head and shoulders above the many imitations they spawned over the decades.

Each issue contains four twist-ending stories, written for the most part by Al Feldstein and Bill Gaines. Early issues have interesting moments (Kurtzman's college initiation story in 21, though the usually excellent Wally Wood fails to draw convincing horror), but it's not until the arrival of Jack Davis with 24 that everything begins to gel. By this point Gaines and Feldstein have settled on their strangely moralistic formula of evil thwarted in appropriately gruesome fashion or revenge occurring from beyond the grave. Davis, Jack Kamen and Graham 'Ghastly' Ingels are the featured artists in almost every issue from the mid-20s, and are consistently excellent, with Ingels' story of a murdering shadow in 39 outstanding. A precociously competent Joe Orlando is most commonly the fourth contributor, although George Evans (who illustrates a quiz show story in 43) and Bernie Krigstein (whose best is Murder Dream in 45) are also of note. The sheer volume of stories Gaines and Feldstein wrote for three EC horror titles inevitably ensured a dip in quality, and the pair began substituting more explicit gore to cover predictable plots from about 34. Razor-sharp fire poles, a bigamist dismembered and used as sporting accessories by his wives, and butchers short of meat selling parts of corpses are typical of this era (although the title wasn't above self-parody, as evinced in 31's story about artist Jack Kamen). With Senate hearings on horror comics beckoning, the writers were forced to be less reliant on gore, and the final issues are a return to form. The quality of the art never dips. *Tales from the Crypt* is best read an issue at a time. En masse, the stories are formularised and predictable, although their over-the-top nature can still raise a chuckle.

The stories have been reprinted many times and in many different formats, few following the original numbering. If you can afford the boxed set, it's a complete reprinting, although not in colour. The Gladstone series couples reprints of *Tales from the Crypt* with *Crime SuspenStories*. The Russ Cochran series combines two original issues every time, and some are also available as oversize editions. The Gemstone editions are facsimiles of the originals and the run begins from 1, by re-titling the *Crypt of Terror* issues, hence the longer run.~FP

Recommended: 27-33, 43, 44, 46

TALES FROM THE EDGE

Vanguard Comics: *13 issues, 2 Specials 1993-1998*

This anthology starts entertainingly with editor J. David Spurlock's Rick Montana, Space Cowboy (1-4), illustrated in the style of Al Williamson (1) and Wally Wood (2-4), Wood's own 'Encounter' (1), a horror strip from Howard Nostrand pre-dating the Comics Code, and Pat Boyette's 'Stinger Ray' (2-4). The signs are there that this isn't going to take any easy routes, however, with the inclusion of work from fine artist Barron Storey who appears in 1-10 and the Special, including a continued piece, the pretentious and incoherent 'Slidehouse' in 2-7. This 'art' influence extends to Marshall Arisman (2-6, whole of 12, Special), whose drawings are influenced by photojournalism, George Pratt (an interview and illustration in 6-8, 13), Spurlock's own story of rock star indulgence (7, 9), Bill Sienkiewicz (article and illustrations in 9), Greg Spalenka (mixed media strip in 9-10) and Douglas Winter (distorted photographs in 10). Dennis Calero's adaptation of the Sting song 'The Wild Wild Sea' (7) is almost welcome after that. Slightly less arty, are Bill Koeb's strips in 10 and 13 and David Hollenbach's in 13. The whole of 11 is given over to Jim Steranko, "Graphic Prince of Darkness", with articles, illustrations and storyboards from Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula*. The second Special ('Nightstand Chillers'), was a benefit containing reprints.~NF

TALES FROM THE FRIDGE

Kitchen Sink (US)/Cozmic (UK): *One-shot 1973*

Very funny EC pastiche also taking the time to lampoon the Dick Tracy and Flash Gordon newspaper strips along the way. Bob Stewart and Russ Jones introduce obese glutton Global McBlimp, whose hamburger recipe is parlayed into a chain of Globalburger franchises by his manipulative flatmate Rod Usher. When Global's gorging finally results in cardiac arrest and pauper's grave, the EC morality tale and horror elements come to the fore, complete with a totally over-the-top final panel. There's even room for some good one-pagers at the end. PC be damned, fatties are funny.~WJ

Recommended

TALES FROM THE HEART

Entropy: *2 issues 1987**
Slave Labor: *9 issues (3-11) 1988-1994**
Marvel/Epic: *One-shot ('Temporary Natives') 1990, One-shot ('Bloodlines') 1992*

Witty, warm-hearted, endearing and educational in the best fashion, *Tales from the Heart* is a unique comic. It draws on the experiences of co-writer Cindy Goff and others during two years spent as Peace Corps volunteers in the Central African Republic, known as "The Heart of Africa", hence the title. 1-3* detail the Peace Corps induction and composite lead character Cathy Grant's arrival and orientation in Boguila. She's naïve, but with an open mind, which is just as well, as her preconceptions are challenged as she gradually learns to adapt to a totally different reality and set of expectations. Goff and co-writer Rafael Nieves are adept at painlessly incorporating an immense amount of background detail and local custom into their stories, at the shorthand introduction of new characters, and of subtly progressing their cast. This would count for little were pencil artists Seitu Hayden (1-6) and Aldin Baroza (7 on) not also first-rate at conveying mood through posture and expression, and at portraying the sparsity of the area in sympathetic fashion.

Each issue is complete in itself, with 8 being a good sample. With her room-mate departing for the capital, Cathy's anticipating a peaceful day, but it doesn't materialise. Issued with the added marketing clout of Epic, the colour one-shots were intended to direct a new audience back to the parent title. They're a contrasting pair. 'Bloodlines' reflects on the harrowing atrocities committed by former C.A.R. dictator Bokassa, and 'Temporary Natives' deals with a Peace Corps volunteer at an impasse. Both are excellent. Never patronising and always absorbing, *Tales from the Heart* is a neglected gem.~FP

Recommended: 1-11, 'Temporary Natives', 'Bloodlines'

TALES FROM THE OUTER BOROUGHS

Fantagraphics: *5 issues 1991-1992*

Douglas Michael unfolds often ridiculous stories in a wayward manner, with layouts and style very similar to Rick Geary in choosing to caption individual illustrations and using minimal dialogue. Where he differs is in extending his stories over an entire issue. This works well for 1's nicely meandering tale of a murder attempt that doesn't quite go to plan, but thereafter drags on stories way beyond any point of interest. Artistically Michael is certainly no Geary. All things considered, sample the first issue and then plenty of Rick Geary.~WJ

TALES FROM THE TOMB

Dell: *1 issue 1962*

Of interest for stories written by *Little Lulu* creator John Stanley. Working within the limitations of what Dell would permit as a horror comic, he's surprisingly inventive, although the art, much of which looks like the work of Tony Tallarico, is very poor. It's an expensive curiousity these days, though.~WW

TALES from the TUBE

Print Mint: *One-shot 1973*

To date probably the only comic devoted to surfing, this is a superb collection of strips put together by Rick Griffin. Griffin's several contributions include a mixture of travelogue pieces on surfing haunts and semi-mythical paeans to the sport, all drawn in his trademark psychedelic style. Robert Williams contributes a fantastically drawn strip, 'The Ties That Bind', and the little-known Jim Evans is also of note. Add work by S. Clay Wilson and Robert Crumb and you have an essential addition to anyone's collection, whether a surfing fan or not.~DAR
Recommended

TALES OF ASGARD

Marvel: *One-shot 1968, one-shot 1984*

Reprints of the five-page back-up strips of the same name from *Journey into Mystery* 97-106 in the 1968 one-shot and *Thor* 129-136 in the 1984 volume.~APS

TALES OF BEATRIX FARMER

Mu Press: *1 issue 1996*

Anthropomorphics from Steve Gallacci and Taral Wayne as new girl in the city Beatrix Farmer is given a three quarter bodysuit that fully protects her from harm, but also denies certain bodily functions as it can't be removed. It's a capricious enough start, but soon devolves into standard funny animal material.~FP

TALES OF EVIL

Atlas: *3 issues 1975*

Standard predictable horror notable only for the typically Atlas lashings of excess gore. Bog-Beast and Man-Monster starred in 2 and 3, and the paucity of imagination applied to their names reveals all you need to know about the content.~WJ

TALES OF SUSPENSE

Marvel: *99 issues 1959-1968, one-shot 1995*

This title ably charts Marvel's rise from a struggling outfit to industry leaders, and for much of its run was home to two of their most enduring characters Iron Man and Captain America. In 1959, though, superheroes were only beginning to make a comeback, and this began as just another mystery anthology, with the early issues making use of inventory pages prepared before the company's mid-1957 implosion. The writing was uninspired, but it was beautifully drawn by the likes of Al Williamson (1, 4), John Buscema (1) and Russ Heath (2). As the title progressed new features emerged around an artistic core of Steve Ditko, Don Heck, Paul Reinman and Jack Kirby, and a Kirby strip in 7 ('The Molten Man-Thing') set the tone for the next few years. Readers delighted to a menagerie of marauding monsters such as Goom, Googam (son of Goom), Kraa, Maaboo, Brutu and Oog. The best of these, 'I Created the Colossus' in 14, written by Larry Lieber, as these strips invariably were, weighed in at a hefty eighteen pages and positively exploded with wanton destruction, as did a sequel in 20. All the monster strips were graced with powerful art by Kirby and Dick Ayers, but after 31 they concentrated on quirky science fiction and horror strips that, while better written, lacked the zen-like moronic fun. Almost every one of the first 46 issues also featured an exquisite five page twist in the tail strip by Stan Lee and Ditko that frequently outshone the lead feature. Much of their appeal lay in Ditko's stylish inventive art, and while almost every issue is well drawn, on some (10, 11, 14, 17, 20, 22 and 39) he excelled himself. A lovely Reed Crandall strip in 12 aside, the other back-ups were not particularly noteworthy, and despite his best efforts Don Heck had to wait until the introduction of Iron Man in 39 to make his mark.

From a modern perspective, Tony Stark, multi-millionaire arms manufacturer is an unlikely choice for pre-teen reader identification. Captured by communists in Vietnam, a fatally wounded Stark creates a life-saving armour suit that he uses to roundly thrash his captors. In time he gained a typical supporting cast of pining secretary and faithful chauffeur, and faced the constant threat of his heart giving out. In the early days writer Robert Bernstein clearly didn't know what to do with the character, resulting in charmingly daft strips like 44's journey back in time to meet Cleopatra. It was at least graced with terrific Heck art, with Kirby filling in for 40, 41 and 43, and Ditko doing so in 47-49. Stan Lee took over the writing from 47, producing a more action-oriented strip, and Heck's art began to suffer as he was forced to copy Kirby's style of storytelling, a situation not helped by some poor inking. Gene Colan's dynamic art from 73 improved things immensely, and any of his issues, particularly 84 on inked by Frank Giacoia, are fine examples of prime period Marvel superhero comics. Unfortunately, though, the breakneck action came at the expense of any significant characterisation, and the most enduring aspect was the incessant commie-bashing, with the bulk of Iron Man's villains being reds of some description. Certainly Iron Man's strip is the only one to feature Nikita Khruschev as a regular supporting character. Transferring to his own title Iron Man left his red-baiting days behind him.

As early as 49 Iron Man was supported by another feature, the banal 'Tales of The Watcher'. Few mourned its replacement in 59 when Stan Lee and Jack Kirby presented the newly resurrected Captain America's action packed strip. And the emphasis was very much on action to the exclusion of pretty much everything else. Kirby's art here was as explosive and exciting as anything else he ever did, though, and that's quite some compensation. The first few instalments lacked direction, but the strip came alive with a sequence in 63-71 set during World War II. It gave Captain America the context and supporting cast his contemporary stories had lacked, and subsequent episodes were one-dimensional. The best of them pitted our hero against the Red Skull (79-81), significantly a 1940s character, but most were readable if only for the art. The non-Kirby issues (70-77, 87-91) were well enough drawn, but without Kirby's exhilarating pace the episodes fall rather flat. Captain America also graduated to his own title after 99, continuing the numbering of this title.

The 1995 one-shot is one of several post-*Marvels* painted comics, featuring (fittingly) Captain America and Iron Man. Surprisingly, given a creative team of James Robinson and Colin MacNeil, the issue is run-of-the-mill. The Iron Man stories in 39-50 and the Captain America run in 59-81 are both available in hardbound *Marvel Masterworks* editions, while less luxurious black and white *Essential* volumes reprint the entire Captain America run and Iron Man stories to 72.~DAR
Recommended: 39, 44, 63-71, 79-81

TALES OF TERROR

Eclipse: *13 issues 1985-1986*

When Bruce Jones didn't want to continue *Twisted Tales*, Eclipse came up with this series, pretty much carrying on where that title had left off. There are some good stories here by writers like Chuck Dixon, Bill Pearson and even Jones himself. There's good artwork too, from John Bolton (7, 9, 12), Gray Morrow (3, 4), Carol Lay (6, 7, 11) and José Ortiz (10), and some really stand-out covers: Tim Conrad (5), John Bolton (9, 12) and John Begley (2).

The stand-out combinations, however, are: Mark Wheatley's 'Suzy Dreams' (1), about a battered wife's escape into fantasy; Eric Vincent and Anthony Smith's 'Live in Dead' (2), also drawn by Vincent, in which an over-tidy husband, returning as a zombie after being killed by his wife and her lover, finds time to do the dishes before remembering just

why he came back from the dead; Dixon and Micheluzzi's 'A Fine Head on her Shoulders' (2), in which a murderess expects to get away with it because she's been told that she can only die by being beheaded and so has no fear of the hangman; Tim Truman's 'Every Evening Billy Comes Home' (6), in which a dog dreams of protecting its dead master; Scott Hampton's 'The Revenant' (8), in which an artist helps a ghost's revenge for her rape and murder; and Toren Smith and Lela Dowling's take on Cabbage Patch dolls in 4.~NF
Recommended: 2

TALES OF THE BEANWORLD

The Beanworld Press: *21 issues 1985-1993**

As the covers suggest, this is "a most peculiar comic book experience". Beanworld is a fantasy world where everything depends for its survival on its place within that world. The beans get a sprout-butt from Gran'Ma'Pa and give it to the Hoi Polloi, who turn it into chow, which the beans can then eat and thus live while they wait for the next sprout-butt to emerge. Larry Marder creates a huge cast of peculiar characters, from Mr Spook, leader of the bean army, to Beanish, an artist who has a strange, secret meeting with Dreamishness, a mysterious shining creature. Marder waits until issue 20 to reveal the origin of the Beanworld, while 21 explains how Professor Garbanzo, the beans' inventor and toolmaker, first discovered the Four Realities in which they live. Utterly charming, *Tales of the Beanworld* can be read as an adventure story but it's also about the way things need to work for beings to live together. If this sounds odd, it is, and there's little by way of explanation in the series: you'll have to make of it what you will, but it's worth the effort. From 2 *Beanworld* was distributed by Eclipse, and the Eclipse logo appeared on the cover from 5.~NF
Recommended: 1-21

TALES OF THE CHEROKEE

Mandalay Books: *1 issue 2001*

A respectful telling of some Native American legends by Gene Gonzales. All display a respect for nature, and the different styles employed by Gonzales are nice, but the stories aren't involving enough to have widespread appeal.~WJ

TALES OF THE CLOSET

Hetrick-Martin: *9 issues 1987-1996*

One day in 1986 eight youngsters discover they've something in common: they're gay, or think they might be. The series explores their feelings of shock, confusion, acceptance or rejection, and the reactions of those around them. Stated baldly it sounds obvious and schlocky, but writer/artist Ivan Velez Jnr deftly captures the anguish and alienation of gay youth and, in ensuing issues, moves the cast through hilarious and cataclysmic events without missing a step. This isn't a stroke book, rather it's a moving and intelligently presented evocation of the perils and pitfalls any youngster can fall victim to when first exploiting their sexuality. The only gripe is the slower-than-molasses progress. Announced as ten issues, it managed roughly an issue a year, but with Velez getting more lucrative gigs at DC and Marvel, and wrangling with Hetrick-Martin over ownership of the series, the finale looks unlikely to appear.~HS
Recommended: 1-9

TALES OF THE FEHNNIK

Antarctic: *One-shot 1995*

There is a subdued charm to this story of circumstances surrounding a potential arranged marriage between royals, but it drags over the full length, and the ending comes as no surprise. Pat Kelly's anthropomorphic figures have a lot of humanity, though.~WJ

TALES OF THE GREEN LANTERN CORPS

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1981*

The first issue imparts a wealth of background information to anyone interested in the Green Lantern Corps, but the succeeding two could be any ordinary issues of Green Lantern.~FP

TALES OF THE JACKALOPE

Blackthorne: *8 issues 1986-1987*

R. L. Crabb uses the history and anthropology of the mythical Jackalope (a stag/rabbit crossbreed) to blend whimsy and satire in usually funny, often barbed yarns with a surreal, ecological viewpoint. Although some of the political content may have dated, much of the material still packs a punch and a chuckle – notably 'Chickens and Eggs' in 4 and especially 'Ayatollah Kokamami and Khadafy Duck' in 3. Junior Jackalope and Suicide Squirrel also appeared in *The Fauna Rebellion* and *Laffin' Gas* 4 and 5.~WW
Recommended: 2-4, 6, 7

Star Wars TALES OF THE JEDI

Dark Horse: *5 issue miniseries 1993-1994*, 2 issue microseries ('The Freedon Nadd Uprising') 1994*, 6 issue miniseries ('The Dark Lords of Sith') 1994-1995*, 6 issue miniseries ('The Sith War') 1995-1996*, 6 issue miniseries (0-5, 'The Golden Age of the Sith) 1996-1997*, 6 issue miniseries ('The Fall of the Sith Empire') 1997*, 5 issue miniseries ('Redemption') 1998**

Preceding *Star Wars* film continuity by 4000 years, the Jedi are heroic warriors who protect the Republic. The first miniseries introduces Jedi initiates destined to become legendary, Ulic Qel-Droma (1-2) and Nomi Sunrider (3-5). The pair are teamed in 'The Freedon Nadd Uprising', and feature in most subsequent series. Tom Veitch writes the first two series, and his material is so far removed from the source it amounts to no more than standard fantasy. *Star Wars* novelist Kevin Anderson teams with Veitch on 'Dark Lords of the Sith', and writes solo thereafter, being particularly adept at foreshadowing elements of continuity millenia away. 'Dark Lords' is the best series, approaching the scope and thrills of the movies in exploring the dark side of The Force and its exponents. 'The Sith War' continues the story, but not as well. All these series have flaws pertaining to the nebulous nature of The Force, and its application. At times those attuned to The Force are seemingly invincible, yet a few pages later, when the plot requires, the same person is fallible. Even given that training is required to manipulate The Force, the inconsistencies are glaring and all too convenient.

The Golden Age of the Sith' and 'The Fall of the Sith Empire' are one continuous story set 1000 years prior to the other series. There's little to differentiate it from them, but the vagaries of The Force play almost no part, and the story is better for it, if a little stretched over eleven issues (the zero issue being of little consequence to the remainder).

Aspirations of epic scope are hindered throughout by art lacking dynamism, and often merely functional, although never bad. Chris Gossett is involved in most series, yet his art is cluttered and overly rendered until 'Redemption', where a more spartan approach appeals greatly. This series is a welcome change of pace overall, jumping a few years from the events of 'The Sith War' as a remorseful Ulic ponders his place in the universe, while others call for his head.~FP

TALES OF THE MARVEL UNIVERSE

Marvel: *One-shot 1997*

An anthology depicting reactions among Marvel's characters to the supposed deaths of several of their peers in defeating Onslaught. Mark Waid and Andy Kubert preface their *Ka-Zar* series, and Kurt Busiek and Mark Bagley do the same for *Thunderbolts*. Dr Strange and War Machine share the spotlight, and the consequences of Reed Richards and Dr Doom's deaths are investigated. For anyone entrenched in Marvel continuity it's a nice package, but the stories are slim fare for the casual reader.~WJ

TALES OF THE MARVELS

Marvel: *One-shot ('Blockbuster') 1995, 2 issue microseries ('Wonder Years') 1995, One-shot ('Inner Demons') 1995*

Banner title for various independent one-shots and microseries thematically linked to Marvels and all similarly adorned with painted artwork. Each lead character is an ordinary man or woman whose life is changed by an encounter with a superbeing. 'Blockbuster' has private detective Ramon Stewart witness his parents' deaths in a free-for-all between the Silver Surfer, Fantastic Four, Doctor Doom and Tyros. This reappraisal of *Fantastic Four* 260 focuses on the survivors' plight as their claims for compensation falter in a legal quagmire and Stewart's frustrations shift to a personal vendetta against the Surfer. Mike Baron's narrative is very creditable, although the suggestion that Stewart could actually kill the Silver Surfer is not entirely convincing.

'Wonder Years' tells a powerful tale of young, painfully shy Cindy Knutz (that's Knutz with a "kay") and her obsession with Wonder Man, who saved her life from Red Ronin's footprint at the time of Avengers 198. Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning's portrayal of her tunnel vision is utterly believable. Sunglasses are advised for the colouring. In 'Inner Demons', Bowery bum John Mahoney forms an uneasy friendship with a fellow pointy-eared, strong, silent, amnesiac down and out. Mahoney's battle with his inner demon (alcoholism) takes centre stage before the amnesiac's identity is revealed in the dénouement. Read *Fantastic Four* 4 for the answer. Mariano Nicieza pens marginally the weakest *Tale of the Marvels*, but only because the general standard is so high. There are some excellent painted pages from Bob Wakelin, who unfortunately didn't paint the entirety, and there are some substandard pages by others towards the end.~APS

Recommended: Blockbuster 1, Wonder Years 1, 2

TALES OF THE Teenage Mutant Ninja TURTLES

Mirage: *7 issues 1987-1989*

Jim Lawson, who would develop into the main Turtles man, cut his teeth here, alternating with Ryan Brown, both of them writing and drawing. There are robots, giant alligators and dinosaurs. Lawson's issues are better by virtue of his being a more talented artist, but there's nothing that isn't improved on in the main Mirage Turtles comic.~WJ

TALES TO ASTONISH

Marvel: *Series one 101 issues, 1959-1968, series two 14 issues 1979-1981, one-shot 1994*

Most of the early output of this title is science-fiction stories, often very well illustrated by the likes of Kirby, and Don Heck at his best, but, with very few exceptions, routinely scripted and relying on EC-style twist endings. Without EC's liberal use of gore, prohibited by the still-new Comics Code, or their A list artists, the content lacked bite. Stories by the Stan Lee/Steve Ditko pairing, each seeming to bring out the best qualities of the other, were honourable exceptions, imaginative and eerie. A one-shot tale in 27, 'The Man in the Ant Hill', wherein a scientist shrank himself to the size of an insect, scored unexpectedly heavily in sales, so the lead, Dr Henry Pym, was brought back as a series star, becostumed and dubbed 'Ant-Man', with 35. Given some thought, the Marvel staff might have realised that a tiny human up against full-size humans might make for less than dynamic conflicts; but then, they'd tried something unlikely with The Fantastic Four and that had worked, so what had they to lose? The early Ant-Man stories have a certain clunky charm, but the series badly needed a shake-up. It got two. Janet Van Dyne arrived in 44, as Ant-Man's partner, the Wasp. A refreshing character who gave the impression of having a keen mind behind a flighty façade, she livened up the stuffy Hank Pym no end. His early protests of romantic detachment notwithstanding, it wasn't long before they were a couple, and the only one of Marvel's early couples whom you could believe actually desired each other. The Ant-Man tales were collected in 2002 as *The Essential Ant-Man*. The second major change came when Pym discovered how to grow as well as shrink, and ventured forth as Giant-Man from 49. Despite these changes, and many charming moments between the bantering lovers, the strips remained weakly plotted, and Hank and Jan's villains are third-rate.

With 60, the Hulk, who had failed in his own title but been a success as a roaming villain, started a series backing-up, and soon eclipsing, the Giant-Man stories. Old Jade Jaws concentrated a bit more on the tragic-monster side than on his old rampaging routine, with the ragged and weary Bruce Banner waking up in strange locations all over the world, helpless to do anything but speculate what his alter ego had wrought. Giant-Man and the Wasp were pushed to the back of the comic, then ousted all together, as Prince Namor, the Sub-Mariner, another anti-hero from the beginnings of Marvel, took over their slot with 70. Hank and Jan became popular supporting characters, most prominently as part of the *Avengers*, and Namor and the Hulk vied with each other to see who could be most tragically misunderstood. This state of affairs continued until 101, when, a distribution restriction having been lifted, Marvel was able to split *Astonish* and its other shared titles, *Strange Tales* and *Tales of Suspense*, into their component parts. The Hulk title continued *Tales to Astonish*'s numbering, while *The Sub-Mariner* restarted from 1. The title, though not the numbering, was revived for a short-lived series of reprints from Sub-Mariner in 1979, and the 1994 one-shot was a prestige-format painted story teaming Hank Pym, no longer Giant-Man, and the Wasp with the now intelligent and erudite Hulk. Peter David's script was adroit, especially in catching echoes of the old Hank and Jan banter, but John Estes' painted art merely looked vague and washed-out.~HS

TALES TO OFFEND

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1997*

Frank Miller takes a few pokes at correct behaviour via his unbelievably offensive hero Lance Blastoff. It's very nicely drawn and there's a few chuckles along the way, but overall this will be just a footnote in Miller's career.~FP

TALES TOO TERRIBLE TO TELL

NEC: *11 issues 1989-1993*

Reprints of violent and gruesome pre-Comics Code horror comics. After a couple of 'sampler' issues it focussed on different publishers each time, representing three or four stories and an intelligent annotated commentary and company profile, making compelling reading for comics historians. 10 and 11 were renamed *Terrorology*, but the content remained unchanged. Mention should also be made of a companion title, *My Terrible Romance*, devoted to a different genre, (oh, go on, have a guess...), which is of equally high standard but ran for only two issues.~HS

TALEWEAVER

WildStorm: *6 issue miniseries 2001-2002*

Fantasy tale with echoes of *Lord of the Rings* beautifully rendered by Philip Tan. It's an insubstantial yarn of Axel, a young man whose stories are the only solace for an enslaved village, and how his life changes when an opposing army liberates them. Just as in any good story, the lad finds himself, through chance and keen wits, increasingly important to the cause of good whilst improving his own fortunes along the way.~WW

TALK DIRTY

Eros: *3 issue miniseries 1992**

A woman, a man and a crane. Mathias Schultheiss' rumpathon is well drawn, but the distancing technique of printing dialogue alongside individual illustrations tends to highlight the banal nature of any talk during sex, although that could also be an unsympathetic translation. If the comic's working as intended you won't notice any of that. The couple manage to keep going for three issues, so you've got to admire their staying power.~FP

TALOS of the Wilderness Sea

DC: *One-shot 1987*

Fantasy story that's not so much a boy and his dog, but a boy and his big cat. Sterling illustration from Gil Kane is marred by poor plotting from Gil Kane, and there's little here that hasn't been seen in countless fantasy novels and films.~FP

TANDRA

Hanthercraft: *14/15 issues (1-12 – see below) 1976-1993*

Tandra is a little-known masterpiece; a fantasy epic strong on plot and characterisation. Stylistically very much in the mould of *Prince Valiant*, being blocks of text accompanying individual illustrations, *Tandra* is a generational saga spanning twenty years of both the characters and the creator, Christopher Hanther (known only by his surname), who began work on the series in 1973. Hanther's art isn't up to Hal Foster's standard, but doesn't fall very far short by the later issues, and is already confident and composed by the conclusion of the first volume.

A striking opening sequence sets the tone for the series. On seeing a woman being attacked, David Galon leaps to her rescue. A relationship develops, but she's summoned away through an iron door in a brick wall. When he attempts to follow, the door peels off the wall like paper. Galon's persistence pays off, and he's transported to Tandra, a primitive world where he has to survive through his wits and strength. Although not always centre stage, Galon is the central figure throughout the series. His intelligence, engineering skills and adaptable nature ensure his success in a world almost unblemished by science, but whose inhabitants fear the occasional visits of wizards from the sky. From Galon's invention of a superior airship in *The Iron Cloud*, the series really takes off. It transpires that the wizards dwell in a ring surrounding the planet, and from that point revelations about the world and the relationships between various factions increase with each succeeding chapter, leading to an inevitable battle for supremacy between Galon and the brutish Kilthane.

The original chapters have been re-sequenced for more commonly available packages, numbered from 1 to 12 (including a 9A, 9B and 9C), with the most obvious reconstruction being the combination of two early collections, titled *The Golden Warrior* and *The Iron Cloud*, into a single volume. Although not all Tandra issues are numbered, each page is numbered in sequence (up to 718 as the final page of 12), enabling the saga to be followed in order. Those interested in a complete researched chronology will find it in issue 7 of the succeeding series, *Dragonrok Saga*. For someone so accomplished with pen and ink, Hanther's cover paintings are strangely poor, but this shouldn't put anyone off sampling a series that has a rightful place alongside the most highly regarded comics of recent years. More recently Hanther has concentrated on making improved and coloured versions of his *Tandra* pages available on CD-Rom and via the internet. Check www.tandra.com.~FP

Recommended: 3-12

TANGENT COMICS

DC: *One-shot (The Atom) 1997, one-shot (Doom Patrol) 1997, one-shot (Flash) 1997, one-shot (Green Lantern) 1997, one-shot (The Joker) 1997, one-shot (Metal Men) 1997, one-shot (Nightwing) 1997, one-shot (Sea Devils) 1997, one-shot (Secret Six) 1997, one-shot (Tales of the Green Lantern) 1998, one-shot (The Trials of the Flash) 1998, one-shot (Wonder Woman) 1998, one-shot (Nightwing: 'Nightforce') 1998, one-shot (Powergirl) 1998, one-shot (The Superman) 1998, one-shot (JLA) 1998, one-shot (The Batman) 1998, one-shot (The Joker's Wild) 1998*

Conceived by Dan Jurgens, Tangent Comics is a re-imagining of the DC Universe, using existing character names, but allowing the writers freedom to create completely new identities around those names. So, for instance, Nightwing is a covert government organisation and the Joker is a female subversive, more good than bad. The one-shots were published in two batches each in a single month and the first is better overall, dealing with relatively minor characters. Apart from Jurgens himself, writers include James Robinson (*Green Lantern*), John Ostrander (*Nightwing*), Kurt Busiek (*Sea Devils*), Peter David (*Wonder Woman*) and Mark Millar (*The Superman*). Artists include J. H. Williams (*Green Lantern*), Jan Duursema (*Nightwing*), Mike McKone (*Metal Men*) and Klaus Janson (*The Batman*).

The best are the two *Flash* issues, written with lots of humour by Todd Dezago (artwork by Gary Frank, 1997 and Paul Pelletier 1998), the *Secret Six* by Chuck Dixon and Tom Grummett and the *Joker* issues, written by Karl Kesel, again with a fair amount of humour (artwork by Matt Haley, 1997 and Joe Phillips, 1998).~NF

TANK GIRL

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1991*, 4 issue miniseries 1993**

Created in 1988 by Jamie Hewlett and Alan Martin for *Deadline*, the unwashed, violent, hard-drinking, chain-smoking, kangaroo-shagging Tank Girl became the magazine's strongest selling point, and idol of dykes and crusties the world over. Originally living in an unspecified near-future Australia as some form of agent, she quickly abandoned even that flimsy persona for life as an outlaw causing lots of explosions – for no very good reason – and indulging in everything imaginable that's bad for you. In a brain-dead way, her *Deadline* adventures, a selection of which were reprinted in two Dark Horse miniseries (and the first series of *Deadline USA*), are great fun. A third collection reprints material from the British *Deadline* otherwise unseen in the USA.~HS

TANK GIRL

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries ('The Odyssey') 1995, one-shot ('The Movie') 1995, 4 issue miniseries ('Apocalypse') 1995-1996*

When Tank Girl was optioned for a movie, DC's Vertigo imprint took an interest, and two new miniseries were commissioned. Suddenly, *Tank Girl* had to have 'meaning'. Sigh. Peter Milligan got away with it in 'Odyssey', an amusing, alleged commentary on James Joyce's *Ulysses* in which Tank Girl discovers secrets behind her parentage, but Alan Grant's take on 'Apocalypse' was crude and gross without being inventive or funny. Both Vertigo miniseries had covers by Brian Bolland. The movie was made in 1995, starring Lori Petty and Ice T, and was an unmitigated disaster, featuring a sanitised, unrecognisable version of the character. The comics adaptation by Milligan and Andy Pritchett sported an inappropriate John Bolton cover, and succeeded in being more amusing than the movie which spawned it. Despite the failure of her movie, she penetrated the public consciousness as a Tank Girl lookalike was the star of an advertising campaign for Wrangler Jeans in 1991.~HS

TANTALISING STORIES

Tundra: *One-shot, 5 issues 1992-1993*

Tantalising Stories features the inspired pairing of Jim Woodring's Frank, frequently seen in *Jim*, and Mark Martin's Montgomery Wart. It manages to be very funny, but it makes you question the reassuring world of children's adventures. The juvenile presentation and subject-matter belie subtle narratives that play heavily and knowingly on our mature cynicism.

To call 'Frank' a funny-animal strip is to do it a disservice. Woodring has created a silent, surreal world inhabited by strange beasts. Although his dream-like milieu at first seems to make little sense, as the title progresses relationships and conflicts emerge. Frank goes about his everyday life, reading books, going to parties for the dead, on the alert for attacks from a warthog creature straight out of a Bosch painting. The conflict provides much-needed stability in a world of confusing symbolism. Frank is fundamentally nice, while the warthog is nasty but stupid. You'll either love the strip's quiet humour or wonder what all the fuss is about. Woodring is a consummate cartoonist, able to communicate complex emotions without words. For the black and white series he adopts a broad, brush-inked style reminiscent of Robert Crumb's bolder efforts. Whereas Woodring keeps to a single style, his companion Mark Martin rings changes, from explosive Bigfoot cartooning to sophisticated wash styles. His main characters (Montgomery Wart, a bullfrog who likes to think himself cynical and worldly-wise, Cicero Buck, a very naïve deer indeed, and Murgatroid, a thick but happy frog) get into boyish escapades, à la *Tom Sawyer*. Martin's jaundiced morals, appended to each story, reflect the true spirit of Twain's tales. The dialogue and approach to story-telling, which owe a lot of the classic US newspaper strip *Pogo*, are superb.

The series is good, and the colour one-shot, titled *Frank In 'The River'*, is superlative. Tundra didn't spare the pennies when producing it, and the thick, glossy paper is put to good use. Woodring's Frank story is among his best work. The painted pages glow with primary colours as Frank becomes involved in a bizarre mystery while working for the bad warthog. Woodring reflects the reader's incomprehension as Frank presses further and further into a nightmare world. Montgomery Wart also benefits from colour treatment, painted in a rough watercolour style that adds a great deal of charm to Martin's fluid cartooning. After such an unsettling Frank story you're more than ready for a straight humour piece like this, where the grasping Wart is inspired by a magazine article to leave home. To get away he decides to train as a flight attendant but his attempts at a dry run involving Hallowe'en lanterns are frustrated by his pal Murgatroid's stupidity. Matters are complicated when the insects inhabiting the jack 'o lanterns begin demanding extra peanuts, vegetarian meals and frequent flyer stamps. It's a quite fabulous package.~FJ

Recommended: One-shot, 1-5

TAOLAND ADVENTURES

Antarctic: *2 issues 1999*

A dark-haired baboon named Yingpeng, and Shaohai, a little guy in a mint green outfit spend the whole of 1 having a workout in a friend's tavern. Ien, a girl in a bra-top, joins them in 2. Despite some clever tricks with blurring figures in motion and a storyboard-style feel for action, artististic shortcomings are highlighted by vain attempts to give dimension to figures and backgrounds via computer colouring. Page fifteen's beautifully rendered wooden pail is the highlight of the entire series. Slight and not charming enough to transcend its amateurishness.~SW

TAPESTRY ANTHOLOGY

Tapestry: *1 issue 1997*

Strangely, only Jenni Gregory's *Dreamwalker* represents features occupying a Tapestry title, although Andrew Pepoy's well drawn and whimsical Simone and Ajax would have a career in back-up strips elsewhere. There's early art from David Boller on 'The Wallas' as transparent an attempt at creating a saccharine animated feature as you're ever likely to see, and the final strip, Burrito, is well below acceptable standard. Gregory, though, provides the charm and good story that characterised her title.~WJ

Clive Barker's TAPPING THE VEIN

Eclipse/Titan: *5 issues 1990-1992*

It's arguable that Clive Barker's short stories are his best work, and these adaptations from *Books of Blood* are powerful even if you've read the originals. They have sympathetic scripts and excellent art throughout from the likes of John Bolton, Tim Conrad, Bo and Scott Hampton and P. Craig Russell. Titan Books published UK editions of the first four issues.~WJ

Recommended: 1-5

Weird Suspense featuring the TARANTULA

Atlas: *3 issues 1975*

Michael Fleisher and Pat Boyette manage to be gross and tasteless, even by Atlas' standards. The Tarantula is humanoid except for a giant spider's head. He traps his victims in a web, injects them with poison and eats them. Not to be read before meals.~FP

TARGITT

Atlas: *3 issues 1975*

In later years Targitt would have been designed as a testosterone-fuelled, heavily armed, pumped-up vigilante. In 1975 he started as a blonde guy with a penchant for roll-neck jumpers and a pistol, whose adventures are as exciting as watching paint dry in Tedium, Nebraska. An unfortunate letters page seer compares this with *The Spirit* and predicts popularity on a level with *Spider-Man*. Oops. A change to 'Man-Stalker' with added costume was no better, although this was one of the few Atlas titles to feature the same artist, Howard Nostrand in this instance, for every issue.~FP

TAROT: Witch of the Black Rose

Broadsword Comics: *11 issues + 2000 to date*

Awful, exploitative rubbish from former *Catwoman* artist Jim Balent as the glamourous witch Tarot fights the forces of supernatural evil in a horned hat, a g-string and nipple-cups in an eternal quest to make the world safe for Wiccans everywhere. Avoid unless you're hopelessly addicted to bad drawings of unfeasibly large breasts.~WW

TART

Eros: *4 issues 1994-2000*

This has disturbing qualities way beyond the distaste of some readers for sexually explicit material. If the constant subtext of sister/brother incest wasn't enough, there's the pandering to the market for under age of consent sex. This is never stated, although is implicit in the manner that the lead character Tess is drawn. The drawing is the hook, with creator Howie Dard's style appealing, fine-lined and grey-toned, if preposterous when it comes to male genitalia. There are no redeeming ironic qualities, so if you like well drawn sex comics, can you support material that verges on the fringes of paedophilia?~FP

TARZAN

Dell: *131 issues, 4 Annuals 1948-1962*

Edgar Rice Burroughs' noble savage had been a phenomenon in pulp magazines, consolidating his fame with films and top newspaper strips in the 1920s. With artwork by Hal Foster and later Burne Hogarth, the syndicated *Tarzan* strip was one of the seminal influences on the developing adventure strip. He featured in text stories in Dell's *Crackajack Comics* from 1939 to 1942, whilst his daily and Sunday strips were reprinted in *Tip Top* and *Sparkler Comics* from the beginning of the 1940s. In 1947 Dell experimented with originated Tarzan material in their Four Color series (137 and 161). The stories were written by clergyman Gaylord Dubois, who'd been writing newspaper strips since the 1930s, and the art was by Disney storyman Jesse Marsh. A regular title was promptly launched the following year, every issue of which was produced by the same team. Some may find Marsh's artwork crude, but his simplicity of style disguises a sophisticated knowledge of texture, animal anatomy and locale. His eighteen-year stay on the strip is only slightly overshadowed by Dubois managing a staggering twenty-five years between 1947 and 1972. His stories are rarely controversial, but effortlessly maintain the language and mythos founded by Burroughs.

Early issues feature a forgettable back-up strip, 'Two Against The Jungle', which gave way to Brothers of the Spear with 25 in 1951. Dan-El and Natongo, one white, one black, are the adventuring princes who rule the jungle kingdom of Aba-Zulu. Although it had been initiated by Dubois and Marsh, the job of drawing the strip fell to Russ Manning in 1953 (*Tarzan* 39). These strips are a treasure trove worthy of collection, not only for Manning's gorgeous art, but for Dubois' gentle portrayal of his view of racial equality. This was long before it became a socially aware selling point in the 1960s.

When the comic covers weren't painted they featured photos of the film Tarzan's Lex Barker (13-54) and Gordon Scott (80-110). Between 1952 and 1955 Dell also issued hundred-page annuals, some of which featured stories by Marsh, rather uncomfortably inked by Manning.~SW

TARZAN

Gold Key: *75 issues (132-206) 1962-1972*

Continuing the numbering from the Dell issues, this title was of merely average quality, which only took an upswing when long-time artist Jesse Marsh left the strip to Russ Manning with 154. Gaylord Dubois had written the strip since the 1940s, but such was Manning's flair that his run outshone the syndicated newspaper strip that he soon took over. On Manning's departure much of the life left the title, despite brave tries by Doug Wildey and Mel Keefer, among others. Brothers of the Spear continued as a back-up until Manning began drawing the lead feature, and returned as reprints in 196-206. They were briefly replaced by Leopard Girl, which starred Meru, a teenage zoologist who could talk to the animals. DC purchasing the licence to produce *Tarzan* was the best possible tonic, even if they lost Dubois in the process.~SW

TARZAN of the Apes

DC: *53 issues (207-259) 1972-1977*

As Gold Key had rather let the feature fall into disrepute DC really only had to be competent to succeed. That they produced some outstanding material was a bonus. Joe Kubert edited the comic, wrote most of the stories and seemed to have found the strip he was born to draw. He began by adapting *Tarzan of the Apes* in spectacular fashion in 207-210, bringing both the jungle atmosphere and Tarzan's originally primal nature to vivid life. His adaptations of *The Return of Tarzan* in 219-223 and *Tarzan and the Lion Man* in 231-234 are of an equally high standard, as are all his original stories until 235. Once he'd reached that point, though, he seemed to run out of inspiration, and although he continued writing and providing layouts for the likes of Franc Reyes, Rudy Florese and the Redondo Studio it was formulaic stuff. Gerry Conway and José Luis Garcia-Lopez take over from 250, but it's early Lopez and his pencils are unsympathetically inked throughout. Denny O'Neil writes the final two original issues, and 257-258 reprint Kubert stories.

230-235 are all one hundred pages, featuring some notable back-up strips, including a Mike Kaluta-drawn short in 230 and Alex Niño illustrated Korak strips in 231-234. Besides standard Detective Chimp and Congo Bill reprints in those issues, there are also Russ Manning *Tarzan* newspaper strips, rejigged to resemble comic material. Given a trial run in 226, they were obviously popular enough to occupy 237 and 238 in their entirety. Other classic newspaper strips from an earlier era, by Hal Foster, can be found in 208, 209, 211, 215 and 221. There are also other Burroughs stories adapted, with John Carter in 207-209, and *Beyond the Furthest Star* in 213-218.~HY/DAR

Recommended: 207-210, 219-223, 230-235

TARZAN

Marvel: *29 issues, 3 Annuals 1977-1979, 2 issue microseries 1984*

Unimaginative stories and dull art, mostly from John Buscema, whose Tarzan is almost indistinguishable from his Conan. Leave well alone. The 1984 series reprints *Marvel Super Special* 29, with Dan Spiegle adapting the *Greystoke* film.~FP

TARZAN

Malibu: *5 issue miniseries ('The Warrior') 1992, 3 issue miniseries ('Love, Lies and the Lost City') 1992, 7 issue limited series ('The Beckoning') 1992-1993*

'The Warrior' introduces three men who might be Tarzan, but none of them ruling the jungle. The likeliest candidate lives in Baltimore, locates dimensional rifts in the company of his wife Jane, and takes over tribes of ape-men. The plot is slim, but the mystery drags it along to the final issue, which establishes Tarzan in 20th-century USA. The science-fiction elements in 'The Warrior' are intrusive, but it succeeds in retrieving Tarzan from cinema and TV clichés. 'Love, Lies and the Lost City' is better, a thrilling lost-civilisation story by the all-Danish team of Henning Kure, Teddy Kristiansen and Peter Snejbjerg, while Kure collaborates with Tom Yeates for 'The Beckoning'. It's the best *Tarzan* in comics since the DC issues, marred only by pages of issue 3 being printed out of order. While in San Francisco destroying an illegal ivory operation, Tarzan is mentally manipulated by an African witch doctor into experiencing flashbacks to jungle battles. The trails of poaching and the hallucinations lead back to Africa, where everything pulls together along, with an explanation of how Tarzan and Jane are now both over a century old. Kure and Yeates weave an enthralling adventure that slightly overextends itself with a convenient conclusion, and Yeates draws a Tarzan with both grace and power.~WJ

Recommended: 'The Beckoning' 1-7

TARZAN

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries ('The Lost Adventure') 1995*, one-shot ('A Tale of Mugambi') 1995, one-shot ('The Land That Time Forgot/The Pool of Time) 1996, 4 issue miniseries (Tarzan/John Carter: 'Warlords of Mars') 1996, 4 issue miniseries (Tarzan versus Predator at the Earth's Core) 1996*, 20 issues 1996-1998, 3 issue miniseries ('The Return of Tarzan') 1997, 4 issue miniseries ('Carson of Venus') 1998, 4 issue miniseries ('The Savage Heart') 1999, 2 issue microseries ('Disney's Tarzan') 1999, one-shot ('Tarzan of the Apes') 1999, one-shot ('Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar') 1999, one-shot ('Tarzan the Untamed') 1999, 4 issue miniseries ('The Rivers of Blood') 1999-2000*

'The Lost Adventure' is Edgar Rice Burroughs' last *Tarzan* novel completed by Joe R. Lansdale, with spot illustrations by Tom Yeates, Gary Gianni, Mike Kaluta and Charles Vess, amongst others. Each issue also contains episodes from the *John Carter of Mars* newspaper strip (1941-1943) produced by Burroughs' son. 'A Tale of Mugambi', by Darko Macan and Igor Kordey, is an offbeat *Tarzan* story told by a native round a campfire as a lesson about the need for leaders not to think themselves above their people. 'The Land That Time Forgot' and 'The Pool of Time' are two of four strips produced by Russ Manning for the European market in 1974 and feature a mysterious island, where dinosaurs still survive amongst a number of other strange beings. 'The Warlords of Mars' concerns an attempt by a pirate to brainwash Tarzan into killing John Carter, but the best of the miniseries is by Walt Simonson and Lee Weeks. They provide a thrilling story combining a traditional Tarzan adventure and an unusual use of Predators, as *Tarzan* must overcome the return to Pellucidar of the reptilian Mahars whilst a company of Predators conspires with them to provide a constant supply of fresh sport.

The ongoing series plants Tarzan firmly back in Africa, as Bruce Jones begins with a tale involving a virus Tarzan brought back from Mars, which revives ancient races (1-6). There are plenty of twists and turns to keep the plot moving, with artwork by Christopher Schenck and Yeates. Schenck and George Freeman provide the art for Allan Gross' 'Legion of Hate' (7-10) featuring Nazis, warrior women and raising some interesting questions about race. In 11-16* writer Lovern Kindzierski pits Tarzan for two issues apiece against The Phantom of the Opera, Frankenstein's Monster and Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde respectively. The art by Stan Manoukian and Vince Roucher provides the right level of period atmosphere, matching the skilful use of Tarzan in the urban landscapes of Paris and New York. In 17-20 Tarzan and his son, Korak travel into the future to rescue the Waziri tribe from aliens. This isn't Tim Truman's best writing, but art by Yeates and Al Williamson somewhat makes up for it.

The adaptation of Edgar Rice Burroughs' novel *The Return of Tarzan* is well handled by Yeates on his own (compare with the cut-down version reprinted in *Tarzan of the Apes*). Macan and Kordey return for Tarzan's trip to Venus where he comes to the aid of Carson against the tyrannical, Loveking. Pellucidar is visited again in 'The Savage Heart', but Gross' examination of the nature of savagery is let down by lacklustre artwork from Mike Grell. By way of contrast, the adaptation of the animated *Tarzan* film from Disney, by Greg Ehrbar and Mario Cortes, actually has a lot of fun in re-telling Tarzan's origin. When wife Jane is struck down by a mysterious illness, Tarzan travels to Vienna to consult with Sigmund Freud in 'The Rivers of Blood'. Despite promising subplots concerning political intrigue before World War 1, the series only managed half the intended eight issues, leaving the story unfinished. The 1999 one-shots are all softcover collections containing Manning reprints from the Gold Key *Tarzan*.~NF

Recommended: *Tarzan versus Predator at the Earth's Core* 1-4, Ongoing 11-16

Jungle Tales of TARZAN

Charlton: *4 issues 1964-1965*

This notorious unauthorised comic adaptation was forcibly discontinued by the Edgar Rice Burroughs estate after four issues. They seized practically the entire print run of 4 and destroyed it. The strips are adapted from the Burroughs' original stories, by writer Joe Gill and artist Sam Glanzman. The story is told entirely in captions, lettered by Charlton's dreadful 'A.Machine' device in 1. Whilst this is consistent with the original *Tarzan* newspaper strip it makes for poorly-paced comics. The artwork in 1-3 is nice, though hardly

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* Available in a collected edition

Glanzman's best. Luckily, the ultra-rare issue 4 is drawn by Bill Montes and Ernie Bache, guaranteeing more entertainment from the staples in the centrefold than the rest of the comic.~SW

TARZAN FAMILY

DC: *7 issues (60-66) 1975-1976*

Continuing the numbering from the cancelled *Korak* title, the Korak feature simply shifted into this new umbrella title, which also encompassed other Edgar Rice Burroughs creations. Robert Kanigher packs his stories with action – in twelve pages in 60 Korak fights a giant octopus, a horned ape and panther, enough material for a miniseries now – but they never really excite. They're mostly drawn by Rudy Florese or Noly Zamora, and it's interesting to see them attempt to imitate editor Joe Kubert's art style. Zamora also illustrates the new John Carter stories in 62-64, with the Carter tales in the final two issues being reprints. An early, but very welcome, reprint is Len Wein and Mike Kaluta's 'Carson of Venus' adaptation, to be found in every issue, and there are also *Tarzan* newspaper strip reprints. The 1930s Hal Foster pages in 60, 62 and 63 are printed as single pages, but the 1960s Russ Manning illustrated strips are bizarrely cut and pasted to resemble a comic strip.~HY

TASKMASTER

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 2002*

The Taskmaster was introduced by David Michelinie in *Avengers* 196, or the last page of 195, to be precise, as a rare memorable original creation who could hold his own against the team. This is because he instantly adapts and duplicates any moves he witnesses, combat or otherwise. That's been his ability over the years whether running training schools, supplying armies for super-villains, or acting as a mercenary. It's strange, then, that his talent is largely sidelined here, with a device enabling him to alter his appearance monopolised until the final issue. Taskmaster carries out a mission, but is not paid, causing him to teach his erstwhile employer a lesson. This is a decent enough action-thriller, but given the minimal use of Taskmaster's established ability, and presumably the reason he merits a miniseries in the first place, it could have starred almost any Marvel villain. It's drawn by five credited artists each issue in a refined manga style.~WJ

TATTERED BANNERS

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1998-1999**

This unusual strip, initially written by Keith Giffen and Alan Grant but finished by Grant alone, it's about a misanthropic New York social worker whose world goes mad one morning. Giant dogs on the streets and insects in the showers give a flavour of paranoid 19th century Russian literature by such as Gogol and Dostoyevsky and, similarly, fails to reach a satisfactory conclusion. Mick McMahon's art is not his very best, but one oughtn't to turn up one's nose at unique talent.~GK

Recommended: 1-3

TATTERS

Caliber: *One-shot 1996*

In 2050AD the US government is at war with its own bureaucracy and Tatters is the revived corpse of a superspy trying to solve the mystery of his death and resurrection in an atmosphere of futuristic cold war intrigue. A complex and enthralling tale from Steven Philip Jones and Aldin Baroza that's well worth seeking out.~WW

Recommended

TATTOO

Caliber: *4 issues 1996-1997*

Tattoo is a mysterious figure meandering her way through a future America in search of the Gate Opener, encountering disparate pockets of downtrodden and degenerate humanity. *Legend Lore* alumni Ralph Griffiths and Stuart Kerr fail to intrigue in this oh-so-average sci-fi thriller.~WW

TAXMAN

Comics Conspiracy: *One-shot 2000*

Jack's a gun-toting tax collector in a world where only the government is allowed to use technology. His assistant, Chris, tries to make him see the human side of his audits, but he can't see beyond his orders to collect taxes. Set in the same world as *Operator 99*, this has an interesting script from Doug Miers, but the artwork, by Don Walker, is inconsistent, too darkly coloured, but smoothly inked.~NF

TEAM AMERICA

Marvel: *2 issues 1982-1983*

After their first appearance in *Captain America* 269, five mavericks grudgingly gang up to use motorbikes licensed from Ideal Toy Corporation for stunt exhibitions and competition racing. Jim Shooter's yarns (1-2, 8-9, 11-12), which concentrate on racing and character interaction, outstrip Bill Mantlo's weary stories of espionage and environmental disasters. The mysterious, unidentified Marauder and a weak psionic link between the five major stars maintain some intrigue. Latter issues are surprisingly better than the lame premise promises. 9 is noteworthy for a fight-free guest appearance by Iron Man. The admirable issue 12 kicks off with a wonderful cover caption: "Because You Demanded It... The End Of Team America!", resolves all plot-lines and contains a forthright text page about the cancellation by Shooter, who points out that the comic was more successful than *Daredevil* during Frank Miller's first year. How different it all could have been.~APS

TEAM NIPPON

Aircel: *7 issue limited series 1989*

An awful piece of trash from Barry Blair about a team of pre- or post-adolescent (it's hard to tell from panel to panel) martial artists who dress up as superheroes to fight the Yakuza and the Tongs, and, of course, to sunbathe. Among them are Blair creations Samurai and Nightwynd. It's muddled and confusing, with characters appearing after they've been killed (not unknown in comics, but it's not a plot device here) and much of the artwork is as racially stereotypical and as offensive as anything produced during the propaganda-charged days of World War II. Avoid at all costs.~WW

TEAM ONE

Image: *2 issue microseries ('Stormwatch') 1995, 2 issue microseries ('WildC.A.T.S.') 1995*

Set in the early 1960s, one series details the beginnings of the superhero group that would grow into Stormwatch, the other does the same for WildC.A.T.S. The Stormwatch issues are totally dependent upon an extensive familiarity with the 1990s team, and Steven Seagle and Tom Raney can do little but bore and bewilder with arch comments and a half-baked plot by aliens to capture a missile silo. For WildC.A.T.S. James Robinson and Rich Johnson take another perspective on the missile base battle. Although better written, and with solid artwork, the decision to have the reader try to guess who became who in the 1990s team is distracting and counterproductive. One for the fans, only.~WW

TEAM 7

Image/WildStorm: *4 issue miniseries 1994*, 3 issue miniseries 1995, 4 issue miniseries 1996*

When Image's WildStorm branch constructed a retroactive continuity dating back over several decades, the untold story most readers wanted to see was that of Team 7. This was the supersoldier unit of which many modern-day WildStorm heroes had been members. They included Backlash, Deathblow, WildC.A.T.S.' Grifter, Wetworks' Dane and Gen^{13}'s Lynch) Almost everyone in Team 7 who didn't now have their own title was the father of at least one other major WildStorm character. After various hints and teasers, the real story was eventually told over three miniseries written by Chuck Dixon, and did not disappoint.

The Team 7 story tells of a unit of Navy SEALs set by the US government to be unwitting guinea-pigs for an experiment which gives them immense psychic powers and

makes them the ultimate weapon. But the powers are more than many of them can – or should even be asked to – handle, and the stresses of dealing with what they've become, added to the more and more insidious manipulation and betrayal by a government they had previously trusted, drive the team apart. By the end of the first series many have defected. The following two series carry on the air of doom and inevitability as the Team gradually realise they can't escape the clutches of a government that has used and abused them, and eventually they resign themselves to hoping that if they can't save themselves then at least they can try to save their children. The hindsight of reading a story to which we already know the ending adds a tragedy to the unfolding action, which is both poignant and incredibly fast-paced. As stand-alone stories the series is good, as background to the WildStorm universe it is excellent – and essential for understanding the motivations of the characters in their present-day incarnations.~JC
Recommended: Miniseries one 1-4

TEAM TITANS

DC: *28 issues (5x1, 2-24), 2 Annuals 1992-1994*

Absolutely awful spin-off series featuring Teen Titans from an alternate future trying to adapt to a new life in the Twentieth Century. Even close crossplotting with the parent title and transfer of popular character Donna Troy to head the team can't pep up dull stories about dull people. Add to that the confusion of too much time-travel and it was no surprise that the series was erased as part of the *Zero Hour* continuity correction event. Lacklustre and tedious.~WW

TEAM X/TEAM 7

Marvel: *One-shot 1996*

This cross-company pairing has the two teams independently sent into action by rival US secret services against a Middle-Eastern supersoldier factory. As things start to go wrong, they find themselves joining forces against Omega Red and a group of half-finished supersoldiers who've acquired a nuclear missile. There's no inventiveness in Larry Hama's script, which incorporates continuity mistakes, and the art by Steve Epting and Klaus Janson is very dull. Only if you must.~NF

TEAM YANKEE

First: *6 issue miniseries 1989*

War is bloody boring in the pages of Team Yankee. Whether that's down to the original novel or a poor adaptation is debatable. There's so much concern that the military terminology and soldier's shorthand conversation is correctly transcribed that large quantities of dialogue become so much babble to the average reader. Constant reference to the explanatory pages in the rear of the issue (1 and 4 only) is required to have an idea of what's going on. By concentrating on the activities of one battalion, war is presented in microcosm, but what might be an exciting against-the-odds war movie is dull and lifeless here.~WJ

TEAM YOUNGBLOOD

Image/Extreme: *22 issues 1993-1996*

Mega-proportioned babes falling out their costumes, ludicrously muscled guys, big, big, big guns and pin-up pages mid-story. Early issues, though, have an odd occurrence for Rob Liefeld titles: a modicum of plot, making Team Youngblood a veritable Sistine Chapel ceiling among Rob's product, but compared to most other superhero comics it reads like an enthusiastic fanzine. For later issues someone's realised a plot gets in the way of the fighting and pin-ups, and corrected the deficiency.~FP

TEASER AND THE BLACKSMITH

Fantagraphics: *1 issue 1989*

This toe-curlingly twee agrarian fantasy, with bonus psychedelic sex scenes, reads like the work of a 'liberated' sociology teacher. Writer/artist Timothy H. Glass has to point out to us slower students that Teaser and the Blacksmith is the "story of Pan's return to a passionless land". And there we were thinking it was just a load of dated hippie bilge, silly old us.~AL

TECH JACKET

Image: *2 issues – 2002 to date*

So far a very promising update on the Peter Parker scenario of the high-school loner being bestowed with incredible powers. In this case, it's the tech jacket, an alien bodysuit offering levels of protection varying from basic chest armour to full-covering armed battlesuit. Pencil artist E.J. Su relishes drawing complicated and time-consuming detail, while writer Robert Kirkman has set up several intriguing plots. Definitely one to watch.~FP

TECHNOPOLIS

Caliber: *4 issue miniseries 1997-1998*

Madison James is a bigoted reporter on a 1940s Earth technologically advanced by a Collarian spaceship crash-landing a decade previously. The Collarian community stranded on Earth has their own city, Technopolis, but divisions within their ruling council spill out into wider society. Creator Adrie Van Viersen, in conjunction with co-plotter Peter Taylor has turned out a little gem of an adventure comic, written by Taylor and Patrick Sauriol. How a world exposed to alien technology in the 1930s might be is well realised by Van Viersen, and it gives a gloss to the well-worn plot of the cynic turned fugitive accompanied by a beautiful woman, both caught in events beyond their control. Deserving of a far wider audience.~WJ
Recommended: 1-4

TEEN TITANS

DC: *Series one 53 issues 1966-1973 (1-43), 1976-1978 (44-53), series two 91 issues, 4 Annuals 1980-1988, series three 131 issues (0-130), 7 Annuals (5-11) 1984-1996, series four 24 issues, 1 Annual (1996-1998)*

Sparked by a team-up of three kid sidekicks – Robin the Boy Wonder, Kid Flash, and Aqualad – in *The Brave and the Bold* 54, DC threw in a distaff member – Wonder Girl, whose existence as a separate entity from her adult self had not previously been suspected – and dubbed the quartet the Teen Titans. Two further tryouts (*The Brave and the Bold* 60, *Showcase* 59) established sufficient demand for the team to be awarded their own comic.

In the annals of truly silly comics, there's little to beat your average issue of *Teen Titans* from the 1960s. Their early pledge to help ' Teens in Trouble', their truly inane Rogue's Gallery – The Mad Mod? Captain Rumble? Ding-Dong Daddy Dowd? Aieee! – and the excruciating dialogue, product of how middle-aged to elderly men (chiefly Bob Haney) thought "hip" teens actually spoke, made these issues an almost hallucinogenic experience. For the best example of this, check out the numbing 'A Christmas Happening' (13), with a magnetic Christmas tree (and the Titans as ornaments!), a ray that turns junk back into new consumer goods, and Wonder Girl in a Santa Claus mini-skirt, in a tortuous mod retelling of *A Christmas Carol*. The series' regular artist, Nick Cardy, once he'd hit his stride in the first few issues, did beautiful, lush artwork that glowed from the page. The combination of this vital, almost tactile art and the outstandingly bonkers stories resulted in some seriously trippy comics. From 16, the creators tried a more serious adventure angle, relying on inter-dimensional invaders to kick start some long term plot threads. This led to, among other things, the revelation of Wonder Girl's origin (and a spifty new costume!), and the addition to the cast of Hawk and The Dove, a philosophically opposed pair of sibling superheroes from a cancelled title. With 25, another new direction, the Titans are inadvertently involved in the death of a great humanitarian figure, and swear off the use of their powers until they have made amends. Approached by the intermittently psychic go-go dancer Lilith, they team with the mysterious Mr Jupiter, and undergo training as his agents, after Robin, too hot a property to nullify, has left the team. Mal Duncan, the first black Titan, joined in 26, a sadly stereotypical ghetto kid with a dream. The non-costumed aspect got old real fast, and by 30, except for Mal and Lilith, the group were mostly back in uniform, but occasionally ventured out in plain clothes to investigate matters, still under the auspices of Mr Jupiter. By now, desperation had set in and

Haney was stealing ideas from anywhere, *The Stepford Wives*, *Romeo and Juliet*, even *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, all overlaid with an attempt at Gothic horror in which the brightly costumed Titans looked embarrassed and out of place. When the series saw its finale, in a truly cringe-making *Rosemary's Baby* swipe, it was a merciful end. Fleetingly revived in 1976, the new version was straightforward superheroics, but of an inferior sort. It lasted only long enough to introduce a whole bunch of second string heroes – the original Bat-Girl (later Flamebird), the Bumblebee, the Joker's Daughter (later the Harlequin), and junior Hawkman the Golden Eagle – as "Titans West", predating the similar *Avengers* concept by over a decade.

The 1980 *New Teen Titans* surprised the critics by being a monster hit from day one. Wonder Girl, Kid Flash and Robin of the old team, plus part-time member Beast Boy, now named the Changeling, were teamed with brand new characters Raven (half-demon empath), Starfire (energy shooting alien princess), and Cyborg (Have a guess. What do you think he looked like?). Cosmic drama and high angst were the theme, writer Marv Wolfman and artist George Pérez clearly taking their inspiration from Claremont and Byrne's *X-Men*, then still fondly remembered. The New Teen Titans fought the JLA, defeated Raven's demon daddy Trigon, battled Starfire's evil sister, tracked down the killers of the Doom Patrol, and faced off against the Titans of Myth, stopping off at Paradise Island on the way. 1-10 are available as a hardbound book in the DC *Archives* series. The pace was brisk, the characterisation deft, and the title a good solid read. Where it truly excelled, however, was in the stories that dealt as much with emotions as with action. The two part 'Runaways' (26-27), the haunting 'Who Is Donna Troy?' in 38, and the stunning 'Judas Contract' in 42-44, climaxing in the third annual, were moving and skilful stories emphasising the emotional frailty of the humans behind the masks. Unfortunately, 'The Judas Contract' was virtually the swan song for quality in this incarnation of the Titans.

The success of *New Teen Titans* was such that DC issued a more expensive companion title, relaunching from 1, and Pérez left the original comic to work on it. DC had pre-empted this by rechristening the original series *Tales of the Teen Titans* from 40, and with the launch of the new comic, this foundered in a year's worth of inferior material before becoming a reprint of the deluxe edition. The new series started promisingly, with another match with Trigon, but that story never reached the heights of the previous series. Pérez left at the conclusion in 5, swiftly forcing upon the readers the realisation that he'd had more to do with the plotting than had been let on. Without Pérez, Wolfman took the Titans through a series of drab fight scenes, pointless exposition, clichéd character traits, and relentless attempts to introduce new characters while frequently ignoring the supposed stars. DC's management was eventually bludgeoned into publishing *Deathstroke The Terminator*, a spin-off starring an unremarkable Titans villain, in an attempt to climb the then popular Punisher bandwagon, but that didn't stop Wolfman shoehorning him into the *Titans* at every opportunity, to the series' constant detriment. Pérez was persuaded to return with 50, as the title changed again to *New Titans*, but his heart was no longer in it. The 'Who Is Wonder Girl?' tale, an attempted sequel to 38 of the second series, was a botched effort raising more questions than it resolved about the Titan whose complete history had been unravelled by *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. Staying only long enough to bestow one of the ugliest new costumes ever on the hapless Ms.Troy (54), Pérez fled again. Other distinguished illustrators worked on the title – Jose Luis Garcia-Lopez, Tom Grummett, Eduardo Barreto – but all seemed ill at ease. By now, the *Titans* were looking desperate; relaunch followed "New Beginning", followed "Old Order Changeth", each new line-up of Titans barely getting time to become known to the readers before being reshuffled again. By 100, an aborted wedding between Nightwing and Starfire, even the compensation of good artwork had gone. The last thirty or so issues were drawn in a sub-professional manner that was simply an embarrassment to what had once been DC's finest title. Eventually, they realised the harm this was doing to their reputation, and cancelled it; about eighty issues too late, but still.

Not wanting to lose the name, they promptly relaunched from 1 again, with an entirely new group – Argent, Risk, Prysm, Joto, and the Atom, a mainstay hero rejuvenated in the time-warping *Zero Hour*. Script and art were in the hands of Dan Jurgens, and Pérez came back, albeit only as an inker, for the early part of the run. Our heroes – Atom aside – had a common origin, being the result of alien genetic manipulation, and the name Titans was bestowed on them by a tabloid reporter. Links to the older team were quickly established, however, as Loren Jupiter, former patron of the original Titans, and Neil Richards, the ex-Mad Mod, became supporting cast members, together with Omen, a mysterious psychic who was eventually revealed to have been a Titan under another name. Despite conscientious efforts from all parties, the series never clicked. Readers resisted a Titans team lacking any big names from the past, and its significant that 'Then and Now' (12-15), which heavily featured the former Robin, Kid Flash, Speedy and Aqualad, is the only story arc at all difficult to obtain. Revealing the true identity and parentage of Omen, as well as featuring the death of a cast member, this is also the best-told tale in the series.

Adding Captain Marvel Jr. to the team, and inserting frequent guest appearances by other DC mainstays, did nothing to help ailing circulation. Plans were already afoot to launch *The Titans*, a new series featuring the original team and friends, so the Jurgens *Teen Titans* was, justifiably, deemed superfluous to requirements. Better than its immediate precursor, it nevertheless remained superheroics at its most generic.~HS

Recommended: Series two 26, 27, 38, 42-44, Annual 3

Tales of the New TEEN TITANS

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1982*

This spotlights the new characters introduced to the then extremely successful *Teen Titans*, one per issue. Respectively it concentrates on Cyborg, Raven, Changeling and Starfire, all written by Marv Wolfman and lavishly illustrated by George Pérez, the creative team who introduced the characters. Each of the characters has a tale to tell and a few secrets to reveal, and they're all well crafted and worthwhile supplements to the regular series.~HY

Recommended: 1-4

TEEN TITANS SPOTLIGHT

DC: *21 issues 1986-1988*

Started as fan interest in the 1980s Teen Titans was on the wane, this offered solo stories, initially of team members, but later of associates and villains. There's little bad here, but nothing really notable either, with the topics being far better than the execution. Alien Starfire discovers apartheid in 1-2, while Jericho's past returns in the overlong 3-6, all written by Marv Wolfman, while there's early Erik Larsen art on 10's Aqualad solo and 15's look at the Omega Men, an okay follow-up to their series written by Todd Klein. There's a homage to both *Tintin* and *Kamandi* in 11, when the Brotherhood of Evil have to become heroes, Ernie Colón draws Wonder Girl's trip to Central America in 12, and J. Michael Straczynski writes 13's story of Two-Face attempting to demonise Cyborg, which is the best of the run. Frances Kane is first named Magenta in 17, while the next two issues tie-in to *Millennium*. The series closes on a high with Sharman DiVono, Mark Evanier and Dan Spiegle turning in a story about an aggressive jailbird from the 1960s released into the 1980s. It captures the feel of the 1960s without ever descending to that level of silliness.~FP

Eastman and Laird's TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES

Mirage: *62 issues 1984-1993, series two 13 issues 1993-1995*
Image: *23 issues 1996-1999*
Mirage: *Series three (TMNT) 7 issues + 2001 to date*

This began an industry, in the process making its creators, who'd self-published the first issues, multi-millionaires. It's heartening given the comic industry's shabby history of ensuring creators whose ideas have earned fortunes rarely share in the proceeds. Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird's concept is decidedly off the wall, although owing a little to the ninja stories Frank Miller produced in *Daredevil*. Raphael, Leonardo, Donatello and the incorrectly spelled Michaelangelo live in the sewers where they are trained as ninjas by the humanoid rat Splinter (1). In addition to the ongoing series each stars in an Eastman and Laird-created solo issue, the best of which is Michaelangelo's Christmas story. There's a grubbiness, grittiness and violence in the early issues. These turtles look as if they inhabit the sewers, as does their human companion April when she visits. For all that, it's the idea and characters that carry the stories, as neither Eastman or Laird are great plotters or artists. Most early issues contain extended choreographed fight sequences spliced with the odd quip or mission recap, and the joke soon wears very thin. A guest shot from Cerebus, along with his creator Dave Sim, in 8 is the best of them.

From 9 other creators contribute with increasing frequency, Michael Dooney being the first. Eric Talbot and Mark Bodé also come aboard as semi-regulars, but it's Mark Martin's début in 16 that's the stand-out. His inventive storytelling, visual asides and ideas beyond fights make for an early treat. He returns in 22 and 23, the second part of which is all but a Gnat Rat tale, but this time his whimsy may prove off-putting, and the participation of the Turtles is minimal. Rick Veitch's 24-26 provide the last issues available in the assorted collections, but his Ed Roth-influenced 30 is better. Michael Zulli's art in 35-36 is welcome and the madcap script and art of Rich Hedden and Tom McWeeney provides another highlight in 38-40. By this time the comic has progressed far away from the ninja roots, and is open to all kinds of interpretations. Those who enjoyed the earlier issues probably won't care much for Hedden and McWeeney, with a Raphael solo story featuring spectacularly inept, yet nonetheless deadly small aliens. Perhaps the most unlikely contributor of the entire run is Richard Corben in 33, a colour issue. It works surprisingly well, with Jan Strnad's story of alternate turtles in time stretching Corben beyond his usual vistas.

With 46 it's goodbye to the guest creators (with the exception of those contributing pin-ups to the strange, almost wordless 50), and welcome back Eastman and Laird, with artist Jim Lawson. The remaining issues of their run are a continuing story, 'City at War', with preludes to 50 and the deal itself to 62. It's a back-to-basics approach and works far better than the earlier issues because by this point the turtles have individual characters, and there's more than just fights. If you prefer the ninja emphasis these issues are as good as it gets. Lawson's art has a European feel, and those who wish can see 62 as an ideal finishing point.

The second Mirage series is distinguished from the first by the lack of Eastman and Laird's names on the cover. Lawson writes and illustrates, and the warm colouring of Mary Woodring, then Eric Vincent, gives a distinct look, although Eric Talbot inking Lawson isn't welcome. 1 is very fragmented, foreshadowing greater issue-to-issue continuity, and a feeling of the ninja issues without a return to them. Anyone who enjoyed the Eastman and Laird run ought to find something worthwhile here also.

Long after the global fad passed, the turtles re-embraced the ninja concept at Image, but with occasional heavier doses of violence. In this they seemingly took their lead from Body Count, or perhaps it's writer Gary Carlson's response to the mass market dilution of the original premise. It provided a surprisingly durable revival. Penciller Frank Fosco falters whenever he strays from Frank Miller's style, but despite weak figurework his art has an action appeal. Carlson shakes up the status quo and plots decent adventure comics with enough going on to draw the reader back the following issue. The placement of guest characters is well conceived, particularly Savage Dragon and his vast supporting cast in 10-11, which make good sample issues.

It's Laird and Lawson who start the third Mirage series, ignoring the Image comics, and ageing the turtles to their thirties. It's consistently the best turtles to date. Laird's writing has improved, and he's developed the ability to introduce suspense and surprises with several subplots on the go at once. Lawson's art is grubby and stylised, and it would seem that no major character from the past is to be ignored here. If you loved the Turtles as a kid, this is the comic for you in meaty thirty-two page chunks.~WJ

Recommended: 16, 38-40

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES ADVENTURES

Archie: *3 issue miniseries 1988, 75 issues, 11 Specials, 2 Holiday Specials, 3 Movie Specials, 1988-1995, 3 issue miniseries (TMNT Presents the Mighty Mutanimals) 1991*, 3 issue miniseries ('Year of the Turtle') 1995*

Long running but poorly executed tie-in to the animated show based on the Mirage comic. Initially adapting TV episodes utilising the talents of funny animal comics stalwarts Dave Garcia and Ken and Beth Mitchroney, with 10 scripter Dean Clarrain switches over to original stories. Michaelangelo, Raphael, Donatello, Leonardo, Splinter and April are joined by a vast cast of mutated animal characters in their struggle to defend the Earth from the evil Shredder and Lord Krang. 14 marks a striking change as Don Simpson illustrates the first part of an Amazon adventure that is fast paced, thrilling, funny and delivers a strong Eco-warning without being obvious or preachy. The saga continues as the Turtles make their way back to the USA, foiling the plans of evil entrepreneur Mr Null, even crossing over into the spin-off Mighty Mutanimals to foil the invasion plans of the malicious Maligna. 20, a tribute to the Lee and Kirby monster comics of the 1960s, ends this creative period and the comics devolve into bland and formulaic fights and pizza gags, bad even for kids cartoons. The Movie Specials are very poor adaptations of the films, but the Spring Special, where the Turtles meet the Archies, may be of interest to collectors of the bizarre. 1-16 were available as collections.~WW

Recommended: 14

TEENAGENTS

Topps: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

Based on characters and concepts created by Jack Kirby, this is a lousy tribute to The King's creative genius. Writer Kurt Busiek and artist Neil Vokes tell a stunningly average yarn about a group of young heroes who travel to earth from an underground city with the aid of their "Omni-Bus", a cosmic coach that is one of the book's few authentically Kirbyesque touches.~AL

TEENAGERS FROM MARS

Rick Spears and Rob Goodridge: *4 issues + 2001 to date*

Supermarket checkout boy, Macon, who has a sideline as a self-published cartoonist, is fired after a mother protests about the demonic violence in a comic he sold to her son, Max, and the manager tells him to pull all of the comics from the market's shelves. Max is one of a group of boys committing grave robbery to fund their desire for the expensive first appearance of Captain Tomorrow, while the city of Mars is under mounting pressure over the images of sex and violence presented to its children. Self-published by the creators, this is an unsubtle (in some respects), well-presented tirade against censorship that also captures the anger and bitterness of youth at the restraints of parents and society. The doll-like features of the characters and slightly distorted anatomy add to the sense of detachment.~NF

Recommended: 1-4

William Shatner's TEK WORLD

Marvel/Epic: *24 issues 1992-1994*

In the year 2020 the most pernicious threat to society is the virtual hallucinogen Tek. Jake Cardigan, cop, Tek user and William Shatner lookalike is framed as a pusher and sentenced to fifteen years in a deep freeze satellite. Sprung after four years, he joins a high profile Detection Agency and is assigned to recover a doctor and his daughter who've discovered a cure for Tek addiction. Shatner's long-time collaborator Ron Goulart adapts the novels *Tek War* and *Teklords*, liberally interspersed with new material, and artist

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* Available in a collected edition

Lee Sullivan does his best, but it's still a largely uninspired Sci-Fi Private Eye in a dystopian tomorrow riff that borrows more than liberally from *Bladerunner* and Mike Hammer.~WW

TEKKEN FOREVER

Image: *4 issue miniseries 2001-2002*

Moronic fight comic based on a computer game where all the characters posture and hit each other at the slightest provocation. Impossible to follow without a scorecard, but there isn't one, and a sad indictment of the medium when obviously competent creators forget that not everybody is always familiar with the original licensed product. Total waste of time.~WW

Neil Gaiman's TEKNOPHAGE

Tekno: *10 issues 1995-1996*

Rob Nichols, a real-estate salesman, is transported to Kalighoul. By good luck he manages to work his way up through the ranks of the workers to threaten Phage, a reptilian monster who rules through fear, as seen in issues of *Mr Hero.* His subjects are so used to living in terror that when, as often happens, he decides to eat them, they don't put up much of a struggle. 1-6 tell the story of Nichols' attempt to strike a deal with or kill the Teknophage in order to attain power/wealth and/or rescue a missing earthwoman. Brian Talbot's artwork is, as ever, excellent, and Angus McKie's colouring are points of interest, but ultimately Rick Veitch's characters and story disappoint. The Paul Jenkins and Al Davison (7-10) present a more hopeful view of life on Kalighoul, but there's less humour involved, making the whole thing rather pretentious.~NF

TELLOS

Image: *10 issues 1999-2000*, one-shot ('The Last Heist'), one-shot ('Maiden Voyage') 2001, one-shot ('Sons and Moons') 2002*

This colourful, ultimately Tolkien derived, fantasy starts with an anthropomorphic bunny and a kindly-seeming mage before introducing a man-tiger, Koj, best friend to a young boy, Jarek, and Serra, a teenage pirate queen. They have lighthearted fights with characters hunting a mysterious amulet and with frog police. It's not awfully imaginative, with characterisation often limited to speech impediments or faulty syntax, while the language veers between courtly formality and New York wisecracks, with some expository interior monologue. A wet place in a fantasy story must be named something, but "Torrent, Land of a Thousand Storms" can't have exercised scripter Todd Dezago for long. Mike Wieringo's clear and pleasant art is well suited to the subject matter. There is not much story in 1-3, but things improve in 4 with the introduction of Hawke, an adventurer in love with Serra, and his partner Rikk, a kleptomaniac fox. Dezago's strengths as a writer come in to play with 5, in which this quite comic story hosts very violent surprises. Brad the stoned dragon, who calls everyone "dude", adds welcome humour to the remainder of the run, which is otherwise pretty serious while the heroes conclude their battle with the cruel Malesur, who would cover the whole bright world of Tellos with darkness. The last two issues cleverly reveal an extra level to the story. 1-3 were initially collected as 'The Joining' before 4 and 5 were added for 'Reluctant Heroes', with 'Kindred Spirits' hoovering up the remainder.

'The Last Heist', starring Rikk, with excellent art by Craig Rousseau, is the best of the one-shots, all still written by Dezago. 'Maiden Voyage', by the French artist Didier "Crisse" Crispeels, is the story of how Serra defeated some saucy sirens and became captain of her ship. The best thing about 'Sons and Moons' is the cover by the still great Nick Cardy.~GK

TEMPEST

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1996-1997*

Aquaman's sidekick finally comes of age. Ignored for decades, Aqualad is given new powers with a snazzy new costume. Now able to control heat and cold, he takes the new name Tempest. This was a very pleasant surprise, written and beautifully pencilled by Phil Jimenez (heavily influenced by George Pérez), with impressive colouring by Carla Feeny. The main plot deals with Tempest's inheritance, his dysfunctional family and the historical myths of Atlantis. The story evolves around Garth's emotions and the manner in which he deals with the return of his apparently dead lover, Tula. Jimenez handles Tempest's sense of loss excellently (drawing on his own personal experience) in concluding that life must go on, and the past doesn't return.~HY

Recommended: 1-4

TEMPLE DUNCAN

Eros: *One-shot 2001*

Ho Che Anderson ponders on his sexual predilections via a parade of previous lovers. Witty in places, and holding the attention throughout, it's unlikely Anderson's sketchy illustration panders to most Eros customers. That's probably deliberate.~FP

TEMPTATION

Eros: *3 issue miniseries 1995*

Strange Japanese fantasies from Hiroyuki Utatane, drawn in manga style, and with a twist ending that surprises by the convention of its presence after twenty pages of hardcore sex rather than the twist itself. Beware the third issue being almost half pin-ups.~WJ

TEMPTRESS: Blood of Eve

Caliber: *2 issues 1997*

An introduction to a much larger maxi-series called 'The Terrorist's Saga'. Tom Sniegoski and Eric Powell tell the tale of Eve, a really old vampire who claims to be 'The' Eve. She wanders the Earth hunting demons and monsters. Dull stuff.~WW

TEMPUS FUGITIVE

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1990-1991**

This is an unusual comic: a stroke book for the aviation enthusiast, ingeniously set up to present the reader with a succession of lithe, shiny machines in energetic action, and all tied together by something vaguely resembling a plot. Ray is a fugitive from the future, and he zips backwards and forwards through the 20th century, always (somehow) emerging within feet of an aeroplane. Ken Steacy's dialogue is porn-film terrible and his art for the human characters is perfunctory to the point of contempt, but you could keep warm through a bad winter on the love that's gone in to drawing those aeroplanes. Some landscapes are also striking: aerial views that make you want to grow wings. Flick through an issue if it comes your way, and discover a different way of looking at the world.~FC

TENDER FLESH

Draculina: *One-shot 1997*

Variation on *The Most Dangerous Game,* with a dancer, Paula, lured to an island by a decadent, cannibalistic foursome, who seduce her and then hunt her, after sending her boyfriend away. Using stills from the film itself, occasionally doctored for a comics effect, Kevin Collins provides a script that could have done with being proofread, but despite its bizarre scenes and gratuitous nudity, it probably makes more sense here than in the film it's based on.~NF

The TENTH

Image: *4 issue miniseries ('Abuse of Humanity') 1997*, 15 issues (0-14) 1997-1999*, One-shot ('Configuration') 1998, 4 issue miniseries ('The Black Embrace') 1999*, 4 issue miniseries ('Evil's Child') 1999-2000, 1 Special 2000*

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries ('Resurrected') 2001-2002*

Tony Daniel's Tenth is a monster, the creation of Rhazes Darkk, an alien initially supported by the government, who is attempting to recreate his race and repopulate the Earth with the help of ten super-powered beasts. As his name implies, Victor DeLeon is the tenth monster, a CIA operative whose mission to infiltrate Darkk's experimental town Springdale goes disastrously wrong. The leads are Esperanza (Espy) del Toro, who has powers of telekinesis, and Zorina Fine, two young women caught in the intrigues between mysterious

* Available in a collected edition

government department UPROAR (and it's chief, Sam Jaffe), the power-hungry General Greer and Darkk himself. Other characters include Zorina's mother, Espy's cat, which has powers of its own, Adrenalynn who's a Russian-made cyborg with a young girls' personality, and the manipulative Gulliver who is largely responsible for throwing most of the characters together.

As the series progresses, Darkk's monsters turn against him, particularly Gozza, whose attempted coup comes to nought in 'The Black Embrace', co-plotted by Scott Lobdell. 'Evil's Child' reads like a conclusion, revealing links between Darkk's experiments and the two women. 'Resurrected', effectively re-starts everything with all the main players back in place, and a continuation promised. After a while it's possible to get used to Daniel's impossibly long-limbed women and the scripts and artwork mesh in a more readable way as the ongoing series progresses (Beau Smith is "developer and scripter" until 10). There's just about enough characterisation to make you care what happens, but the pacing and scene shifts often leave too many shortcuts in the storytelling.~NF

THE 10TH MUSE

Image: *10 issues 2001-2002*
Avatar: *1 issue + 2002 to date*

In Greek mythology the nine daughters of Mnemosyne are collectively called the Muses. This series proposes a tenth: Justice. Beauteous district attorney Emma Sonnet transforms into the superheroic Muse to battle evil, but unknowingly. Her double life dates back to a visit to Greece where she went missing for five years. Early issues show Emma and her best friends piecing her experiences back together, followed by visits to *Savage Dragon*'s apocalyptic future and the fantasy past of *Tellos*, awakening to find that the goddess' essence has been stripped away. By 10 the Muse inhabits the assistant of the sinister Grayson Bishop, Emma's unwanted suitor. 10th Muse was created as a vehicle for wrestler and model Rena Mero, better known as WWF's Sable. Despite the arch dialogue, Marv Wolfman scripts lucidly, with the second story arc the best as Emma seeks the help of Medusa in 8 and her sister muses hire a trademark flouting mercenary named Orion in 9. It's an exciting read with a weak introduction thanks to the unexplained guest shots. The better art is by Roger Cruz from 5. His clean linework works well with the colour, adding some much-needed stability to the series continuing into the Avatar series, which was launched with multiple covers. Individual issues remain hard to follow.~SW

TERMINAL CITY

DC/Vertigo: *9 issue limited series 1996-1997*, 5 issue miniseries ('Aerial Graffiti') 1997-1998*

In a massive city, four famous men are publicly disgraced before their scheduled appearances at a major City Fair. One of them is Cosmo Quinn, human fly, now a window-cleaner crawling up the sides of very tall buildings. As the story progresses we find out what the others have been doing when they return to the city to seek revenge for their humiliations. Additional characters are introduced, like mob boss Big Lil, and sisters Faith, Hope and Charity, while the action takes place in and around a large hotel. In 'Aerial Graffiti', a sky-writer turns his slogans into obscenities, threatening the city's reputation ahead of the opening of the Transatlantic Tunnel and Charity's gambling debts become life-threateningly high. The first series is slowly paced, but there is a lot of territory to cover. The second seems rushed in comparison as writer, Dean Motter seems to rely more on explanations than storytelling. It is fun and intriguing, though there are so many significant cast members that characterisation suffers. Michael Lark's artwork is suitably modernist (and heavily influenced by Alex Toth) for Motter's retro city and pulp atmosphere.~NF

TERMINAL POINT

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1993*

There's a conspiracy by an organisation called Terminus to assume control of time, and to this end an operative called Pilot has been sent to construct a beacon for their use. He turns renegade, though, and hides out in 1946, where he falls in love with a nightclub singer. Terminus, of course, come after him. It's all simple action stuff from Bruce Zick, still very much in Kirby-style story mode, but fails to involve.~FP

THE TERMINATOR

Now: *17 issues 1988-1990, 5 issue miniseries ('The Burning Earth') 1990, 2 issue microseries 1990*

If ever there was a film suited to comics where unlimited special effects cost nothing, it's *The Terminator*. Sadly, Now appoint shoddy amateur artists who consistently scupper decent scripts. The comic stays in 2031, a world controlled by machines, one in which the robotic Terminators are programmed to wipe out humanity. Initially there are separate story arcs to look in on assorted human communities and loners, the best of which is 7's story of a modified wolf. From 8 the community introduced in 1-3* is the central focus; John Connor, the hero mentioned in the *Terminator* film, returns in 12. Writer Ron Fortier must have wondered who he angered in a previous life, given the appalling artists who illustrate his always effective scripts. It seems, though, that he was storing credits for 'The Burning Earth' miniseries, illustrated by Alex Ross: a quantum leap in quality. Ross paints a dark gloomy world to match the circumstances, and the story has a final assault on Skynet. This is the series to sample. Now's final fling before their licence was revoked was a two-part story, just titled *Terminator*, recounting events preceding the first film.~FP

THE TERMINATOR

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries ('Tempest') 1990*, 4 issue miniseries ('Secondary Objectives') 1991*, One-shot 1991, 4 issue miniseries ('The Enemy Within') 1991-1992*, 3 issue miniseries ('Endgame') 1992*, 3 issue miniseries ('Hunters and Killers') 1992*, 1 Special 1998, 4 issue miniseries ('Death Valley') 1998, 4 issue miniseries ('The Dark Years') 1999*

Based on the film in which a robot 'Terminator' is sent back in time to prevent the defeat of a worldwide computer network that has been systematically destroying humankind. The Terminator's objective is to kill Sarah Connor, the mother of the rebel leader, John, but he is opposed by a human also sent back through time who becomes John's father. In 'Tempest', more humans arrive in the past, with a plan to prevent the future coming about by killing Dr. Hollister, who invented Skynet (the computer network) at Cyberdyne Systems. Needless to say, some terminators arrive to stop them, including Dudley, half-human, half-Terminator, with whose help the humans eventually seem to have succeeded. This leads to 'Secondary Objectives' and the Terminators trying to kill Sarah Connor again. The characters reappear in 'The Enemy Within', no treading any new ground, but the storyline is resolved in 'Endgame', which does have a satisfying conclusion. Written by John Arcudi ('Tempest'), Ian Edginton ('The Enemy Within') and James Robinson (the rest), it's only the last that brings the storyline to any sort of life while Paul Gulacy ('Secondary Objectives') and Jackson Guice ('Endgame'), with very similar photo-realistic styles, offer the best of the artwork.

The one-shot by Robinson and Matt Wagner has a pop-up motorbike in the centrefold, and is a clever and well-painted story about a Terminator trying to kill the wrong Sarah Connor. 'Hunters and Killers' at least attempts to add something to the series, set in Russia where rebels attempt to destroy the Mir space station considered a refuge for a Skynet near-defeat. Unfortunately, it's a flat, unconvincing tale. At this point, Dark Horse lost the license for the series.

The 1998 Special is the prelude to the miniseries of the same year (retrospectively called, 'Death Valley'). It's drawn by Guy Davis, whose artwork simply isn't right for this sort of action-oriented strip. Alan Grant's script tries to introduce something new to a pair of Terminators, who are still trying to kill Sarah Connor, but who are distracted by the leader of a group of Satan-worshippers into chasing him and an innocent family through the desert. Drawn by Steve Pugh, the miniseries is better, but like Mel Rubi on 'The Dark Years' (again by Grant, this tells two parallel tales of John Connor in the present and the future), lacks a realism that seems more appropriate to the series. Dark Horse have collected editions of most series.~NF

TERMINATOR 2

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1991*

An adaptation of the film, written by Gregory Wright, with artwork by Klaus Janson. It's difficult to follow if you haven't seen the film, but otherwise it's quite an effective adaptation, reviving a lot of the laughs and thrills. Janson, with his sketchy style, is an interesting choice as artist on a project where you might expect slavish photorealism; his crude handling of faces is sometimes distracting, but this is more than balanced by the feeling of spontaneity and freshness.~FC

TERRARISTS

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1993-1994*

As corporations continue to plunder the planet the Earth creates her own superpowered champions with a brief to save the planet. Subtlety isn't a consideration, but the story is solid enough and the painted art of John Erasmus shows promise until deadline pressures obviously cut in.~FP

THE TERRITORY

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1999*

Our hero wakes in a bizarre world he doesn't understand, to find he has amnesia. He has two constants in his life: one is his conviction that he must find Scarlett, a woman he believes loves him despite all evidence to the contrary, and the other is his disproportionate dislike of a cartoon dog that everyone else seems to love. Jamie Delano's plot is strange and full of metaphors, and it's soon obvious that something is not right in this weird place. David Lloyd's art is his usual professional work, and the end result is an engaging comic, although it is a case of when you guess the end rather than if.~DB

TERROR Inc

Marvel: *13 issues 1992-1993*

A very dark sense of humour is at work in the creation of a stylish and articulate inhuman mercenary able to dismember humans and demons alike. Having done so, Terror can replace his own bodily parts with them, absorbing all memories, sensations and abilities. Realising that his Schreck character from the Epic series *Doctor Zero* was too good to waste in a supporting role, Dan Chichester reincarnated him here. The execution, so to speak, doesn't match the concept, but if you want a look try the typically gruesome Christmas tale in 8.~FP

TERROR TOTS

Tapestry: *1 issue 1996*

The spirits of warrior monks from centuries past inhabit six year old quintuplets. The joke is stretched far too thin over even one comic, but Paul Fricke's art is delightful.~WJ

TERRY AND THE PIRATES

Flying Buttress: *25 volumes 1986-1992*

Milt Caniff's Associated Press Syndicate newspaper strip commenced on October 22nd 1934, augmented with Sunday pages from December 9th. It's set in 1930s China with the increasing threat of Japanese incursion. Young Terry is looked after by adventurer Pat Ryan and oriental grotesque Connie, joined later by the grosser Big Stoop. Terry is the emotional focus of the strip whilst Pat remains something of a macho archetype. There are many fascinating women portrayed in the stories, the most infamous being Chinese bandit queen Dragon Lady. The story also keeps running into unforgettable goodtime girl Burma. There's romance with the tragic Raven Sherman, the flighty Normandie Drake and Terry's 1940s girlfriend April Kane. The male villains make their presence felt but General Klang in 6, Baron DePlexus in 8 and Captain Judas in 13-14 are no match for the girls. Terry grew up very quickly when America entered the war in 1941, becoming a pilot under Col. Flip Corkin in 17.

Each sixty-page volume covers just under six months of continuity, running the dailies and the Sunday pages in date order. It is no exaggeration to say that the scripting style that Milt Caniff perfected in the 1930s on this strip is still being used today in most comics. If that weren't enough, these remain some of the most exciting stories ever told in comic form. They're beautifully realised by Caniff in a fluent, unfancy style that owes some of its developing mastery of chiaroscuro to Caniff's colleague Noel Sickles. The reprints run up to Dec 1946 when Caniff left Associated Press to create a strip he owned a slice of and for which he would receive greater rewards – *Steve Canyon*.~SW

Recommended: 1-25

TEX BENSON

Metro: *4 issues 1987*

3-D Zone: *4 issues 1990-1991*

Tex Benson is an impossibly desirable space-jock in a light-hearted guns'n'girls strip. Creator Chuck Roblin's art is heavily influenced by the 1940s great Lou Fine, but his storytelling is very muddled and difficult to follow.~WJ

TEX DAWSON Gunslinger

Marvel: *3 issues 1973*

1950s reprints featuring Tex of the title who "rode the Western range with his fighting pals Whirlwind and Lightning". Whirlwind and Lightning were respectively a horse and a wolf, but this doesn't stop Tex chattering away to them both. These days he'd be in a Care In The Community programme; in the 1950s he had his own comic with predictable plots and dull art. Were kids really that naïve once?~FP

THANOS QUEST

Marvel: *2 issue microseries 1990*

Thanos quests for the six infinity gems in his never-ending bid for Mistress Death's approval. This inferior Jim Starlin plot regurgitates past classics, strips Thanos of his awe and majesty and portrays Marvel's cosmic entities as five-year-olds.~APS

THB

Horse Press: *9 issues (1-5, 6 a-d) 1994-2002, one-shot (Giant THB Parade) 1996, one-shot ('Circus') 1998, one-shot (THB:M3) 2000*

Paul Pope seemed to spring out of nowhere. In the time it took him to self-publish three thick black and white volumes of his futuristic teen adventure story, *THB* he'd gone from small press unknown to one of the most fêted new comic artists. Although you can see his art developing over the first couple of issues (a delightful process in itself), he is obviously a talented artist from the start, drawing in several styles, using watercolour and washes for particularly atmospheric scenes, but returning frequently to an elongated brush style reminiscent of the Italian adventure tradition. His page design and pacing owe something to Moebius and Jean Claude Forest, but he's also taken tricks and effects from the likes of Alex Toth: an excellent selection of influences that never overwhelm his natural drawing abilities.

THB is packed with the escapades of H. R. Watson, the precocious young daughter of an important scientific industrialist who, on the cusp of adulthood, is one minute the intrepid adventurer and the next an impulsive schoolgirl. To protect her from people who might want to attack her father through her, she is given THB, a giant genie-like bio-construct concealed in a tiny pill. Just add water and you have an instant bodyguard. Sometimes, however, water is hard to find, especially as the series is set on Mars.

Pope, with all the enthusiasm of a science-fiction fan, has mapped out the minutest details of his extraordinary yet often anachronistic future. Humans build huge Martian cities built by humans over the ruins of the native architecture, and indentured Martians work for them, ruled by a weird bureaucracy of insect-masked civil servants who hide their flesh behind metallic body suits. When HR's father tries to move outside the jurisdiction of the cities, the police begin to hound her, leading to a series of meetings, chases and attacks. The issues are huge, seventy-two or ninety-six pages of detailed black and white artwork (6 itself is split into four as 6a, 6b, 6c, and 6d), allowing Pope plenty of space to develop the relationships between HR and her friends and allies, as well as exploring the Martian culture. Engrossing, if often mystifying, read.

For those who fall in love with Pope as an artist, the oversize soft back 'Circus' is a must. It reworks material from the early issues: 'The Hidden Face' from 1 becomes 'Hidden Face Adventure 97', while 'The Bumble Hip Shake' is completely reinterpreted to become 'THB Circus'. Created between 1996 and 1997 when he'd begun reworking *THB* in a manga style for Kodansha, it covers Pope's extremely creative period when his Hugo Pratt-influenced linear working method was being blown apart by the approach necessary to communicate with a new audience raised on manga. Several critics complain they can't understand Pope's work. Gentlemen, you must try harder! His art looks better than ever printed on the larger pages on newsprint.~FJ

Recommended: 1-5, and 6 a-d, 'Circus'

THEATER OF THE MEEK

Ice World Press: *1 issue 2000*

Small, but disturbing moments from the youth of creator Robyn Chapman. The ponderous pace, basic art and insignificance of the stories would render them easily dismissable were they not autobiographical. Anyone who refers to herself as "Turdus" shouldn't be exorcising herself via comics, they should be seeking therapy.~FP

THERE'S A MADMAN IN MY MIRROR

Bench Press: *One-shot 1999*

Classic yet innovative style of comic storytelling using large single and double-page illustrations with imbedded prose to tell the story of a US war correspondent. He steals Hitler's diary from his Berlin bunker in the days immediately following the Fuhrer's suicide, and the macabre effect the writings then have on his own hapless psyche. Classic chiller from James Kitchen.~WW

Recommended

The Sandman Presents:THE THESSALIAD

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 2002*

Featuring the post-Morpheus adventures of the bookish Thessaly, last of the Thessalian witches, as introduced in *Sandman* 32-37. Bill Willingham and Shawn McManus craft a cracking thriller as the deadliest witch alive's perpetual quest for a peaceful life is shattered by the ghostly Fetch who drags her out of reality and onto the Allegorical Highway on an all-stops journey to Hell. Willingham's sharp dialogue and the clean, cartoony art make for a seductively spooky read.~WW

THEY WERE 11

Viz: *4 issue miniseries 1995**

A science-fiction romance with the premise that teams of trainees from all over the galaxy have to face a final test before being allowed to enter the Galactic University. It's important to all of them to a greater or lesser extent. Though each team is supposed to have ten members, the story is about one that has eleven. That there is an extra member is kept secret from the rest of the teams but also remains mysterious to them. With a delicate but deft touch, Moto Hagio, who both writes and draws the story, has produced a fun but thoughtful tale.~NF

THIEVES AND KINGS

I Box: *39 issues + 1994 to date*

A peculiar title, much prized by those who read it, yet little known generally. Unable to pack in enough material per issue to tell his broad fantasy story, creator Mark Oakley (M'Oak) opts to separate his comic pages with pages of text continuing the story. Certainly a valid storytelling device, it comes a cropper here because M'Oak is no more than a functional writer, although his art improves immensely over time. The plot starts with Rubel, teenage thief under royal protection, having located a crown hidden to determine who would succeed to the throne, and having passed it on to the princess. Accompanied by an imp, Rubel manages to make enemies with ease, and in 5 learns that his royal patronage might not be the boon he assumed. Thereafter the focus shifts a little from Rubel, with the trials of reincarnated girl of destiny Heath Wingwit and her mentor, the wizard Quinton, occupying equal space. Rubel and Heath meet in 18, an issue with plenty of background explanation for those wanting to dip in for a feel of the series. Thereafter they're more or less a team with a purpose, although spend plenty of issues separated.

Thieves and Kings frustrates with plenty of seemingly superfluous detours. There is an extended story to tell, and every so often a few clues point towards quite a clever idea, but so many issues have the feeling of marking time. They're characterised by ultimately meaningless chases and battles early on, then disguised a little more skillfully by whimsical conversations. Overall an abiding thought is that the whole may have worked better as a novel. Reading as it does like a children's fairy-tale with the occasional adult intrusion, there's never any real sense of danger, but those who enjoy fantasy material might be as charmed as the regular readership. Sample 23 with Heath attempting to enter a tower, and make up your own mind. M'Oak does keep all issues in print via collections.~WJ

THE THING

Charlton: *17 issues 1952-1954*

Just before their comic line's collapse Fawcett put together this horror anthology hosted by the unseen "Thing". The title ended up published by Charlton, who bought lots of Fawcett's inventory. By 1953 new material was being packaged by Al Fago whose artists included many newcomers to the industry including Tony Tallarico, Dick Ayers, Seymour Moskowitz and Steve Ditko. The tales are cheap, nasty and include gruesome interpretations of *Hansel and Gretel*, *Cinderella* and *Rumplestiltskin* in 11, 12 and 14, with the last two being some of Ditko's earliest comics work. In 14's 'Evil Eye' a man's arms and legs are gnawed off by rats before he is thrown, still living, into the sea. With such horrific contents it was inevitable that the comic would be scuppered by The Comics Code.~SW

THE THING

Marvel: *36 issues 1983-1986, 4 issue miniseries (Adventures of the Thing) 1992, 4 issue miniseries ('Freakshow') 2002, one-shot (Thing/She-Hulk) 2002*

During his critically acclaimed run on the *Fantastic Four*, writer/artist John Byrne took The Thing – one of the team's founder-members – away from the group and gave him a solo title. The Byrne written issues are very good, using the extra space to explore the character intelligently. Later issues, written by Mike Carlin, aren't as good but are still worth a glance, but Ron Wilson's art throughout is ordinary. Byrne returned for the final two issues, a story completed in *West Coast Avengers* 10. The first miniseries reprinted selected Thing team-up adventures from *Marvel Two-In-One*, while 'Freakshow' is a pointless morality play in which circus freaks who Ben Grimm encountered as a child come back into his life as the rocky, man-monster Thing. Oh, and he bemoans his lot for panel after panel, as if we haven't had enough of that in the previous forty years of Marvel Comics. Really, don't bother. In the one-shot The Thing and his one-time replacement in the Fantastic Four team up for a double-sized fight scene for no really good reason. Nicely drawn by Bryan Hitch and Paul Neary though, and the who-is-stronger-the-Hulk-or-the-Thing brigade might enjoy it.~JC

Recommended: Series one 3

THE THING FROM ANOTHER WORLD

Dark Horse: *2 issue microseries 1992, 4 issue miniseries ('Climate of Fear') 1992, 4 issue miniseries ('Eternal Vows') 1993-1994*

Continuing where John Carpenter's film ended, the first series has a team of Navy Seals massacred, giving the alien an opportunity to escape into the outside world, leaving hero MacReady adrift. Chuck Pfarrar's script seems rushed and rather cramped, while John Higgins' artwork is patchy. MacReady is rescued from the ice and some Argentinians encounter the alien in 'Climate of Fear', by John Arcudi and Jim Somerville, but it's David deVries' 'Eternal Vows' that really moves the idea on, introducing two Things and keeping the suspense at high pitch throughout. In this he's greatly helped by the artwork of Paul Gulacy, who's not at his best but still sharp.~NF

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* Available in a collected edition

THE 3RD DEGREE

NBM: *4 issue miniseries 2002*

A company executive attempts to control an artificial intelligence that's evolved in a new global computer system while a former programmer attempts to prevent it. Getting further information from writer Chris Rowley is like pulling teeth, as he makes it as difficult as possible to follow the story, with masses of technical language and new slang to prove it's set in the future. The rebels run hither and yon, a step ahead of the authorities all the time, and it would be a totally tiresome read were it not for artist Justin Norman occasionally showing a little inspiration.~WJ

THIRD WORLD WAR

Fleetway/Quality: *6 issue miniseries 1991*

When originally produced to launch the UK's *Crisis*, this was groundbreaking stuff. Pat Mills, hand on bleeding heart, extrapolates a few years into the future from the 1980s envisaging an era when soldiers sponsored by multinationals enforce corporate imperialism amid the poor of South America. Mills commendably incorporates real life atrocities, and he's harsh in his condemnation of the perpetrators, the systems permitting them to operate and ecological ignorance. The material hasn't dated well, though, and the incessant proselytising grates. The stylised art of Carlos Ezquerra, although very good, isn't to all tastes.~FP

THIRTEEN

Dell: *29 issues 1961-1971*

Subtitled 'Going on Eighteen', this is John Stanley's wonderfully realised teen series about the life and loves of Val, her best friend, Judy, her neighbour, Billy, and her sister, Evie. Each issue normally consists of two Val strips, one featuring Judy and one featuring a younger Judy and her relationship with put-upon, Jimmy Fuzzi. Judy starts out as rather plump and homely, but by 5 has thinned out a bit and is more of an equal to Val in the battle for dates. A brief flirtation with Paul Vayne occupies Val from 6-11, until she realises her feelings for Billy, who she's always treated as a doormat. Not that dating him means any less trouble for Billy. Stanley's perfectly paced humour and the pitfalls of everyday life and love make this a joy to read however outdated the fashions and concerns might seem now. The final issues from 26 are reprints from 1.~NF

Recommended: 5-25

THIRTEEN O'CLOCK

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1992*

The two stories in this one-shot feature Mr. Murmur, a masked detective who appears to operate much like The Shadow. The title story was originally serialised in *Deadline USA* 1-3. It connects the murder of several doctors at the hands of the corkscrew-wielding Wheezer, a group of doctors who meet secretly and work under the direction of someone who manifests himself as a floating skull, and a flower shop whose owner nurtures flesh-eating plants. So, just the sort of thing you'd expect from Richard Sala, then. His twilight world is full of mysterious creatures, dangerous, if not deranged, men of science and doomed participants (there are few survivors of Sala's tales). His creepy artwork complements this world perfectly and if the results are too genre-specific to put him in the first rank of cartoonists, his work is always entertaining, if grim.~NF

Recommended

30 DAYS OF NIGHT

IDW: *3 issue miniseries 2002**

This caught everyone on the hop by selling out astoundingly quickly, largely via word of mouth. It's a classic horror story founded on a good idea. There's a town in Alaska where the sun sets on November 18th and doesn't rise for a month, making it an ideal place for a vampire convention. Steve Niles knows his way around this type of material, providing a cinematic plot that if not confounding expectations, certainly delivers. The stark, scratchy art of Ben Templesmith won't be to all tastes, but, given the setting, could not be anything other than bleak to be effective.~FP

Mark Crilley's 32 PAGES

Sirius: *One-shot 2001*

Literally, thirty-two self-contained pages by the creator of the critically-acclaimed *Akiko*. According to Crilley's introduction the pages were originally doodled in coffee shops and then self-published in 1995 and 1996 as editions of *Mark Crilley's 12 Pages*. Whilst there's great charm, skill and overflowing talent here the contents remain shallow and slavishly Crumb-like. An exquisitely decorated box of smoke.~SW

The Mighty THOR

Marvel: *Series one 377 issues (126-502), 19 annuals, 1 Giant-Size 1966-1996, series two 57 issues + 3 annuals 1998 to date*

By the time *Journey into Mystery* became *The Mighty Thor* (right in the middle of a major tussle with Hercules), the precepts of the Asgardian and Marvel Universes were already fully established. Furthermore Jack Kirby was already the premier superhero and high concept artist working in comics. His efforts would shape every superhero comic for most of the next decade, and his artistic influence would only be rivalled by Neal Adams, who very briefly followed him on *Thor*. With that kind of a legacy it's hard to understand that the *Thor* of that period is a rather poor read.

Replacing the inadequate crime tales and villains such as the Cobra, Mr Hyde or Radioactive Man were stellar armadas, evolutionary meddlers and more and more threats to Thor's mystic homeland Asgard. The perennial ploys of evil half-brother Loki still resulted in nothing, his subsequent awesome punishments still equated favourably with being stood in a corner, and All-Father Odin banished and/or diminished Thor's power every second Tuesday. The nonsensical romance with soap opera reject Jane Foster was abruptly dropped in favour of Sif, a tough Asgardian cookie in 137 and the scope and panorama of a War of Powers began. It would continue in one form or another until long after Kirby's departure. The stories Kirby wanted to tell weren't compatible with the practicalities of periodical publishing. His heart seemed much more in tune with the epic mythologies that featured in the 'Tales of Asgard' back-up feature, begun in *Journey into Mystery* 97 and running almost continuously until replaced by The Inhumans in 146-152. Thereafter the entire page count was devoted to Thor's increasingly melodramatic adventures.

High cosmic dramas demand epic conclusions, but comics survive by never ending, and a never convincingly refuted story explains Kirby's decision to leave Thor and Marvel for DC to produce *New Gods*. In Norse legend Ragnarok is the final days of the Gods, and in Thor it was thwarted many, many times. Scripter, editor and publisher Stan Lee turned down Kirby's pleas to finally have Ragnarok occur. Kirby wanted to begin a new series based on the aftermath. Between 159 and the parting in 179, concept replaced characterisation, never a Kirby strong point. Readers learn that there never was a human Don Blake, merely Thor under a spell (158-159), and the Thunder God fought and eventually discovered the secret of the planet-devouring Galactus (160-162, 168-169) and even battles the artificial human "Him", who would eventually become Adam Warlock (165-166). A change in publishing policy exacerbated the problems as Marvel switched to single issue stories. John Buscema became the first artist other than Kirby to draw an issue of *Thor* with 178, and Kirby's final outing was the first chapter of a tale involving Loki and the devil-lord Mephisto. Neal Adams completed the story (180-181) before Buscema became the regular artist for more of the same-old, same-old, which continued until Gerry Conway became writer with 193.

Conway planned a little further ahead than Lee or Kirby, and his fantasy sensibilities moved *Thor* into a less grandiose, yet more humanistically combative form, which obviously

* Available in a collected edition

suited the more realistic sensibilities of his artist. The Asgardians never looked less like deities than under Conway and Buscema. If there were fewer old standby plots though, there was also no grand spectacle. The closest moments came when a chunk of Ego, the Living Planet is used to hyperstimulate evolution or when Loki uses the Legions of Asgard to invade Earth which introduces a new plot: Odin Goes Missing (232-234). It would recur many times. By now the title was near terminally in the doldrums, as a succession of writers flail about. Rival pantheons are introduced, so are more aliens, old and new whilst a succession of inappropriate inkers dampen the strengths of Buscema's drawing. Even a pencilling stint by arch-stylist Walt Simonson was drowned by the likes of inker Tony DeZuniga (260-271). In 272 classical scholar and ex-English teacher Roy Thomas takes over, beginning an intriguing period that sees the introduction of Red Norvell - a replacement Thor – and a scheme to hasten and thereby control the extent of Ragnarok. This in turn leads to a challenging epic, if overlong and badly drawn. By enlarging on Kirby's *Eternals* series, it links Marvel's gods to Wagner's Ring Cycle of operas, in the process giving Asgard and Thor a proper origin, and thereby explaining the Thunder God's obsessive dedication to the mortal world. It culminates in a battle with the Celestials in 300, although by then Thomas is gone and it's left to Mark Gruenwald and Ralph Macchio to script the big finish. The succeeding issues pall in comparison, although a fill-in by Doug Moench and Rick Leonardi in 303 is notable. It touches new territory when Thor helps a faltering Catholic priest to rediscover his faith in a novel and humanistic treatment sadly absent when Moench becomes the regular scripter for possibly the least readable run *Thor* endured.

Just when cancellation seemed desirable Walt Simonson returns as both writer (337-382) and artist (to 367) and immediately makes all the disparate and almost-great elements that comprise the canon blend and work. By incorporating long forgotten factors, creating new characters and reinvigorating old villains Simonson finally gives the series the scope, sensibility, spectacle and grandeur that had always been just out of reach. The art is imposing and powerful again and the stories at last do justice to the myths they came from. Beta-Ray Bill is an alien as noble as the Thunder God, and is therefore able to benefit from the spell on Thor's hammer just as the god himself is. An alien threat becomes a menace to all of creation and Simonson even revitalises the concept of Elves, returning them to their malevolent Scandinavian Norse origins whilst updating them to fit into the modern world. His great trick was to incorporate all the varying aspects of Thor into one great whole. He wasn't just a superhero fighting villains, nor a space exploring adventurer, nor a magical barbarian warrior for Simonson. He was all of those things at once. Earth and Asgard were of equal importance and both were used to best advantage. Simonson also managed to instil humour into a series that previously hosted only fat jokes at the expense of fellow God Volstagg, and the odd paternalistic jibe at how callow youth was from Odin. One of the most fondly remembered tales of the run has Thor transformed into a frog in (364-366), and it's practically a swan song for the good times. Although Simonson had taken art breaks before (355, 356), with 368 Sal Buscema takes over as full time pencil artist and it's just not the same. Combine that with some poor single issue fill-ins and it seems that the old times are on their way again. By the time of Simonson's departure Thor has a new look, no secret identity, a new weakness and enough new back-story for his writing successors to putter along with until the demise.

First up was arch traditionalist Tom DeFalco, who with long-time collaborator Ron Frenz produced a decent if uninspired run based heavily upon the Jack Kirby era with Thor generally taking the role of New York superhero. There are guest stars (Hulk in 385, Spider-Man in 391, The New Warriors – who premiered in 412 before getting their own series), the odd jaunt into space, yet another pantheon to deal with (Celtic this time in 385), someone else worthy of the power of Thor (Dargo, the future Thor in 384), the return of many Lee/Kirby creations such as the Colonizers, Hercules, 'Tales of Asgard' as a back-up strip, the now mandatory assault on Asgard by evil gods, and the return of the Celestials (387-389) one of the few *Thor* stories collected into book form. A new wrinkle on an old plot was the introduction of Eric Masterson, conjoined with Thor as in the old Don Blake days before eventually taking his identity (433). This coincides with Frenz's changing his art style to a copy of Sal Buscema's that lasted until the original Thunder God's return and the creative team's departure (459) to take Masterson, now called Thunderstrike, into his own title. The subsequent plunge in quality is breathtaking, with the returned Thor apparently deranged, hopping about all over the universe fighting everyone in crossovers. Roy Thomas embroils him a lame plot involving the High Evolutionary and a whole new bunch of manufactured deities and improbable situations, including the return of Don Blake, who you'll recall never actually existed. All this occurs against a floundering back-drop of cheap sales stunts such as costume changes, losing his helmet, and definitely losing all credibility, before at the lowest possible ebb Warren Ellis and Mike Deodato Jr. produce 'Worldengine' (491-494*). Although more a triumph of style than content, at least it restores some marketability to what had become Marvel's worst title in a stable of lousy titles. After the post-modern histrionics William Messner-Loebs took over the writing, but had nothing new to say, and after the moribund regulation battle for Asgard the title finally gives up the ghost, reverting to *Journey into Mystery* with issue 503.

After prolonged dormancy, Thor was relaunched under the art team of John Romita Jr and Klaus Janson and writer Dan Jurgens, who initiate a subplot of humanity resenting a "superhero" who claims to be divine. A new bunch of Evil Gods is introduced, and the hoary old concept of a weak mortal turning into a mighty Warrior God is restored. At least it's handled with a little style as paramedic Jake Olson is killed in the line of duty due to Thor's negligence. Thor dies too but he gets better, thanks to a mysterious being who combines Olson's essence with Thor's so that the Asgardian can atone for the mortal life he wasted. Sadly, after that it's pretty much business as usual for the Thunder God as great art once again marries itself to uninspired plotting to tell the same that killed the series last time.

Slowly it all works towards the reintroduction of the Asgardian Gods, missing since the conclusion of the previous series. Old favourite John Buscema provides guest pencils (9) before Romita Jr excels himself visually, despite mediocre scripts, in the conclusion and epilogue in (12-13). Fill-ins from Mike McKone (14) and Lee Weeks (15) precede another epic as a band of Enchanters return (from 142-144) to topple Asgard and murder Odin. This leads in turn to the return of arch baddies Thanos and Magog and the introduction of The Designate, an all-powerful girl who would play a major part in later Thor tales. Romita Jr leaves after 25 and the series falters immediately, and not just artistically. Erik Larsen's Kirby knock-off style is adequate, but we're once again reduced to seeing the Thunder God having difficulty handling second-rate, retread opposition such as the Absorbing Man, Wrecking Crew, Kurse or the Dark Elf. Andy Kubert takes over the drawing in a series of mindless fight issues, prior to a new story that begins with the major powers of the cosmos hinting at an unavoidable future where Thor is the cause of all woe. Jim Starlin and Stuart Immonen take brief turns at the art followed by a rapid succession of others, but finally the pictures are less important than the first major plot advance since the first time Jane Foster was dropped as a love interest. Odin is gone. Thor has inherited his power, and with 45 even the title changes to *Thor: Lord of Asgard*. A much more aggressive, proactive Thunder God begins to make waves. At last the series has escaped from predictability, but for how long? Like its precursor, the current Thor has few quality plot highs but lots of great art to go along with the repetitive stories.~WW

Recommended: 303, 337-354, 357-369, 379-381

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* Available in a collected edition

THOR Miniseries

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries (Thor Corps) 1993, 3 issue miniseries ('Godstorm') 2001-2002*

Thor Corps relies on a gimmick associated with the thunder god's hammer. Anybody who's "worthy" is bestowed with the power of Thor when they hold it, so a group of such worthies is called together to stop a villain bent on unmaking reality. Dargo (the future Thor), Beta Ray Bill (the Alien Thor) and Thunderstrike (the substitute Thor) are eventually joined by Thor (the Thor Thor) and a host of guest stars ranging from Kid Colt to Spiderman 2099 to save the universe. Tom DeFalco and Patrick Olliffe serve up an unprepossessing dose of hero humbug. In 'Godstorm' Kurt Busiek, Steve Rude and Mike Royer reprise Stan Lee and Jack Kirby with the tale of a storm that rebelled against the young Thunder God in days past. It returns in the era of the founding Avengers (for the Don Blake Thor), and later, to that of the contemporary (Jake Olsen) Thor. Insubstantial fluff magnificently illustrated.~WW

THRAX

Event: *1 issue 1996*

Thrax works for a high-tech agency called Paragon who are engaged in a clandestine war with Dr Shrikes' 'Guild'. When a Guild team attempt to steal Paragon's data core, Thrax, an obnoxious cyborg operative who can turn into a winged warrior, is sent in to chastise them. Inane and tedious effort from David Ross and Mike Baron.~WW

THREAT

Fantagraphics: *10 issues 1985-1987*

The Holo Brothers, Enigma, Zone and occasionally Bob the Mercenary, occupy this anthology magazine. They're well designed characters, and the art is fine, but there's very little story for your money.~FP

THRED

Immersion Press: *One-shot 2000*

Stanislav is a toy maker on Market Island, owned by Mergecom, which runs the island of New Philadelphia. When a new Minister of Division decides to close Market Island, Stanislav, mystically empowered, creates toys to help him fight the bureaucracy. Oddly written, drawn and lettered by creator, Bruce Orr, the anti-commercial stance and hero of the underdog appeal stand strangely with the mysticism and, admittedly ineffectual, final battle.~NF

THE 3-D ZONE

The 3-D Zone: *21 issues 1987-1989*

The brainchild of Ray Zone, this series contains artwork from many of the greatest names in comics, including Basil Wolverton (2), George Herriman (5), Joe Kubert (8), Bob Powell (10) and Harvey Kurtzman (15). Unfortunately the artwork has been doctored to be in 3-D. The original pencils and inks are in black, and red and green shadows have been added to create depth when the reader uses a pair of 3-D glasses. This process makes the pages difficult to read without the glasses, so if you can't see in 3-D (or indeed have no particular desire to experience the artwork in 3-D) then the title will have little interest for you. Zone's handling of the process is first-rate but ultimately rather pointless. Since most of these stories were never intended for 3-D, the individual benefits are minimal.~NF

.357!

Mu Press: *One-shot 1990*

Supposedly set in the far future, the only difference from the world of today is that humans and intelligent biped animals exist together. One reluctant and one inexperienced policewomen are assigned to catch a killer in what's meant as an adventure comedy. Sadly, the gaping lapses of logic in the plot combined with feeble jokes drain any small charm the idea has.~FP

The 3 GEEKS

3 Fingerprints: *11 issues 1997-1999*

A satirical swipe at the obsessive nature of comic fans from Rich Koslowski, using characters from his *How to Pick Up Girls if You're a Comic Book Geek.* It's gentle, if depressingly true, but not without funny moments over 1-3* as the protagonists immerse themselves in a comic convention. Any comic fan should recognise aspects of themselves, if not now then once, and it should serve as a warning to us all. The continuation is problematical. Despite Koslowski's cartooning having broad appeal, his one-note caricatures aren't sustainable, and it's only when he places them in the broader world beyond comics in 8 that the title picks up. The Geeks later transferred to *Geeksville* then *Dork Tower*, and for a savaging of the same obsessions see Dork.~WJ

300

Dark Horse: *5 issue miniseries 1998**

For those not familiar with the story, King Leonidas of Sparta and three hundred warriors halted the invasion of Greece by King Xerxes of Persia in 480 B.C. with the suicidal defence of a mountain pass. Frank Miller decided to translate his long interest in this heroic feat into comics. That he has succeeded in bringing this story to life is a tribute both to his research into the subject and his storytelling abilities. Lynn Varley's sunset-fuelled colouring plays perfectly against the thick blacks of Miller's pencils, effortlessly drawing the reader into period. It's a simple story, but Miller has chosen not to simplify it further by treating its characters as cyphers. Warts and all, he explores Spartan society specifically and Greek society generally – political, social and personal. He doesn't ignore the ruthless nature of the Kings, the expendability of the foot-soldiers nor the racism implicit in the conflict. Miller's approach can be summed up by a scene in 3 where Ephialtes, saved from death at birth by sentimental parents, asks Leonidas for the chance to redeem his father's honour by joining him now. Leonidas hears him out, but rejects him because his hunchback prevents him from lifting his shield high enough in battle. At this, Ephialtes kills himself and Leonidas thinks "Poor soul. May he rest in peace." The death is poignant; we can't help but feel for Ephialtes, yet Leonidas is simply weighing up the danger to the rest of his men. Miller tells us as much about the nature of heroism generally as about the Spartan attitude to life, and death. Physical pain is nothing in the pursuit of honour, duty and glory, but one way or another, something suffers. A large format collection from 1999 offers the reader a chance to appreciate the artwork without page folds.~NF

Recommended: Collection

THE THREE MOUSEKETEERS

DC: *7 issues 1970-1971*

Fatsy (aka The Captain), Patsy (the dumb one) and Minus (the cute, mischievous one) are members of a club with its own secret (tin can) headquarters. Together they have to deal with telephones, sticks of rock, moles and, of course, the occasional cat. Sheldon Mayer's mice are a delight and their short tales are funny and entertaining. From 5, the page-count went up to sixty-four and more of DC's lost anthropomorphic characters reappeared: Dizzy Dog, the Dodo and the Frog, Doodles Duck and Bo Bunny. Mayer's genius is that his work is ageless. This is classic material.~NF

Recommended: 1-7

Blast Off Presents Fantastic New Worlds With THE 3 ROCKETEERS

Harvey: *One-shot 1965*

This little treasure collects five unpublished stories drawn for Harvey's anthology titles in 1956, with the first two drawn by the unforgettable team of Jack Kirby and Al Williamson. Williamson contributes two more stories in his late EC style, and the central two-pager, often incorrectly attributed to Harvey Kurtzman, looks more like the work of editor Joe Simon. The Rocketeer stories star dashing space Captain Rip McCoy, his gruff Sergeant 'Beefy' Brown and balding boffin Montrose 'Figures' Faraday, all members of Earth's military

space force. There are marked similarities between this trio and Kirby's later *Challengers of the Unknown*, and with the *Sky Masters* newspaper strip. It's all good, clean, enjoyable and extremely well drawn fun.~SW
Recommended

3x3 EYES

Innovation: *5 issue miniseries ('Rebirth/House of Demons') 1991-1992**
Dark Horse: *5 issue miniseries ('Curse of the Gesu') 1995-1996*

When Yakumo rescues Pai from a mugger, he loses his soul and thus becomes bound to Pai, who happens to be the last member of a race called The Triclops. Yakumo promises to help Pai and together they travel to Hong Kong in search of the Ningen statue, which has the power to make her human. The Dark Horse series picks up the story straight afterwards as they return to Japan and face a demon that wants the secret of Pai's immortality. Yuzo Takada's dynamically drawn manga has plenty of action and comedy, as well as a romantic subplot involving Pai, Yakumo and his friend Natsuko, but this is only the beginning as the story continues in *Super Manga Blast*.~NF

THRESHOLD

Sleeping Giant Comics: *2 issue microseries ('18th and Market Streets') 1996, 2 issue microseries ('The Stamp Collector') 1997, one-shot ('29 Epilogues') 1997, 3 issues ('Nico Teen', 'The Hair Club', 'The Demolition') 1997-1998*

Peculiar and stylish superhero comic performed in the manner of Grant Morrison's *Doom Patrol* or Bernie Mireault's *The Jam*. David Yurkovich crafts a witty and compelling set of stories featuring the New York Super-Hero Syndicate and their friendly rivals – and Fantastic Four wannabes – Threshold. There's a nice balance between the worldly cynicism and sense of wonder. All the heroes organised into a US style Labor Union that negotiates all its services with city and government before going into action, yet when recruiting new members, applicants have to pass a popular music appreciation test. Surreal and well thought out hero fantasy that's funny in all the right places.~WW
Recommended: '18th and Market Streets' (1-2), 'The Stamp Collector' (1-2), '29 Epilogues', 'Nico Teen', 'The Hair Club'

THRESHOLD

Avatar: *49 issues + 1997 to date*

Cheesy 'adults only' anthology featuring Avatar's stable of naked fighting chicks losing their clothes and hitting each other. The monotony is occasionally broken up by their less prurient characters such as Snowman and Tantrum. One fisted adventure, just the way you like it.~WW

THRILL-O-RAMA

Harvey: *3 issues 1965-1966*

All three issues feature Bob Powell's 'Man In Black Called Fate' – a whimsical storyteller reprinted from the 1950s comic named after him. 2 and 3 cover-feature Pirana, an Aquaman clone, and his pets Bara and Cuda. The 1950s reprints win hands down.~SW

THRILLER

DC: *12 issue limited series 1983-1984*

Thriller was the first major work by writer Robert Loren Fleming, who co-created this unusual team of superheroes with artist Trevor Von Eeden. Sadly, neither creator finished the twelve issues, and neither fulfilled the promise of such a radical yet engaging title. Angeline Thriller ("a cross between Jesus Christ and my mom", according to Fleming) is a bodiless, precognisant entity accidentally bonded to her scientist husband in an atomic explosion. He's terribly guilty about this, and most of the characters have terrific amounts of psychological baggage. Thriller picks on hopeless cases to be her physical emissaries, and the story follows a news cameraman whom she rescues after he's filmed the death of his brother at the hands of a religious maniac.

Thriller uses age-old devices like introducing a newcomer into the situation so you can have everyone introduce themselves, but manages to be at once more intense and more mythical than most superhero comics. Fleming writes about powerful human emotions and deals in mythical archetypes while retaining a subtle and humorous edge. As the series progresses, Trevor Von Eeden's artwork gets increasingly experimental (although he's obviously learnt a trick or two from Miller's early *Daredevil*). Sadly, Fleming left with 7 and Von Eeden followed an issue later, for no very clear reasons; they were replaced by Bill Dubay and Alex Niño, who make an ugly hash of what should have been an epic conclusion.~FJ
Recommended: 1-7

THRILLING ADVENTURE STORIES

Atlas: *2 issues 1975*

Very good black and white magazine anthology that almost justifies the appalling colour comics published by Atlas. The second issue is an artistic feast, with Russ Heath, John Severin, Walt Simonson, and Alex Toth having decent stories to illustrate and all turning in superlative jobs. The first issue is patchier, but has Heath and Frank Thorne, and if you can't get enough of Tigerman he's also in here.~FP
Recommended: 2

THRILLING MURDER Comics

San Francisco Comics: *One-shot 1971*

It's thought that this was originally intended for the fourth issue of *Bogeyman*, although that comic's creator doesn't actually appear here. Like *Bogeyman*, *Thrilling Murder* was a horror comic, but one with a hard, uncomfortable edge. Its most notable story, Robert Crumb's 'Jumpin' Jack Flash', was a Mansonesque exercise in misogyny, though Jim Osbourne's semi-autobiographical 'Kid Kill' manages to surpass it in unpleasant content. With a stellar line-up also including Bill Griffith, Kim Deitch and S. Clay Wilson, *Thrilling Murder* promised much, but only Spain's 'In the Gloom of Nite' is really up to par. Disappointing.~DAR

THRILLING PLANET TALES

Paragon: *1 issue 1991*

Eight sample stories from the 1940s title, *Planet Comics*, originally published by Fiction House and featuring Flash Gordon-style space opera, often with strong, if scantily clad, female leads. If the stories seem rather dated and xenophobic, the real strength of the title is in its artwork. Fran Hopper, one of several female artists employed by Fiction House during World War II, is represented by a Gale Allen strip. Lee Elias, better known for *The Black Cat*, draws a Space Rangers story, George Evans, who later made his mark at EC, illustrates 'The Lost World', and popular 'good girl' artist Matt Baker handles 'Mysta of the Moon'.~NF

THRILLING SCIENCE TALES

AC: *2 issues 1989-1990*

Reprinting neglected (and indeed odd) stories from the 1950s, this is well worth searching out. Behind a Mike Kaluta cover the first issue includes 'The Invasion from the Abyss', a curious collaboration between Al Williamson, Wally Wood, Frank Frazetta, Roy Krenkel and Joe Orlando, plus a solo story by Wood, both from Avon's *Strange Worlds*. The former's not five times as good as any of their individual efforts, but worth reading. Also included are a Fred Guardineer Space Ace story from *Manhunt* and a science fiction Western (not many of those about) from Fawcett's *Bob Colt*. 2 featured Fawcett's Captain Video illustrated by George Evans, Mysta of the Moon by Ruben Moreira from *Planet Comics* and Avon's Captain Science by Orlando and Wood.~NF
Recommended: 1-2

THRILLING WONDER TALES

AC: *1 issue 1991*

Black and white reprints of four great 1950s creators: Kenton of the Star Patrol battles space sirens, beautifully drawn by Wally Wood, from Avon's *Strange Worlds*, from which there's also Joe Kubert's 'The Adventures of Henry Twist', a humorous story of a nerd being fought over by thousands of alien women. Dick Ayers illustrates 'The Third Element', a story of mankind uniting against an alien enemy, originally printed in Fago Publications' *Atom-Age Combat*; and finally, just a little out of place, is Bob Powell's first episode of 'Thunda, King of the Congo' (originally drawn by Frank Frazetta), a frothy mix of half-naked babes, naughty natives trying to sacrifice them and brutal action as Thunda and his tiger sidekick come to the rescue.~NF

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* Available in a collected edition

THRILLKILLER

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1997, one-shot (Thrillkillers '62) 1998*

This Batman miniseries is set in a universe similar to the familiar DC one, but with some differences and a beatnik influence. Barbara Gordon, estranged from her father after her mother's death, owns Wayne Manor. She becomes a vigilante, sucking in Dick Grayson, an ex-circus acrobat, with her womanly wiles. Dick loves her, but she's afraid she's falling for one of her father's dour detectives, Bruce Wayne, penniless when his parents' paper fortune imploded on their deaths. He's one straight cop in a city on the make, where a green-haired woman with a big grin seeks to control the heroin trade via her nightclubs. What starts off for Barbara as a bit of a thrill soon becomes deadly as Dick's family are involved in a fatal 'accident'. Dan Brereton's heavy-handed drawing style gives Howard Chaykin's story a solid, fleshy feel. It's seedy and it's muscular, full of rain-washed streets and smoky jazz clubs. A class act by all involved. The one-shot continues the sleazy feel, with a drug plague threatening to engulf the experimental youth of Gotham.~FJ

Recommended: 1-3

THRILLOGY

Pacific: *1 issue 1984*

This contains three stories written and drawn by Tim Conrad, one set in prehistoric times (pretentious), one in medieval times (long-winded and poorly told), and one in the future (derivative). However, the artwork is beautiful. The colouring has nice effects with firelight, but this really deserves to be seen in black and white.~FC

THRUD THE BARBARIAN

Carl Critchlow: *2 issues + 2002 to date*

Artist Carl Critchlow serves up an excess of excess starring thug Thrud, some daft knights, very British explorers on a quest, Priest-King Kembaal-O and inept magician To-Me Ku-Pa. British fans will understand. The jokes are telegraphed a mile off, but they're none the less enjoyable for that. The revelation is Critchlow's art, modified to a loose, blocky style at times reminiscent of Mike McMahon, and his muted colouring complements it superbly. This is not quite *Groo*, but better than any other barbarian parody in comics.~WJ

Recommended: 1-2

THUMP'N GUTS

Kitchen Sink: *One-shot 1993*

You're sure to know whether or not you're interested in a mindless parody, possibly unintentional, by the misguided Kevin Eastman and the overrated Simon Bisley, of mindless comics featuring over-muscled, skull faced, electronic claw and fisted, missile-breasted or crocodile-teethed morons, garnished with a teensy-weensy bit of swearing.~GK

THUN'DA TALES

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1987*

Now renowned as a stylish fantasy painter, in the 1950s Frank Frazetta was hacking out comics, including these hokey adventure tales of a pilot stranded in a lost world of dinosaurs and cavemen. While the art is fine it's very much of its era and there's nothing here to suggest future greatness.~FP

T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents

Tower: *20 issues 1965-1969*

The acronymically named T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents topped the TV vogue for spy organisations by additionally employing superheroes, and managed to innovate besides, not least by issuing giant-sized 25-cent comics when 12 cents was the industry norm. The most interesting concept was Noman, able to shift his consciousness between a host of android bodies in an instant. The brave but blundering Len Brown, named after one of the writers, wore a strength-enhancing belt as Dynamo, and had a sexual frisson with armoured villainess Iron Maiden. The mind-reading helmet of Menthor also showed a spark, which was, unfortunately, not present in the creation of standard superspeedster Lightning and flying hero Raven. The heroes appeared in separate but sometimes connected stories in each issue, and in an era when superheroes were rarely hurt, 7's death of one cast member was a major shock. Unusually, the non-powered supporting players were also fully characterised; they included Weed, a thinly disguised version of chief artist chain-smoking Wally Wood. Other top-notch artists working on the stories included Reed Crandall, Gil Kane, Ogden Whitney, Dan Adkins, Steve Ditko, an on-form Mike Sekowsky and the underrated and distinctive Manny Stallman, largely on the Raven solos. Mind you, there were also John Giunta and George Tuska. So with innovative ideas and several top-notch artists, why no recommended issues? Unfortunately, the step between concept and art was script, and they were generally little more than ordinary, and sometimes dreadful, particularly on Noman. This didn't prevent a Noman solo series, or one for Dynamo. Reprint collections were pocket paperbacks issued by Tower (primarily paperback publishers anyway) in the 1960s and they're rarely seen today. There was also a short-lived 1980s reprint series from JC Productions, and DC have now reprinted 1-4 in their hardcover Archives series. In case you're wondering, by the way, the T.H.U.N.D.E.R. stands for The United Nations Defense Enforcement Reserve. There. You can sleep easy now.~WJ

T.H.U.N.D.E.R. AGENTS

JC Comics: *2 issues 1983-1984*

These are new T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents stories, featuring the characters from the 1960s stories reprinted in the *Hall of Fame* series, along with some new ones. There's some nice artwork by Lou Manna and Willie Blyberg, some nice dialogue...but the storytelling's so muddled it makes it hard to care what's happening or to whom.~FC

Wally Wood's T.H.U.N.D.E.R. AGENTS

Deluxe: *5 issues 1984-1986*

Believing the copyright on *T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents* had expired, Deluxe assembled an impressive roster of creative talent to produce new stories. Over five issues there are Dave Cockrum, a motivated Steve Ditko, Steve Englehart, Jerry Ordway and George Pérez, and, wisely sticking to the original formula of mixing team stories with those of individual agents, these are good superhero comics. The Lightning stories by Keith Giffen and Tom and Mary Bierbaum are the best of the bunch. They set off the light, glossy action nature of the rest of the comic with downbeat stories about a man who ages every time he uses his superspeed suit and who's being stalked by a murderous enemy. Unfortunately for fans, the copyright on the characters rested elsewhere, and the series came to a premature end.~FP

Peter Cannon THUNDERBOLT

Charlton: *11 issues (1, 51-60) 1966-1967*

A pacifist martial artist was an unusual concept in the 1960s, and this couldn't have emerged at any other time. Signing his strips anonymously as 'PAM', Pete Morisi hid behind an alias necessitated by his full time job as a policeman forbidding moonlighting. His writing is deadpan and stilted, and his art sparse and functional. Furthermore, in two-tone swimming trunks Thunderbolt is cursed with an all-time stinker of a costume, yet somehow everything meshes into a halfway decent strip. Thunderbolt's pacifist attitude is fundamental, inculcated through his having grown up in a Tibetan monastery, and preserved despite battles against weird pulp-style foes. 53's Gore is typical, a would-be world-beater whose left hand is an ape's paw. 57, 59 and 60, by more proficient creators, don't match Morisi's po-faced sincerity, and fail without his input. The bizarre numbering is a Charlton speciality, with the series continuing *Son of Vulcan*'s issue numbers for no apparent reason.

Thunderbolt's back-up features are every bit as off-beat as the lead. The Sentinels, a rock'n'roll trio bequeathed gimmicky devices by a dying scientist, are an interesting idea poorly executed in 54-59, but The Prankster in 60 is plain bizarre. Set in the futuristic Ultraopolis where playing music is punishable by public execution, the Prankster is a garish foe of authority, using the arsenal of a clown to humiliate the regime. Script by Denny O'Neil (under his Sergius O'Shaughnessy alias) and early Jim Aparo art make for a rare original.~FP

THUNDERBOLT

DC: *12 issues 1992-1993*

Conscientious and tolerably entertaining revival of the 1960s action hero by Mike Collins, nevertheless lacking a certain spark to make it really take off.~HS

THUNDERBOLTS

Marvel: *74 issues +, 2 Annuals, 1 Special ('Life Sentences') 1996 to date*

This new team of super-beings first appeared when most of the prominent Marvel heroes were sucked into another dimension, and presumed dead. After *Hulk* 449 they moved into their own comic, and at the end of 1 there was a genuinely shocking revelation. The new heroes were in reality, Baron Zemo and several members of the Masters of Evil, a villainous alliance who've plagued the Avengers since the earliest days. Seeing a void in the heroic hierarchy, they'd assumed disguises and modified their powers, doing good deeds to win the public confidence. They planned entry into the abandoned headquarters of the missing heroes, from which they could steal technology and other secrets, and parlay this advantage into dominion of Earth with no effective opposition. That was the theory. Zemo himself (now "Citizen V") remained unregenerate, and a couple of the Thunderbolts remained adherents to his cause, but several others discover they like the admiration and respect of others. If not moved by purely altruistic motives, they weren't on the run all the time. The division is heightened when a new metahuman, Jolt, joins the team believing in their integrity, and her unalloyed idealism throws the mixed motives of the others into sharp contrast. Then there is Meteorite, formerly Moonstone, a clinical psychologist and accomplished manipulator, who refuses to commit to either faction, but remains ready to turn any development to her own advantage. Her detached analyses of all the team – including herself – involve the reader, and she emerges as the title's star.

When the Thunderbolts' imposture is eventually revealed they have to go on the run again. Some of them, rather than returning to a life of crime, decide to pay the price for their actions, and genuinely seek to reform, but after their previous misdeeds – and particularly given the nature of their recent scam – will they ever gain the public trust? These themes of redemption, atonement, betrayal and duplicity occupy most of 1-50, and make for a compelling read. Writers Kurt Busiek (to 33) and Fabian Nicieza (34 up) sustain the premise surprisingly well, losing momentum only after 50, when the title is temporarily taken over by a replacement team, the Redeemers, and then the group is sidetracked into a split storyline. One half of the team is stranded on a parallel Earth of 'Heroes Reborn', while the other, under the guidance of Hawkeye, seeks to augment its ranks with a new generation of (possibly) reformed villains. Everyone seemed to sense that the title had lost its way by this stage, and events were drawn to a rapid close with 75. Very much a writer-led comic, primary pencillers Mark Bagley and Patrick Zircher provide competent storytelling without flash. The 2000 Annual sees the return of a deceased character to the Marvel Universe, and 'Life Sentences' is a realistic look at the problems some of the Thunderbolts have when they try to return to the straight and narrow without relying on their powers. 1 and 2 sold out and were rapidly reprinted as 'First Strikes', and 1-12 are available in collections.~HS

Recommended: 1-12

THUNDERBUNNY

Red Circle: *1 issue 1984*
WaRP: *6 issues 1985- 1986*
Apple: *6 issues (7-12) 1987-1989*

Continuing from *Charlton Bullseye* 6 and 10, the Red Circle issue retells how young Bobby Caswell finds an alien artefact, a gift from a dying race who sealed the power of their greatest hero therein. Bobby gains the power, but doesn't realise, until he looks in the mirror, is that the aliens were anthropomorphic animals, and his heroic form is that of a giant, pink-furred bunny rabbit. Creator Martin L. Greim and artists Brian Buniak and Gary Kato took this ingenious but flimsy premise surprisingly far. Thunderbunny discovered a group of 1940s superheroes being held in suspended animation, teamed fleetingly with the T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents, and had romantic problems with the fledgling superheroine Moon Miss, all written divertingly and (save for 9's atrocious fill-in) stylishly illustrated. When cancellation loomed, rather than leave the characters dangling, Greim wrote an 'Imaginary Story', set five years or so in the series' future, which serves quite satisfactorily as a farewell, a thoughtful gesture to readers.~HS

THUNDERCATS

WildStorm: *5 issue miniseries 2002-2003*

Lion-O, Tygra and all the old cartoon characters are revived, with new additions Bengali, Lynx-O and Pumyra, in a lacklustre reprise for the new nostalgia generation. Villains Mumm-Ra and the evil mutants provide the usual suspense. Flashy but insubstantial fare aimed more at new parents, rather than their kids.~WW

Biff THUNDERSAUR

Innovation: *1 issue 1991*

Dinosaur Biff retrieves the fabled Black Eye of Kwyta Shyna, but when his robotic mount breaks down, some opportunistic mercenaries attack him. Originally planned as a three part miniseries, this appears to have been stripped of any depth and is all quickfire gags and puns from George Broderick Jr, with smoothly drawn artwork.~NF

THUNDERSTRIKE

Marvel: *24 issues 1993-1995*

There are few original ideas in this substitute Thor's comic, but old concepts are endearingly recycled to provide a reasonable superhero title. You wouldn't know it from a truly wretched first issue, though, packed with leaden expository thought balloons. Once past that, Thunderstrike finds his destiny very much intertwined with the rampaging Bloodaxe. 13-16 were also issued as flip-books featuring New York police's superhero containment squad Code Blue, and Thunderstrike's page-count is halved by back-up strips in 17-21.~FP

TIC TOC TOM

Detonator: *3 issues 1995-1996*

Strange Canadian anthology where the brief of every creator seems to have been to come up with a concept that matches the title. The best of them is a dystopic future intriguing enough to withstand the irritating quirk of Tick Tock Tom starting every speech with "tic" and ending it with "toc". The best art on offer is from Paul Marhue, who presumably put his problems with perspective and scale behind him. Shame he's not doing comics anymore.~WJ

The TICK

New England Comics: *12 issues 1988-1993*, 5 issues ('Omnibus') 1990-1996, 9 issues ('The Chroma-Tick') 1992-1994, 3 issue miniseries ('Giant Circus of the Mighty') 1992-1993*, 9 issue limited series ('Karma Tornado') 1993-1995*, one-shot ('The Naked City') 1996, 9 issue limited series ('Big Blue Destiny') 1997-1998*, one-shot ('The Tick's Back') 1997, 4 issues ('Big Yule Log Special') 1997-2000, one-shot ('Big Romantic Adventure') 1998, one-shot ('Big Summer Fun Special') 1998, one-shot ('Big Back To School Special') 1998, one-shot ('Big Summer Annual') 1999, 6 issues ('The Tick and Arthur') 1999*, 6 issues ('Heroes of the City') 1999*,*

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* Available in a collected edition

one-shot ('No. 13 Pseudo Edition') 2000, 4 issue miniseries ('Circus Maximus') 2000, 2 issues ('Big Halloween Special') 2000-2001, one-shot ('Big Cruise Ship Vacation Special') 2000, one-shot ('Big Father's Day Special') 2000, one-shot ('Big Year 2000 Spectacle') 2000, one-shot ('Big Mother's Day Special') 2000, one-shot ('Big Tax Time Terror') 2000, 2 issue microseries ('Massive Summer Double Spectacle') 2000, one-shot ('Internet Comic') 2001, one-shot ('Big Red-n-Green Christmas Spectacle') 2001, 6 issues ('Color') 2001, one-shot ('Circus Maximus Redux') 2001, one-shot ('Introducing') 2002, 3 issue miniseries ('Big Xmas Trilogy') 2002, 2 issues + ('Tick & Artie') 2002 to date, 3 issue miniseries ('Golden Age') 2002-2003

In the original series, the Tick escapes from a lunatic asylum and decides to be a superhero because he's nigh invulnerable. The first issues see him trying out a brief secret identity, clashing with a caped superhero, who happens to be a journalist called Clark (1-2), opposing (with Oedipus Ashley Stevens, a female ninja) the local World of Ninjas franchise (3-4), meeting his first supervillain, Chairface (7), travelling to New York (9-10), where he's accepted amongst the city's many superheroes after defeating a namesake, who then tries to kill him by telling a team of supervillains where he'll be (11-12). Creator, Ben Edlund's clean style is perfect for the cartoon violence of this superhero parody. Spin-off characters are introduced here, including Paul The Samurai (4), The Man-Eating Cow (8) and the Chainsaw Vigilante (9). He also picks up a sidekick, Arthur, a plump rabbit-costumed fellow in a flying suit. With his battle cry of "Spoon", the Tick is a well-meaning, but essentially ineffectual, hero, who succeeds simply by being impossible to deal with. Edlund effectively left after 12 to pursue an animated series for his characters, leaving the storyline unfinished, although a 'No. 13 Pseudo Edition' attempts to solve that cliffhanger.

'Omnibus' is a series of reprints including the encyclopaedic 'Giant Circus of the Mighty' as Volume 4, while 'The Chroma-Tick' reprints 1-9 of the regular series in colour, (and 1-6 of that are then collected as 'The Naked City'). The later 'Circus Maximus' issues also contain encyclopaedia entries. 'Karma Tornado' starts with Edlund credited as plotter, but is largely written by Chris McCullough (1-4) and Clay Griffith (5-9). Here the Tick is largely without Arthur, and any spark of originality has fled by this point.

'Big Blue Destiny', by Eli Stone, tries to recapture some of the original spirit of wacky mayhem, even attempting, in 'The Luny Bin Trilogy' (6-9), to approach Tick's origins, but he's not a strong enough cartoonist or storyteller to pull it off. Regular writers after Stone include Sean Wang (whose best issue is the 'Big Back To School Special', though it's virtually a reprise of Edlund's Chairface story) and Clay and Susan Griffith, who introduce Kid Tick in the 'Big Father's Day Special'. They also have him try to kill Arthur as the story continues into the 'Massive Summer Double Spectacle'. Wang's 'The Tick and Arthur' series reintroduces Oedipus from 3, while 'Heroes of the City' contains short stories of the Tick and his friends, though it does also introduce cheerleader Myndi, who has an arsenal in her pompons.

More recently, the 'Big Xmas Trilogy' sees the Tick try to put on a Christmas pageant and features pretty much all of the characters, while 'Tick & Artie' portrays them as real bugs in strips that originally appeared on the New England Comics website (by "Anonymous", unsurprisingly, given the poverty of ideas). 'Golden Age' contains, as the title suggests, the adventures of the Golden Age Tick, previously unseen. It's difficult to see why anyone's still buying the Tick, because, as amusing as the first series was, no creator since Edlund strays very far from his work, and none capture the detached mentality of the hero that made the strip amusing. Most issues listed above have been kept in print and there are additionally a number of 'Bonanza' issues collecting the various miniseries.~NF

TICK-TOCK FOLLIES

Slave Labor: *One-shot 1996*

An all female touring dancing troupe, a peculiar stunted hominid, a casual romance and a murder. With all that thrown into the pot for stirring it must be business as usual for Chris Butler and Chris Hogg. Despite Hogg's European art style, it's very British and wistfully evocative of a bygone era despite the contemporary setting. The disorienting elements that characterise Butler's scripts are largely held in check until an abrupt change of storytelling technique in the final pages. As ever from the creators, this is decidedly odd and all the better for it.~FP

TIGER GIRL

Gold Key: *1 issue 1968*

Lily Taylor, circus aerialist, dons a black and orange swimsuit, borrows the circus tiger and pops off downtown to fight crime as Tiger Girl. Realism not a priority, then.~FP

TIGER-X

Eternity: *3 issue miniseries 1988, 4 issues, 1 Special 1989*

The fag end of the cold war period had the prolific Ben Dunn turning out this story of the Soviet army invading the USA with powerful battlesuits and tanks of unknown origin. The only hope of repelling the invaders is a secretly developed battlesuit known as Tiger-X. Although the art isn't as polished, the miniseries is superior as Dunn has a better sense of plot and pacing than his successors, but both are dopey fun that should appeal to giant robot fans.~FP

TIGERMAN

Atlas: *3 issues 1975*

As created by Ernie Colón, a scientist injects himself with tiger chromosomes. Rather than have him dying an undignified and agonising death, it gives him the strength and agility of a tiger. Having lucked out once, he really pushes the boat out by costuming himself in tiger-striped all-in-one vest-and-underpants outfit. Still, with tiger strength who'd laugh at him... to his face? It's all very ordinary, but if you can't get enough he's also in *Thrilling Adventure Stories*.~WJ

TIGERS OF TERRA

Mind-Visions: *12 issues 1992-1993**

Antarctic: *13 issues (0-12), 1 Technical Manual 1993-1997*

This is the series with which Ted Nomura began his 'Families of Altered Wars' titles, presenting a past with significant political differences affecting the future. The strengths and weaknesses of all succeeding series are present here, with Nomura already a good artist, but interested in hardware detail above all else. Plot and characterisation are slim, and sometimes it's only Nomura's secondary fondness for drawing attractive women (in a manga style) that drags any plot into an issue at all. For all that the succession of Nomura projects proves a market for his material, but tread warily~FP

TIGERS OF THE LUFTWAFFE

Antarctic: *6 issue miniseries 2001-2002*

Eccentric anthology set in the continuity of writer/artist Ted Nomura's 'Families of Altered Wars', and numbered as issues 89-94 of the greater series. Various sections of the long lived tale of an alternate universe where the Second World War continued due to the interference of extra-dimensional aliens can be played out at a more practical pace than previous story-arc which concentrated only on one era at a time. Features include Tigers of Terra/Luftwaffe:2040 as a prose serial, comic strips Luftwaffe:1946, Black Devil and Two Eagles Have Landed (by Marcel Magnette) and a selection of illustrated technical features on the paraphernalia of flying and related topics. Quality material throughout, but definitely not a read for the uninitiated.~WW

TIGRA

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 2002*

Greer Nelson (Tigra) infiltrates a vigilante group, the Brethren of the Blue Fist, by going undercover within the police force, in order to find out who killed her husband. Despite somewhat unrealistic plotting in places by writer Christina Z, there is sensible use of Tigra's powers to aid her investigation, enhanced by Mike Deodato's richly embellished, realistic artwork. Encouraging.~NF

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* Available in a collected edition

Mike Hoffman's TIGRESS

Basement Comics: *2 issue microseries 1998*
Black Daze Publishing: *One-shot 2000*
Amryl Entertainment: *3 issues + ('Tales') 2001 to date*

Mike Hoffman can work in a variety of styles. Unfortunately none of them are his own. He starts as a Frank Frazetta impersonator, the slavish devotion extending to slim stories about rugged men, glamourous scantily clad women and alien lizards. By the one-shot, elements of Gene Colan and Al Williamson have crept in, and in *Tigress Tales* Wally Wood, Jack Davis and Roy Crane have joined the Hoffman portfolio. Frazetta remains the influence of choice for the cover paintings, though. While a skillful mimic with impeccable sources, Hoffman doesn't match them. The tales of Hoffman's silent tiger-woman are simple morality fables, and back-up western strips of Madam Tarantula are equally wispy. He also has form for issuing as many alternative "limited" versions of his comics as he can get away with.~WJ

THE TIJUANA BIBLE

Starhead: *9 issues 1991-1994*
Eros: *4 issues 1996-1999*
Simon & Schuster Editions: *1 Volume ('Tijuana Bibles') 1997*

Tijuana Bible is one of the names used for the pocket-sized comic booklets featuring popular culture characters engaged in sexual intercourse. They flourished during the depression of the 1930s, through to the early 1950s, distributed by travelling salesmen or sold under the counter from taverns and newsstands. They were commonly eight pages long with one panel on each page, though longer examples exist. The characters would be established and sexual activity started by the third panel, with a gag in the final panel. Starhead's 1-3 contain an informative essay on the format by Robert K. Gluckson, explaining that the comic producers stole copyrighted characters and that popular editions were themselves stolen by other publishers. He also covers their publishing history, illegality and the number of different comics available. The Simon and Schuster volume is an academic study with an introductory essay by Art Spiegelman. The chapters break examples down into cartoons/comics, show business, travelling salesmen etc., criminals, and miscellaneous. A hundred strips are reprinted with commentary on their context.

Examples included in the Starhead issues include Joe Palooka, Alley Oop (2), Chaing Kai-Chek, Joe Stalin, Al Capone and Mahatma Gandhi (3). 4 and 8 are Hollywood issues featuring Clara Bow, Jean Harlot, Clark Gable and Ginger Roger amongst others. 5 is a 1939 World's Fair issue, 6 the Fuller Brush Man and 7 royalty. The Fantagraphics issues reprint between fifteen and twenty-five strips each including Jackie Coogan, Anna Mae in Comic Land, Ginger Rogers (1), a Travelling Preacher, School Days, Popeye and Wimpy (2), Batwoman and Robin, Superman and Supergirl, Dick Tracy (3), Red Barry, Popeye, and Little Orphan Annie and her dog, Sandy (4). These are hardly politically correct comics, but there are a few well-drawn strips and most display an infectious exuberance that's easy to enjoy. There is some overlap of the strips reprinted, especially with the Simon and Schuster volume, but on the whole each issue has a significant number of different strips.~NF

TIMBER WOLF

DC: *5 issues 1992-1993*

The Legion of Super-Heroes' follically unchallenged member is zapped back to the 20th century. His companion, goddess in progress Aria, is, of course, immediately kidnapped, so Timber Wolf fights his way through all and sundry to rescue her. Lovely feral art by Joe Phillips, but inker turned writer Al Gordon doesn't have a clue as to story structure.~HS

TIME BREAKERS

DC/Helix: *5 issue miniseries 1997*

Science-fiction written by Rachel Pollack with artwork by Chris Weston. Temporal paradoxes make life possible, apparently, and without them the laws of physics would lack the motivation to get out of bed in the morning. So we have the Time Breakers, all busy introducing more of those reinforcing paradoxes, in conflict with a sect that is eager for time to weaken and come to an end. The story focuses on Angela Attenborough and her recruitment to Time Breakers, and is almost entirely leaden exposition, with no hint of characterisation or humour. Time Breakers only seem to have one method of creating paradoxes, yet Angela reacts with "But... but... but..." amazement to each instance described to her. That said, the mega-paradox used in 5 has style and some originality, but not nearly enough to make *Time Breakers* an acceptable piece of fiction.~FC

TIME COP

Dark Horse: *2 issue microseries 1994*

Puerile and silly tale of Max Walker, a cop who spends his off-duty hours wishing he could have saved his murdered wife, while his day job consists of going back in time to prevent history being changed. Guess what happens when he finds that his superiors are using the time technology for their own purposes? One of those rare occasions when the movie is better than the comic it sprang from.~WW

TIME FOR LOVE

Charlton: *1 issue (53) 1966, series two 47 issues 1967-1976*

Poor quality love stories for the post flower power generation of girls, but despite a half-hearted attempt at fab and groovy design and lip service to freedom and career choices for young women, all the protagonists eventually end up happy with a man, or alone and sad. Charles Nicholas, Vince Alascia and Jack Abel bear the brunt of most of the art chores, so even the mandatory girls in negligees or girls in bikinis scenes offer no relief from the tedium.~WW

TIME JUMP WAR

Apple: *3 issue miniseries 1989*

Taking the entire first issue of only three to set up the idea that our heroes Doyle and Ron have jumped back through time, and incorporating an Alien homage along the way, seems awfully extravagant. From there it's cavemen vs guns in 2 and guns vs aliens vs cavemen in 3. Chuck Dixon provides a decent enough, if undemanding, plot and Enrique Villagran's art is functional but decidedly old-fashioned. Anyone yearning for the type of story once occupying British boys' adventure comics will love Time Jump War.~FP

TIME KILLERS

Fleetway/Quality: 7 issues 1992-1993

Science-fiction anthology reprinting early 1990s stories from Britain's *2000AD*. The lead strip, 'Killing Time'*, mixes Jack the Ripper and genteel Victorian etiquette with time-travellers and the early, but very promising, art of Chris Weston. Mark Millar and Pete Milligan are among those writing the back-up strips, but seemingly with little enthusiasm.~FP

THE TIME MACHINE

Eternity: *3 issue miniseries 1990**

Perfunctory adaptation of the classic H.G. Wells science fiction novel. This probably isn't the best way to experience the story for the first time, as even the 1960s film is better, but if you're really not prepared to read the book...~WJ

TIME MASTERS

DC: *8 issue limited series 1990*

Reviving time-travelling Rip Hunter, this version has conveniently discovered two methods of travelling through time. Unfortunately an individual can use each method only once, so he must now discover a third method for another trip, and he'll also need a fourth method to return. At the beginning of the story, his lab is destroyed and he suspects the Illuminati, the ultimate secret conspiracy group. He also suspects that they're planning to start a nuclear war, so with each issue a member of Hunter's team goes into the past to try to bring down the Illuminati. The characters are paper-thin and the plots feeble, but it manages to generate just enough curiosity to keep you reading: will they succeed, and if so, how?~FC

TIME TRAVELLER AI

CPM Manga: *21 issues 1999-2001**

Ai Ijima is a semi-retired Japanese porn star ("The Traci Lords of Japan") who 'writes' herself as a sexually liberated fun girl who finds a time-machine and whizzes about having adventures in the past and future. Her initial forays are into history where she meets and sexually educates Cleopatra (1), sorts out the warring sides in Mediaeval Europe (2), ditto for Mongolian warlord Fubirai (3), and visits Cowboys (4), Leonardo da Vinci (5) and Atlantis (6). 7 begins an extended trip for Ai and her film crew to the year 3994 in a laborious spoof of the movie Waterworld, with randy pirates, the last descendent of Captain Nemo, a Ship of Light and lots of missing clothing (7-13). A final saga sends her to shogunate Japan to battle and/or boff Ninjas, wizards, cowboys knights, and giant Clockwork robots. Like many Manga comedy titles the humour simply doesn't translate and coy smut is just a waste of space. Even the most easily excitable readers of one-fisted tales are going home frustrated from this one.~WW

TIME TWISTERS

Quality: *18 issues 1987-1989*

Britain's *2000AD* comic has frequently run short sting-in-the-tail science-fiction strips. More often than not they were treated as try-outs for new writers and artists, and there's little imagination at work, except for a period in the early to mid-1980s, when the quality level was upped considerably by the use of established professionals. Alan Moore, for instance, wrote almost two dozen, and Grant Morrison about half that amount, and both were generally matched with decent artists. Although both writers would consider the strips little more than an intellectual exercise, and none rank with their major work, a sample issue provides considerable enjoyment. Artists fare less well, with the pages drawn to reduce to *2000AD*'s page size being stretched and thinned to accommodate their reproduction at standard American comic page size. Most issues to 12 contain plenty of Alan Moore strips, collected as *Alan Moore's Shocking Futures* and *Alan Moore's Twisted Times* by Titan, and thereafter 18 is a decent sample, with early work from both Glenn Fabry and Neil Gaiman.~WJ

TIME WARP

DC: *5 issues 1979-1980*

With the subtitle "Doomsday Tales and Other Things", this anthology attempted to signpost its thematic obsessions, but the reality is closer to the O. Henry-style twisted endings that dominated EC's science fiction series. There's a good start artistically with contributions from Ditko, Sutton, Newton, Aparo, Kane, Chaykin, Orlando and Grandenetti in the first two issues alone, but the writers fail to match them. While there's little new, no issue is completely devoid of interest.~NF

TIMESLIP

Marvel: *One-shot 1998*

Pin-ups and factfiles reprinted from Marvel promo mag *Marvel Vision* wherein contemporary artists such as John Paul Leon, Michael Allred and Glenn Fabry were asked to redesign the classic Marvel characters of the early 1960s. Gratuitous, exploitative and not to be confused with the *Avengers* one-shot.~WW

TIMESPIRITS

Marvel/Epic: *8 issue limited series 1984-1986*

Cusick the Tuscarora is the one with experience, the teacher, while Doot of the Wawenoc is the student, struggling to come to terms with his inherent shamanic, mystical powers. They travel through time in search of knowledge, ever ready to sell what they already have if the price is right. Thus they become involved with the original floods (2, 3) while saving New Iberia from a creature that can't go home until its grief and sadness are drained, or join Jimi Hendrix and an alien siren on a mission to change history in Central America (5, 6). Written by Steve Perry and drawn by Tom Yeates (guest creators in 4 include Steve Bissette, Al Williamson, Rick Veitch and John Totleben), it's an entertaining, visually evocative series that wasn't given a chance to develop. The political undercurrents of 5 and 6 probably did the series no favours, but would seem less controversial now.~NF

TIMEWALKER

Valiant: *15 issues, 1 Yearbook 1994-1995*

Ivar is an immortal with great strength and healing powers, and he has an affinity for the 'time arcs' that appear periodically and catapult him backwards and forwards through time. OK. So he can't be hurt, he wins all his fights, and whenever he's in trouble there's a good chance an arc will appear and whisk him away. Have you guessed this is not a compelling read? Maybe you're not supposed to read it, but just soak up the sight of all those muscles in his arms – the quantity keeps changing, but at best he has about three times the human norm. The only issues with any merit are 10, 11 and 15, co-written by Debra Doyle and James MacDonald, which have actual plot and humour, and above-average artwork, too.~FC

Recommended: 10, 11, 15

Neurocomics TIMOTHY LEARY

Last Gasp: *One-shot 1979*

Timothy Leary's complex, and occasionally nutty, theories about evolution, consciousness and the untapped possibilities of the human brain are delivered here in dull, weighty segments. It's no wonder Last Gasp can still supply this at cover price after twenty years.~FP

TINCAN MAN

Image: *3 issue miniseries 2000*

The horrible covers do this introspective series no justice, as it possesses a greater poignancy than they suggest. At forty-five homicide detective Alex Darkstar has hit the bottom, and considers his rural childhood, particularly his refuge from an abusive stepfather, his grandfather and the stories he passed on about Alex's heritage. Simultaneously a bizarre robotic creation arrives in town to kill a movie producer, and sticks about to carry out further acts of vengeance against criminals. Darkstar's redemption comes about via investigating the case. It all degenerates into predictability for the finale, but overall writer Jim Thornton and artist Dietrich Smith created something worth a wider look. Tincan man animation can be found at www.fragcity.com.~WJ

TINTIN

Atlantic-Little Brown/Methuen/Magnet/Mammoth: *21 Graphic Novels 1932-1976*
Sundancer: *1 Graphic Novel (Tintin in the Land of the Soviets)*
Attack International: *1 volume (Breaking Free) 1989*

Hergé's adventures of Tintin have been continually in print in the English language for over forty years, and for over seventy in France. The simple "ligne claire" art has been hugely influential throughout Europe, over 100 million *Tintin* books have been sold, and Asterix is the only European comic character to surpass Tintin's popularity. Making the statistics all the more remarkable is that *Tintin* was among the earliest European comic strips. Whereas his American and British counterparts are nothing more than curiosities, *Tintin* is loved by each succeeding generation.

Conceived as an adventure strip for a Christian newspaper's insert for children, the earliest stories are little more than chases propped up by poor jokes and surprisingly slapdash artwork. *Tintin in the Land of the Soviets* and *Tintin in the Congo* remain unavailable as mass-market English-language editions. They're largely unappealing, motivated more by each weekly deadline than by any plot consideration, and were later disowned by Hergé. Not that *Tintin in America* is any better, despite being redrawn for album publication.

Cigars of the Pharaoh is a big step forward, with well-timed comic sequences, a lack of Christian or colonialist propaganda, and a well observed cast. It introduces recurring villain Rastapopoulos and, if one doesn't count Tintin's constant canine companion Snowy, the first regular supporting characters, inept detectives Thompson and Thomson. *The Blue*

Lotus continues the improvement with a structure to the story, effective subplots, and researched and detailed artwork. It's almost the best of the early Tintin stories. In comparison *The Broken Ear* and *The Black Island* are regressive steps, the latter having been largely redrawn in the 1960s by Hergé's chief assistant Bob de Moor. It's worth noting, though, that both were originally produced in the late 1930s, and are streets ahead of most contemporary American product.

King Ottokar's Sceptre is the final fling for Tintin as a solo character, and the best. By this point Hergé has graduated from adventure reel stories to political satire, taking a swipe at the covetous foreign policy of 1930s Germany. Forever armed with a thundering torrent of inventive invective, irascible seadog Captain Haddock débuts in *The Crab with the Golden Claws*, is featured in all succeeding Tintin stories and transforms the series. His short fuse and frequent inebriation, allied with the silent-film comedy of Thompson and Thomson, provide all the slapstick sequences required. The later introductions of deaf and absent-minded Professor Calculus and irritating insurance salesman Jolyon Wagg round off an eccentric supporting cast.

With the exception of the muddled *Land of Black Gold* (which nevertheless has its moments) all albums from *Secret of the Unicorn* until the strangely lacklustre *Flight 917* are Hergé and assistants on top form. The running gags have been established, the comedy is masterful, the plots are almost mathematically constructed, the characters resonate, there's a great attention to detail and the deceptive simplicity of the art appears almost effortless. The best album is *The Castafiore Emerald*, with Haddock a masterful study in repressed rage. Initially it recalls nothing so much as Georgian farce, but becomes a classic locked-room mystery starring imposing opera singer Bianca Castafiore, previously restricted to memorable cameos. After this masterpiece, *Flight 917* is a grave disappointment. Whereas previous potentially incongruous elements have been seamlessly fused to Tintin plots, a rescue by extraterrestrials (although not shown) to conclude a thriller as ordinary as any produced by Hergé since the 1930s just doesn't work. Thankfully, *Tintin and the Picaros*, Hergé's final Tintin story, is a partial return to form. Purists carp over superficial attempts to modernise Tintin (particularly losing his plus fours), but it's funny, Hergé has a point to make about South American dictatorships, and there are interesting new characters. From anyone else it would be considered excellent.

Breaking Free has nothing to do with the then deceased Hergé. Tintin, Captain Haddock and assorted likenesses were appropriated by one J. Daniels for an anti-capitalist diatribe aimed at encouraging the population to rise from the sofa. There's little subtlety in this black and white world, and once the novelty of the transplanted cast expires the ceaseless hectoring dissolves any reading pleasure. Still, if it inspired a few people it did its job.

Oddly for such an enduring character, Tintin himself lacks charisma, never being developed beyond the earnest, plucky and wholesome adventurer introduced in the earliest books. It's the engaging supporting cast and their fully realised comic potential that elevates the title to greatness and to the level where *Tintin* is appreciated by adults as well as their offspring. Forget the substandard animated versions of the novels and the embarrassing film: every true comic fan ought to own at least half a dozen Tintin books.~WJ

Recommended: *King Ottokar's Sceptre, The Crab with the Golden Claws, The Shooting Star, The Secret of the Unicorn, Red Rackham's Treasure, The Seven Crystal Balls, Prisoners of The Sun, Destination Moon, Explorers on the Moon, The Calculus Affair, The Red Sea Sharks, Tintin in Tibet, The Castafiore Emerald, Tintin and the Picaros*

TINY TOON ADVENTURES

DC: *4 issues 1990-1991*

The Tiny Toons are junior versions of Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck and the other Warner Bros cartoon characters. These magazine-size issues are aimed at a very young audience and consist mostly of puzzle pages, jokes, games and mazes, with one short, undistinguished comic strip in each issue.~NF

TITAN

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1994*

Broaching the gap between the *Comics Greatest World* event and the start of regular series such as X, *Barb Wire* and *Ghost* this Superman knock-off tells how the world's most powerful American falls under the sway of shady spin-doctors who want him to work exclusively for the government. This adequate thriller leads directly into the *Will To Power* series.~WW

TITAN A.E.

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 2000*

Prequel to the animated movie set before the invasion of Earth. It's by the numbers science fiction as the military rescue a doctor important to the future of mankind. Unremarkable in every respect.~FP

TITANS

DC: *50 issues, 1 Annual, 1 Secret Files 1999-2003*

The original Teen Titans return, now all a few years older: Nightwing, Robin that was, Flash, once Kid Flash, Troia formerly Wonder Girl, Tempest, née Aqualad, and Arsenal, no longer Speedy. Others from different incarnations of the team are along for the ride, from the capable creative team of Devin Grayson and penciller Mark Buckingham (to 17). Grayson prioritises the interaction of the core characters, with action and villains taking a back seat, and the return of the Nazi Red Panzer out of place. 10-12 connects them all with immortal villain, Vandal Savage, and Cheshire, mother to Arsenal's daughter. This rather turbulent 'family' play a major role in the series. 15-16 hark back to the original *Teen Titans* as Troia tries to smooth various conflicts. Grayson then spotlights the secondary characters, until 21 when co-writer for the last few issues, Jay Faerber takes over in full. He starts well by sorting out the complex history of Troia in 23-25. The latter issue features story and art from previous *Titans* creators including Marv Wolfman, George Pérez and the legendary Nick Cardy, along with then penciller Paul Pelletier. Unfortunately a bunch of misfit kids arrive in 28 as an obvious attempt to create a new Teen Titans, which never took off, so the brats occupied this series. Still Faerber manages to squeeze in some above average stories when they aren't around, such as 30, again featuring Cheshire. Decent art is provided by Barry Kitson and Rich Faber from 37, and Tom Peyer joins from 42. He gets to grips with the characters, but as elsewhere, he's a hot and cold writer so you never know what to expect. Overall it's the best incarnation of the *Titans* since the early *New Teen Titans* days, but still disappointing overall.~HY

Recommended: 15, 16, 23-25, 30

TITANS OF FINANCE

Alternative Comics: *One-shot 2001*

This gathers from various sources (mostly *Keyhole*), short biographies of shady and failed bankers, stock traders, investors and other financial types. An unusual topic for comics, writer R. Walker obviously relishes sticking the knife in and twisting, while Josh Neufeld delivers artistically. Included among the rogues are one-time Marvel Comics asset-stripper Ron Perelman, who later married to Ellen Barkin. No justice there, then.~FP

TITS AND CLITS

Last Gasp: *8 issues 1972-1980*

Originally created by Joyce Farmer and Chyn Lyvely as a backlash against the misogynistic violence depicted in most undergrounds, *Tits and Clits* wisely refrained from male-bashing and instead concentrated on sex-positive strips for women. Not a porno comic per se, *Tits and Clits* focuses on the wry and amusing side of sexual relationships, including the difficulty of having any at all. Originally written and drawn solely by its originators, other contributors were soon invited in. Roberta Gregory, Mary Fleener and several others have livened up its pages. As usual with anthologies, the variety of contributors means that an unqualified recommendation is impossible, but open-minded readers will find something to amuse them in most issues.~HS

TO DIE FOR

Blackthorne: *One-shot 1989*

Lame vampire story as estate agent Kate falls for Vlad, her latest client, and becomes a pawn in a battle between rival bloodsuckers. Also produced in a 3-D version that sucks too.~WW

TOD HOLTON SUPER GREEN BERET

Lightning: *2 issues 1967*

With 1967 now indelibly linked with hippies and peace, repugnant claptrap like this, a more representative sample of contemporary American opinion, surprises. Young Tod Holton is given a magical green beret by his sceptical G. I. Uncle. When he puts it on not only does he transform into a super soldier, but he can magically transport himself to Vietnam, Cuba or Central Africa to beat up gooks, commies and spear-throwing Africans. Time's no problem either with visits to Nazi Germany and Revolutionary USA on the agenda as well. Largely written in light-hearted tone by Otto Binder, twisting his Captain Marvel scenario, it's appalling jingoistic propaganda wretchedly drawn by Carl Pfeufer. Each issue also has one slightly better drawn, although equally gung-ho, strip by Wayne Marston.~FP

TOKA, Jungle King

Dell: *10 issues 1964-1967*

You can bet this Jungle King didn't set too many people on fire back when Gold Key's *Tarzan* comic was being drawn by Russ Manning. Completely forgettable.~SW

Vertigo Pop! TOKYO

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 2002*

Jonathan Vankin and Seth Fisher tell the tale of Steve, an obsessed video-jock who's come to Tokyo to capture the ultimate techno-thrill for the buzz-starved audiences of the world. Instead he finds himself sucked into the city's darkest criminal underbelly by Maki, a too-hip high school girl, and involved in a bizarre plot to kidnap ultimate pop-star Hike. Sharp looking nonsense that's not as cool as it would like.~WW

TOM CORBETT, SPACE CADET

Eternity: *4 issue miniseries 1990, 4 issue miniseries 1990*

A loose interpretation of the 1950s TV series, featuring a bunch of space cadets led by Tom Corbett on the good starship Polaris. Stories and the black and white art are raw, but the tonal work on the manga-style second series works better. The first series sees the return of Tom's father, and as might be expected, not all is as it seems. The second series concentrates on strange objects found on Mars. This might have had more charm if it kept to a 1950s feel rather than attempting to modernise.~HY

TOM JUDGE: End of Days

Image/Top Cow: *One-shot 2003*

The histrionic, rushed and nonsensical conclusion to *Universe*. Tom Judge is an alcoholic ex-priest who possesses a mystic amulet called The Rapture. Whoever he gives the amulet to gets to run the Fifth Dimension and consequently rearrange the Universe to suit his/her/its whims. Ludicrous and derivative to the point of outright theft, it's bound to disappoint fans of writer Paul Jenkins, and Clayton Crain's slick but lifeless drawing adds to the confusion.~WW

TOM MIX WESTERN

AC: *2 issues 1988-1989, one-shot (Holiday Album) 1990*

Do-gooder Tom starred in over 350 films between 1910 and 1930 and then appeared on a radio show until 1950, despite his death in 1940. The strips reprinted here are from Fawcett's Master Comics, illustrated by Carl Pfeufer and John Jordan. In 2 Tom finds himself buried alive in a coffin full of substandard cement, which explains why he escapes to catch the men responsible, but that's as exciting as it gets. Mix is another Western hero who prefers shooting guns out of the baddies' hands rather than risking killing them. Good job he's such a spectacular shot. *The Tom Mix Holiday Album* is just more of the same.~NF

TOM STRONG

America's Best Comics: *18 issues + 1999 to date*

Born just over 100 years ago on the hidden island of Attabar Teru, Tom Strong's career spans a meta-century that resembles ours, but has felt Tom's and other fictional influences that reach into the future. He is a "science hero" raised in a gravity chamber by his father until he was 8 so that he became proportionately stronger and faster. When his parents perished in an earthquake in 1908 Tom's upbringing fell to the Ozu tribe who shared their secret of long life with him. For the past 80 years his main base of operations has been Millennium City where he, his wife Dhalua and their daughter Tesla are installed in The Stronghold on Anvil Street with an extended family of friends. The villains and menaces are consistently earth-shattering but one name keeps resurfacing: Paul Saveen who has not weathered the century as well as Tom.

1 features an origin story right from his birth, possibly even his conception. In 10 we meet Warren Strong, a rabbit version of Tom from another dimension who returns in 13's tribute to Fawcett's *Captain Marvel*. 11-12 feature an alternate Earth peopled by heroes only a copyright clause away from the Ned Pines published pantheon of the 1940s including doppelganger Tom Strange, who, as Doc Strange, was a knock-off Doc Savage, the original 'Man of Bronze'. Tesla Strong gets her own feature in 8, 9 and 10, meeting the lava-being Salamander in 8 who returns to woo her in 15, staying on at the Stronghold. Perils of Dhalua also features in 9. 16-18 features virtually every cast member thus far plus space cowboy The Weird Rider and Tom's soviet counterpart Svetlana X, all fighting a seemingly unstoppable invasion of Earth.

Alan Moore writes everything, and with two centuries to play with has yet to lose interest. There's a particularly rich vein from 9 to 13 including all three stories in 9, the Necro-Gyro in 10 which Tom uses to visit the dead, the trip to Terra Obscura and 13's Tom Strong Family issue.

Regular artist and co-creator Chris Sprouse is nothing short of brilliant throughout. He's cleanly inked by Al Gordon in 1-14*, and then done even greater justice by Karl Story. The list of guest artists drawing all or portions of issues is truly lush: Arthur Adams (4), Jerry Ordway (5), Dave Gibbons (6), Gary Frank and Cam Smith (7), Al Weiss (8), Paul Chadwick (9), Gary Gianni (10), Russ Heath, Kyle Baker and Peter Poplaski (13) and Hilary Barta in 14. The colour by Tad Ehrlich in 1-7 and then by the great Matt Hollingsworth is a key factor in the title's solidity, as is Todd Klein's lettering. Subtleties like the letters in Tom's word balloons always being larger really add to the overall package. Moore's avoidance of any over-facile concentration on continuity and the many pastiche covers and logotypes leaves the reader with the impression that The Superhero is being commented upon. Inventive, ambitious, consistently well-crafted and entertaining. 1-14 are collected.~SW

Recommended: 1, 2, 5, 9-13, 15-18

TOM STRONG'S TERRIFIC TALES

America's Best Comics: *4 issues + 2001 to date*

An anthology title that allows Alan Moore and his cohorts (including Steve Moore, Alan Weiss, Arthur Adams and others) to tell stories from the past of his Superman/Doc Savage pastiche Tom Strong, including one per issue from Strong's childhood. While the tales are as well crafted as you'd expect from Moore they're no different from what's often served up in the regular comic, making a second title largely superfluous – especially as its publishing schedule is erratic to say the least. The middle strip in each issue, Jonni Future by Steve Moore and Arthur Adams, is generic science fantasy that wouldn't be strong enough to hold a title itself.~JC

TOMAHAWK

DC: *130 issues 1950-1970*
DC/Vertigo: *One-shot 1998*

Based broadly on true-life frontiersman Davy Crockett, buckskin clad Tom Hawk is better known throughout the 1770s western frontier as Tomahawk. He shares his adventures with youthful sidekick Dan Hunter. Well, a man's gotta have somebuddy t'talk to. Tom and Dan's coonskin caps were originally seen in *Star-Spangled Comics* 69 (1947), where they stayed to 121. Tom's own series was first drawn by Bruno Premiani along with back-ups from veteran cover artist Fred Ray, who supplied scripts, as did Bill Finger. Early issues also feature 'Tales of the Arrow Maker' drawn by Leonard Starr in 1-8 before Ray takes over, followed by Jim McArdle in 1954, his last tale running in 25. A selection of Ray stories from this period was the bizarre choice of material in the 1976 treasury titled *Superman Salutes the Bicentennial*. There are also some fine covers by Nick Cardy between 20 and 37. Premiani's work is inked by Ray Burnley from 18 to 36, his last issue, after which Ray and Bob Brown alternate on the artwork, with France Herron writing. Storylines begin to veer off into fantasy, giant apes, time travel and things generally sensational.

With 73 in 1961 Brown takes a back seat to Ray and there's little variation until 117 in 1968. In 81 Herron débuted an early costumed vigilante, Miss Victory, and in 83 he introduced Tom and Dan's outfit The Rangers: Big Anvil, Cannonball, Frenchie Duval, Kaintuck Jones and Long Rifle Morgan, their buddy Brass Buttons joining a couple of issues later. This often made Tomahawk a team title, but hyperbole didn't sit well with the period setting. Case in point: 103's Frontier Frankenstein, a ludicrous and very obvious poke at Marvel's Hulk – right down to the torn purple trousers. 'The Origin of the Rangers' is run as a back-up strip in 109, by which time they've been announced as "The Rip Roaring Rangers" on covers, an attempt to make them resemble an 18th Century band of Marvel-style Howling Commandos. Efforts to rekindle interest continued with the employment of writer Robert Kanigher and artist Frank Thorne, behind beautiful covers by Neal Adams. This line-up was responsible for a tremendous upturn in falir and entertainment value from 117. The revamp only achieved critical acclaim, however, and in a last-ditch gamble the comic was re-titled *Son of Tomahawk* (see below) with 131.

The one-shot by writer Rachel Pollack is a credible attempt to bring some spiritual and political sensibility to the legend of Tom Hawk, retelling his eschewing of society with a Native American mythological underscore and no Dan Hunter in sight. Artist Tom Yeates could have done with more time on the fifty-eight pages that were clearly once a miniseries.~SW

Son of TOMAHAWK

DC: *10 issues (131-140) 1970-1972*

Having failed to spark interest in the dynamic new *Tomahawk*, DC moved the series forward twenty years to spotlight Hawk, Tomahawk's son by a Native American woman. Glorious Joe Kubert covers grace every issue, while inside Bob Kanigher and Frank Thorne provide dynamic and thrilling stories, largely with a moral point, taking on racism (133) and slavery (136) among other topics. Tomahawk sneaks back in from the first issue, older, but still in full possession of his skills and faculties, acting as a counterpart to the headstrong Hawk. The best issue is 138's Christmas story (despite Kanigher having Christ crucified at Christmas), in which Hawk's mother and brother, are taken hostage. Giant-sized from 136, well selected reprints (including Frank Frazetta-illustrated strips in 131 and 139) and Joe Kubert's 'Firehair' strip in 132, 134 and 136 round out an excellent package.~FP

Recommended: 133, 135, 136, 138, 139

TOMATO

Starhead: *2 issues 1994-1995*

A smorgasbord of fictional tales and autobiographical items, *Tomato* is underscored throughout by a wicked sense of humour. Whether it's the first issue's previously unseen use for a bottle of ketchup, or the problems of arranging to meet Camille Paglia, or 2's tale of Grandma Forney's games of scrabble, or the over-the-top-costume-party reminiscences, the common thread is laughter. There's little else linking the mainly short strips, drawn in wildly differing styles by Ellen Forney. Not everything is successful, but there's an admirable diversity and lack of pretension, and a decent level of entertainment.~WJ

TOMB of DARKNESS

Marvel: *15 issues (9-23) 1974-1976*

1-8 are titled *Beware*. This title reprints weird/horror shorts from the 1950s to the early 1960s. The only story of interest is 22's 'I Created Grutan' from *Strange Tales* 75, which features a mad scientist who attempts to create a growth serum. In this reprint, his assistant's name is crudely relettered as 'Pym'. This is considered the first chronological story about Hank Pym.~APS

THE TOMB OF DRACULA

Marvel: *Series one 70 issues, 4 Giant-Size* **(2-5)** ***1972-1979, series*** *two 6 issues 1979-1980*
Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1991-1992*

That a *Dracula* comic written by a man named Wolfman exists at all is preposterous. That it's among the best supernatural titles ever stretches credulity beyond breaking point, but so it is. Although introducing key members of the supporting cast – Dracula's descendant Frank Drake, his partner Rachel Van Helsing and the mute Indian Taj – 1-6 don't develop Dracula beyond cinema cliché. 1-2 were reprinted in 1992 as *The Savage Return of Dracula*.

Gene Colan pencils from the off, Marv Wolfman arrives with 7, and inker Tom Palmer rejoins with 12, cementing the creative team for series one. While the Colan/Palmer art is always atmospheric and excellent, it took some initial fumbling before Wolfman began mining gold. It came as the fascinating supporting cast gelled. In addition to the insecure Drake, confident Van Helsing and Taj, there are Quincy Harker, old and wheelchair-bound from a lifetime fighting Dracula, and Blade débuting in 10, a hip 1970s vampire-hunter in search of a vampire who killed his mother. The first signs of greatness are apparent with 12-14, in which Dracula is cornered and killed, although not without cost, and then resurrected by a misguided priest. These were reprinted as the *Halloween Megazine* in 1996. Hannibal King makes his début in a great twist-ending story in 25, losing little of its effect through King's later familiarity. 32-33 have Dracula confronting the infirm Harker; it relates their previous confrontations and Harker's losses in a moving story. At this point Dracula realises that his vampiric abilities are being sapped, and he relocates to Boston to confront the cause of this. 37 introduces two further regular cast members, hack writer Harold H. Harold and the woman of his dreams, Aurora Rabinowitz, in a tale running until 42, in which Harker and company discover that there are worse threats than Dracula.

Wolfman and Colan's Dracula retains a nobility and seductive attraction despite revelling in his status as Lord of the Undead and murdering with ease, Wolfman making each kill more resonant by presenting a brief biography of the victim before death. Dracula retains a sense of honour, though, and is capable of affection, as is seen in later issues with his wife Domini. Beyond the cast a positive factor is that *Tomb of Dracula* is largely self-contained. When this relative insularity is breached by reminders of the Marvel Universe beyond the result is lacklustre reading, viz the guest appearances of Dr Strange and Silver Surfer (44 and 50), both of them reprinted as one-shots in 1994. The supernatural guest stars, the ridiculously named Brother Voodoo and Son of Satan (35 and 53), mesh more comfortably. Dracula marries in 46 (reprinted out of context and rendered meaningless in the 1992 *The Wedding of Dracula*) and the marriage is consummated in 47, with Janus born in 54. Janus' destiny is hinted at in 51, while 59-61 deal with his transformation. That story told, the series, though it's never actually bad, meanders as Dracula becomes human, and must then face his successor as Lord of the Undead. The final story, reprinted in edited form as *Requiem for Dracula* in 1992, has the death of two regular cast members, but the lack of emotional impact typifies later issues.

Series two is a black and white magazine, better displaying Colan's art, which only graces 1 and 3. With Wolfman, Colan and the majority of the supporting cast gone it's on a par with *Giant-Size Dracula*, but fails the inevitable comparison with the previous series. The Epic issues reunite Wolfman, Colan and Dracula, picking up in 1991 and the resurrection of Dracula as if he'd been buried since *Tomb of Dracula* 70. The intervening years have seen the death of Rachel Van Helsing, and Frank Drake referred for depression. Blade's also on hand, and this is a more savage and brutal Dracula. Despite the introduction of the fascinating Inspector Golem it's an unwise return for Wolfman (and, eventually, Dracula), who's going through the motions with no real structure to the story.~FP

Recommended: Series one 12-14, 17, 20, 24-29, 32,33, 37-42, 45-49, 54-57, 59-61

TOMB RAIDER

Image/Top Cow: *25 issues + 2000 to date*

Dan Jurgens writes 1-20 and provides exotic locations, mysteries and action as Lara Croft fulfils assorted quests. A little plot goes a long way, and characterisation is paper thin: Lara is single-minded and adaptable and fellow adventurer Chase, who moves on after 14, fancies her. The lack of complexity hardly matters to the audience for a well-promoted brand name, though. The art is predictably big breasted babe style with plenty of lines throughout, with Andy Park a superior exponent. 1-14 are collected, but perhaps the best sample of the Jurgens/Park style is in 16, 17, 19 and 20, starting with a motorcycle race in the USA, moving to the African veldt and ending in the future. In 21-24 new writer John Ney Rieber manages the trick of plotting a comic in video game style, then adds some pretentious commentary, particularly in 21, over artist Randy Green's ludicrous distortions of the female figure. Lara is transformed in 25, involving another teaming with Sara Pezzini and her Witchblade, here drawn by Michael Turner, which will appeal to some.~WJ

TOMB RAIDER: Journeys

Image/Top Cow: *8 issues + 2002 to date*

Fiona Kai Avery provides several linked stories concerning Lara Croft's meetings with privateer, Captain Kagan and the search for a Dream Spear. She helps him escape from a curse in the past, in 1, finds El Dorado in 2 and Gomorrah in 3, whilst both she and Kagan face black marketeers in 4. She's in a schoolgirl outfit for a clash with one of King Arthur's knight's in 5 and is given a tour of 10 Downing Street by 'Tony' and the ghost of Winston Churchill in 6, which sets the scene for a trip to the Outback (7) and then into the Dreaming (8). None of the artwork is dreadful, but there have been five artists over the eight issues, making the whole seem incoherent. 6 is probably one of the worst comics ever written, by the way.~NF

TOMIE

ComicsOne: *2 volumes 2001*

Tomie is a beautiful itinerant demonic Japanese teenager who makes practically everyone she meets fall madly in love with her. The males in particular feel compelled to knife her to death and cut her into pieces. New little Tomies grow from the pieces, or sometimes just as tumours from the head or chest of a full size Tomie, and encourage the men to kill the rival Tomies and/or themselves. The stories, each starting out mundanely and swiftly leading up to the inevitable blood-spattered and corpse-filled rooms, are certainly horrific, but the constant repetition of the themes of irresistible adolescent sexuality and rapidly invasive illness has a cumulative amusing effect, leaving the reader laughing out loud, perhaps with a hard-on too, by the end of the 500 little pages. Artist/writer Junji Ito may be the genius of manga.~GK

Recommended: 1-2

TOMMI GUNN

London Night: *3 issue miniseries 1996, one-shot ('Black Rain') 1996, 3 issue miniseries ('Digital Meltdown' 1-3 +½) 1997-1998, 4 issue miniseries ('Killer's Lust' 0, 1-3) 1998, annual 1998*

She's blonde. She's busty. She's bionic! Tommi Gunn is yet another blood-soaked, vengeance-driven, scantily clad – as often unclad – hell-bimbo designed to appeal to the lowest common denominator by getting naked – with or without other chicks – and messily slaughtering all and sundry for the flimsiest excuses imaginable. Utterly irredeemable rubbish by Everette Hartsoe and Georges Jeanty.~WW

TOMOE

Crusade: *3 issue miniseries (0, 2, 3) 1996*, one-shot ('Shi vs Tomoe') 1996, one-shot (Tomoe/Witchblade) 1996, one-shot ('Unforgettable Fire') 1997*

Tomoe is Shi's best friend. Neither is aware however that the other is an adherent of rival Japanese warrior sects who have been at war for over a thousand years. At the behest of her masters Tomoe 'kills' Shi. Discovering Shi's identity and having fulfilled her obligation to her masters, Tomoe takes over Shi's mission. This all occurs as *Shi* 4-8, *Tomoe* 0-3 and the *Shi vs Tomoe Special*. Tomoe's masquerade continues in Shi before the one-shots. She is recruited by a band of monks to join New York cop Sara (Witchblade) Pezzini in stopping a samurai amassing occult power, and 'Unforgettable Fire' serves as a prequel to a new series of Shi. Tomoe is transported back in time to meet her historical namesake and convert a demon to Buddhism only to end up in Hiroshima seconds before the Atom bomb is dropped. Beautifully illustrated by a variety of artists the stories are, however, ludicrously overwritten and are further complicated by the interminable crossovers, exemplified by Tomoe's first issue actually being Shi 6.~WW

TOMORROW KNIGHTS

Marvel/Epic: *6 issue miniseries 1990-1991*

In a future scenario where multi-national corporations are the real powers and elected governments merely puppets, the Tomorrow Knights are a freelance team recruited by the US President to break the corporate control. Written and drawn by Rod Whigham and Roy Richardson, *Tomorrow Knights* overcomes the contrived title to develop into a sound adventure series.~WJ

TOMORROW STORIES

America's Best Comics: *12 issues 1999-2002**

This anthology was the most frivolous of Alan Moore's ABC, but none the worse for that. 'Greyshirt', drawn by Rick Veitch, was basically *The Spirit* in all but name, but gave Moore ample scope to explore his noir tendencies. The Jim Baikie-drawn 'First American' was that most tired of genres, the superhero spoof strip, but incredibly Moore made it work with endless coruscating invention. 'The Cobweb', drawn by Melinda Gebbie, was a sapphic cross between 'Phantom Lady' and a Victorian adventuress, and somehow never settled down into anything substantial. By contrast, 'Jack B. Quick – Boy Inventor', drawn with exquisite aplomb by Kevin Nowlan, was a comic masterpiece with each vignette of scientific disaster revealing Moore's seemingly limitless imagination and mastery of the short story format. Sadly, 'Jack B. Quick' was only in six issues (1-4, 10, 12) and its replacement, 'Splash Brannigan', never quite worked despite nice Hilary Barta art. As a rule, if it has 'Jack B. Quick' in it, buy it. *The Tomorrow's Stories Book* collects 1-6.~DAR

Recommended: 1-4, 10, 12

TONGUE LASH

Dark Horse: *2 issue microseries 1996, 2 issue microseries ('II') 1999*

Inspired by Moebius, Randy and Jean-Marc L'Officier have created an alien world of animal-headed slaves, constantly masked men and under-dressed women. The plot involves political intrigue and an attempt by the Begetters (who create the animal-headed creatures) to gain access to the secrets of 'metatime'. It's all rather derivative, including the artwork of Dave Taylor, which, while not entirely following Moebius can't escape the comparison, but it's very easy on the eye. 'II' adds to the characters significantly and stretches the storytellng, including a more open attitude to the sexual decadence underlying the society on display.~NF

TOO MUCH COFFEE MAN

Adhesive: *14 issues +, 3 Specials 1993 to date*

Possibly the first existentialist costumed character, Too Much Coffee Man is gloriously designed by creator Shannon Wheeler as a paunchy guy with a massive coffee-cup helmet on his head and that permanently caffeinated bug-eyed look. Continuing from his début in *Jab*, Too Much Coffee Man contemplates his dull life and reasons for living it, with caffeine-stimulated rushes sparking his day. Until 9 there's also a back-up; a strange, possibly autobiographical, strip about a relationship, punctuated by bizarre interludes when a curiously Neanderthal-style Wheeler contemplates his work. In 9 there are strips by Paul Guinan and Kieron Dwyer, and illustrations by other known artists. Also appearing in *Dark Horse Presents* 92-95, *Too Much Coffee Man* won't be to everyone's taste, and immersion reveals a fatal repetition. Try the ludicrous death issue (5) and work back, or sample at TMCM.com. The colour specials reprint newspaper strips, whose one-note nature is highlighted by this presentation, and assorted book collections are available. As interesting as the strips throughout are the letters the comic receives.

With 11 the title became a magazine, increasing the pages count, but reducing the comic content, and placing it beyond the purview of this guide. 11-12 have Too Much Coffee Man in space, and there are short strips by other creators with Rick Geary in 12 the most notable.~FP

Adam McDaniel's TOOL

Northstar: *1 issue 1995*

A title like that induces a certain level of expectation, and admiration for McDaniel's fearlessness. Disappointment was inevitable, and it comes in the form of bog-standard gruesome horror stories drawn in sub-Berni Wrightson style featuring an avenger of the dead that fuses Swamp Thing and Predator. Originality? Zero.~WJ

TOOTH AND CLAW

Image: *3 issue miniseries 1999*

Dead framed junkie ex-cops Rachel and Jake are possessed by were-creatures from the dawn of time, to fight space aliens from another dimension. Yes, it is as bad as it sounds, with a script so long-winded and hammy you don't know if the tears running down your face are from laughter or despair.~DB

TOP NOTCH COMICS

Fantagraphics: *1 issue 1998*

A flagrant knock-off of Chris Ware's groundbreaking *Acme Comics Library* title that cannot be excused simply because it was issued by the same publisher. Not only does writer/artist Ethan Persoff mimic many of Ware's storytelling innovations, he also sees fit to copy both *Acme*'s ornate designer look and its overwhelming air of misty-eyed melancholy. It only works as an object lesson in the creative dangers inherent in excessive imitation.~AL

TOP SHELF

Primal Groove Press: *4 issues 1995-1996*
Top Shelf Publishing: *4 issues (5-8) 1997-1999*

The anthology that gave birth to an eclectic and admirable publishing company, began long on enthusiasm, but with little to recommend it. In 1 Josué Menjivar builds up and twists expectations, while Steven Weissman is in 2 and James Kochalka's meanderings can be found in all early issues. And the cocktail recipes have a charm. Other than that, while the art improves, the stories are strictly from the "then nothing happened" school. It's with 5 that *Top Shelf* takes a big leap. It's the first squarebound issue with more pages and extra colour. The quantity of dull and impenetrable strips is drastically reduced from this point, and when present they're at least decently drawn. Rich Tommaso's bittersweet story of a restaurant manager whose life is falling to pieces, has moments in 5, as does his strip about flying in 7. 5's other highlights come from Lin Lucas, and the humour of K. Thor Jensen, who adopts a different, but equally effective tone in 8. The monologues of Carrie Golus in 7 and 8 are sharply observed, if static comics, there's a good Peter Sickman-Garner strip in 6, and Myra Goldberg and Jason Little produce a fine drama set in a theatre in 7. British Simon Gane's blocky art is a highlight of 6, while Robert Somerville and Andy Konky Kru deliver European style silent surrealism in 7 and 8 respectively. Those issues have no cover numbering, being titled *Top Shelf on Parade* and *Top Shelf Under the Big Top*. 8 is the best issue overall, with excellent colour work from members of the Israeli comics collective Actus Tragicus, an atypical Billy Dogma strip from Dean Haspiel, an astounding variety of very funny strips by Josh Simmons over thirty-two pages, and the oddity that is the work of Mack White, who won't be to all tastes. Nor will the depressing Mandy Ord strip, the perversity of Mike Diana, Jeff Levine's strange Popeye strip, and funny stuff from Jean Bourguignon, but they all have merit. 8 isn't an unqualified success, but over 175 pages there isn't a lot of filler. By the end *Top Shelf* had evolved into a title bringing to mind the quality and individual editorial vision of the early *Drawn & Quarterly* issues. Sadly, unlike that title, it remains dormant.~FP

Recommended: 8

TOP SHELF Graphic Novels

Top Shelf's stated aim is to "appeal to men and women between 18 and 40, in metropolitan centers, college towns, or otherwise culturally hip communities", which could seem patronizingly smug and ignorant to some. So could many of the artists they publish, who seem to believe that the minutiae of their urban or otherwise culturally hip lives are automatically interesting.

James Kochalka is one of their more prolific creators. *Magic Boy And Girlfriend* reprints very crude self-obsessed strips from his *James Kochalka Superstar* comic, full of adolescent pseudo-profundity and drug anecdotes, mixing a style as simple as possible with semi-realistic self-portrayals. *Perfect Planet*, in which he portrays himself and his wife as elves, with a cute talking cat, is in a more consistent and accomplished style, but is forgotten in the time that it takes to read. His work strains to be cute, sad, and loving, but is never funny. *Monkey vs Robot*, a pompous parable of nature and technology in disharmony, with nods to *2001: A Space Odyssey*, takes 140 pages to do what Bernie Mireault can do in five. *The Sketchbook Diaries* is exactly what it is says it is and documents not much more than Kochalka's compulsion to eat McDonalds fast food. Surely he is joking when he says "I think you'll find the reality of one human's life compelling enough". Pinky & Stinky, about two piglets on a mission to Pluto who crash on the moon, is amusing enough, if pointless, for twenty minutes, at $17.95. Movies are better value.

Craig Thompson's highly regarded *Goodbye Chunky Rice* also features cute little creatures who love one another, but he includes a few human grotesques too and has some flair for storytelling. Tom Hart's boring *Hutch Owen*, an angry rebel against big business, was not worth drawing, however lazily and charmlessly. His *Banks/Eubanks*, a pompous lecherous film buff who fantasizes an adventurous life, is a huge improvement, though the panels are slapped in odd numbers on often largely white pages for no apparent reasons. Here Hart has ditched the dodgy politics in favour of a lot of jokes about breasts, and the world is a happier place for it.

Scott Mills' quiet and sad *Big Clay Pot*, about a clumsy girl befriending an old widower in ancient Japan, is a small touching work with rather a lot of letratone on top of not much drawing. His later, disappointing, *Trenches*, a long ambitious time-jumping story about British soldiers in the First World War, is full of historical and other errors and a bit of a dog. *Abe – Wrong For All The Right Reasons* is a huge collection of Glenn Dakin's ruminative, sometimes autobiographical, strips done over ten years from the mid-eighties. Sadly, though competent, it's graphically and imaginatively sterile from the start and he never gets any better.

A lot of Top Shelf's output is strictly amateur hour stuff. Dean Haspiel's would-be satirical antihero Billy Dogma, is resolutely self-conscious, and Matt Kindt and Jason Hall's *Pistolwhip*, pretentious willowy noir detective tripe. Rick Pinchera's *Crust*, reprinted from his local paper, is most egregiously trivial, all personal computer failure, coffee overdoses, and corporate sponsorship woes for the hipsters; *Doublecross: More Or Less* by Tony Consiglio is the same lousy drawing again and again of a cartoonist's not 100% satisfactory homelife. *Creature Tech* is interminable government agency and aliens malarkey by Doug TenNapel, a TV cartoon developer who doesn't know anything about how to make comics work. Steve Lafler's *Baja* follows his *Bughouse* series, with insect-headed jazzers and dope-dealers are retro-underground spume; and *Three Fingers* by Rich Koslowski is an elaborately done joke about the history of animated cartoons as if the characters were real actors manipulated by producers such as "Dizzy Walters". A vast, ugly and unoriginal waste of time.

Speechless is a lavish large format review of esteemed graphicist Peter Kuper's career as modern underground editor, mass market paper and magazine editorial journalist, and (this IS Top Shelf) embarrassing confessional strip artist. The politics are wet knee-jerkalism but it all looks very striking and is well-produced, and the demonstrations of stages of production are fascinating.~GK

Recommended: *Banks/Eubanks*

TOP TEN

America's Best Comics: *12 issues 1999-2001**

Alan Moore's first original superhero team since his seminal *Watchmen* of the 1980s. Moore's mainstream comic work has since, on the whole, become less portentous and structurally precise, although Top Ten is still a flawlessly executed exercise in genre storytelling that works as both robust entertainment and as a commentary on the form itself. It's simply a bit more relaxed, less anxious to connect every last dot or strike every symbolic note. The premise is simple but inspired: *Hill Street Blues* recast as a superhero soap opera, complete with multiple interlinked plotlines, overlapping dialogue and an extended cast of colourful characters, all wrapped up in one of Moore's most convincingly realised dystopias.

The series begins with focal character Robyn Slinger, aka Toybox, arriving in Neopolis for her first day working at the precinct house and meeting her extraordinary colleagues. There's the dog-headed Kemlo, the dour Superman analogue Jeff Smax, King Peacock the black magic detective, the winged Lieutenant Peregrine, Duane Bodine the cowboy Dust Devil, and many other similarly exotic superbeings. They attempt to maintain some semblance of law and order in the face of alien invaders, invisible perverts and general futuristic crim scum. Layout artist Zander Cannon and finisher Gene Ha have their work cut out for them depicting this densely packed universe, but they more than rise to the challenge, making a vast range of characters and locales visually distinctive and appealing. The main story arc is neatly wrapped up in issue 12, marking the "end of season one", but so far there's been no sign of a follow-up series; in the meantime this one is always worth a re-run, and let's be careful out there too.~AL

Recommended: 1-12

TOR

DC: *6 issues 1975-1976**

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1993**

Rarely can a story have taken forty years in the telling, yet Joe Kubert's tales of the caveman Tor began in 1953, and the DC series reprints the original issues in 2-6. 1 was a new story explaining how Tor came to be. The Epic series continues and expands the story of a man fighting alone in a hostile world. It's to Kubert's credit that although more fantasy-style creatures appear, Tor's existence remains credible. The art on the early stories is primitive compared with the splendour of the magazine-size Epic issues. Tor also appeared in the difficult-to-find tabloid-size *Sojourn*, and DC have recently issued two hardbound archive editions collecting most strips.~FP

TORCH OF LIBERTY Special

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1995*

Seemingly striving for authenticity while simultaneously being a pastiche of the Commie-bashing comics of the 1950s, John Byrne's script is altogether too knowing to succeed, and Kieron Dwyer's art too 1960s. That's not to say it isn't fun, though, but largely pointless.~WJ

Bill Ward's TORCHY

Innovation: *5 issues, 1 Special 1991*

Torchy Todd always seems to muddle through. Having a beautiful face and curvaceous body means she's a great distraction to men, so much so that criminals fall over themselves to get captured when she's around. Bill Ward's stories are full of tantalising fun if high heels and lingerie are your thing, but these days their mild fetishism doesn't seem that risqué. Reprinted in black and white from the 1950s, Ward's art is sharp and easy on the eye. With four or five stories in each issue things can get a bit repetitive (especially since one story appears in both 3 and 4!) but the light-hearted tone is engaging. The Summer Fun Special offers more of the same, plus an example of Gill Fox's work on the strip.~NF

TORG

Adventure: *4 issue miniseries 1992*

Other-dimensional cybernetic demons invade Los Angeles in this series based on a role-playing game. Not to worry, though, because another dimension that saw off the invasion have sent help. Just the one woman, mind. Perhaps it was a small dimension. The series is plotted in the manner of an action movie, so you don't have to think too hard. Given the dramatic potential, though, it should also be noted that the art is almost always as close-up as possible, the lazy artist's option (come on down Cariello).~FP

TORPEDO

Catalan: *6 volumes 1986-1993*

Hard Boiled: *4 issues 1993-1994*

The Spanish creative team of Sanchez Abuli and Jordi Bernet studied their Jimmy Cagney and George Raft movies. Torpedo is a truly ghastly and compulsive creation, a relentlessly brutal 1930s hitman without a hint of conscience for whom humanity is merely a tool to serve his needs. The only redeeming factor is that his victims are equally distressing specimens. His grim world is expounded via short stories three per issue for the comics, and up to ten in the books. Bernet's art is a curious amalgam – part Frank Robbins, part Alex Toth (who draws some stories in the first book) and part Milton Caniff – but very effective in creating the necessary grimy locations and characters. The presentation of the Catalan volumes is more appealing, but Gil Jordan's excellent translations in the comics are superior, making for a more satisfying experience overall. Issue 4 has material previously untranslated into English. Torpedo also appeared in *Vampirella* and, in ill-advised colour, in issues of *Echo of Futurepast*. Sample the comics first and work on from there.~WJ

Recommended: 1-4

TORRID AFFAIRS

Eternity: *5 issues 1988-1989*

Largely reprinted from comics with titles like *Realistic Romance* and *Teen-Age Temptations*, these stories apply the moral concerns of two decades prior to their original publication in the 1950s. As such, of course, they're kitsch treasure troves. The standout issue is 5, with some truly bizarre contrivances. There's the woman infatuated with the gangster who stands her up to rob a warehouse, an actress rehearsing a role who falls in love with a military man who sees her in uniform and believes her a fellow squaddie, and the woman assertive enough to set up and run a dating agency, but not to stand up to the crook she

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* Available in a collected edition

appoints as a partner. It's doubtful these could be enjoyed at face value today, so a sense of the ridiculous is essential.~WJ

TORSO

Image: *6 issue miniseries 1998-1999**

This terrific true crime series has all the ambience and ambition of a James Ellroy novel, yet works first and foremost as an exercise in experimental comics storytelling, with cleverly placed dialogue balloons and eye-catching photomontages helping to rush the compelling storyline along at a breakneck pace. Writer/artist Brian Michael Bendis, and collaborator Marc Andreyko, use the case of the Torso Killer, an unknown psychopath who committed a series of gruesome murders in Cleveland in the 1930s, as the springboard for a bleak meditation on the nature of ambition, discrimination and moral and political corruption. Elliot Ness, the 'Untouchable' who took on the mob in the 1920s, personally set out to catch the Torso Killer, and his failure to do so, as recounted here, effectively ended his political career. Throughout Ness is shown to be a somewhat ambivalent hero, a (self) righteous man with a lust for glory whose decision to torch a Cleveland shantytown during the course of the murder investigation provides the comic with one of its many memorable set-pieces. Reading the collected edition the sophistication of Bendis and Andreyko's plotting and pacing becomes all the more apparent.~AL

Recommended: 1-6

TOTAL ECLIPSE

Eclipse: *5 issue miniseries 1988-1989*

At a time when every comic company was issuing crossovers involving every character they'd ever published, this Eclipse team-up fest proved to be one of the most bizarre of the bunch. Eclipse had a wide variety of publications at the time, from relatively straightforward superheroes to surreal nonsense such as *Tales of the Beanworld*, and, though throwing them all together might have seemed crazy, it also, remarkably, worked. In fact, it works precisely because it's so ludicrous. As Valkyrie puts it in 5: "At last we're evening up the odds, even if our side is composed of talking ducks, beans, and Ninja hamsters." It's rubbish really, but it's mad enough to be fun.~JC

TOTAL JUSTICE

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1996*

Seemingly produced at five minutes notice as 'rushed' doesn't begin to describe both script and art, from three different artists. It's supposed to promote a new line of DC character "action figures" (toys to anyone but fans), thus throws together as many characters in the toy set as possible. Rather than encouraging purchase of the toys, the discerning buyer would surely have thought that if they were as crap as the comic they should be left on the shelf.~FP

A TOUCH OF SILVER

Image: *6 issues 1996**

Semi-autobiographical tales of young Timmy Silver, an introspective loner growing up in the 1960s in a family that's breaking apart. Against a backdrop of turbulent times, racial tension, puberty and his parents' separation, Timmy's one refuge is his comic collection. Evocative, if occasionally maudlin offering from Jim Valentino, and much of the resonance and verity was undoubtedly lost when his legal department advised against using actual period publications such as *Superboy* and *Spider-Man* in favour of the *1963* and *Big Bang* pastiche characters then being published by Image.~WW

TOUGH GUYS, WILD WOMEN

Eternity: *2 issues 1989*

There was a time pre-James Bond when Leslie Charteris' fictional detective The Saint was the last word in suave sophistication. You wouldn't know it, though, from these rough and ready strips reprinted from his 1940s Avon title. A variety of artists work on the reprints, none with any great distinction, and the stories are standard whodunnits.~FP

TOWER OF SHADOWS

Marvel: *9 issues, 1 Special 1969-1971*

The type of horror story that saw Marvel through the 1950s is produced by the contemporary freelancers with surprisingly good results, especially on the part of artists like Neal Adams, Gene Colan, Jim Steranko and Wally Wood. Unfortunately, the mixture is diluted with duff reprints from 6. The title changes to *Creatures on The Loose* with 10.~FP

THE TOWERS OF BOIS-MAURY

Titan: *2 volumes 1985, 1989*

Venture: *3 volumes • 2001 to date*

Belgian artist Hermann is revered throughout Europe, and it's easy to see why, looking at these masterpieces. They're set in the Middle Ages. Sir Aymar de Bois-Maury is a dispossessed knight with a sense of honour and justice lacking in many of his contemporaries, who view the peasants as little better than animals. The first volume, 'Babette', depicts the tragic events set in motion when a knight attempts to force himself on a peasant girl, and the second, 'Eloise de Montgri', tells of an attempt to restore a castle to the rightful owner. Both are named after the female lead. In both cases Hermann's plotting is meticulous, and his art is astonishing, seemingly effortless in evoking the Middle Ages in a simple ligne claire style and in conveying a wealth of emotion and exposition in a single panel.

With the unexpected appearance of the re-lettered Venture volumes in European style graphic album format, the guilty colourist is named as Fraymond. The vivid quality and lack of subtlety is the only failing of these stories. Thankfully he's gone for *Roderigo*, which is actually the twelfth volume in the series and issued under that name alone rather than The Towers umbrella title. The Venture design scraps the elements distinguishing the first two books, and neglects to mention it's part of the same series, which is a shame as it's a pivotal volume set in 14th century Spain providing the hitherto unrevealed background of Bois-Maury. Thankfully, the stories can be read out of sequence, and it's to be hoped that further books will now be made available in English.~FP

Recommended: 1, 2, *Roderigo*

TOXIC AVENGER

Marvel: *11 issues 1991-1992*

Moronic drivel inspired by the allegedly cult film.~HS

TOXIC CRUSADERS

Marvel: *8 issues 1992*

Originating from the deliberately bad taste *Toxic Avenger*, *Toxic Crusaders* must have been the unlikeliest kiddies' cartoon show ever, but even the comic works. A nerdy janitor is transformed into a hideous but superstrong monster on contact with toxic waste. He's the only deformed inhabitant of Tromaville, but mutation is a common condition elsewhere in New Jersey, and there are enough comrades to protect the one unpolluted city from the designs of a malign alien cockroach. Never intended as anything more than a companion to the TV show, *Toxic Crusaders* betters many of Marvel's contemporary mainstream titles. There's a wealth of bad puns, stupid henchmen and knowing asides, and the anti-pollution messages are painlessly passed on. Don't expect anything deep and there'll be a lot to enjoy here. The best sample is 5, with the excellent art of Derek Yaniger, and a funny Steve Gerber script incorporating an *Archie* parody sequence amid the usual mess. Full marks also to the team of Jeremy Banx and David Leach in 8 for the first man-on-toilet-with-trousers-round-his-ankles scene ever in a Marvel comic. A second series was widely solicited and advertised, but never actually published.~FP

TOXINE

Nose Comics: *2 issues 1991-1992*

Toxine is a rebel of sorts in a state-controlled world of the near future. Medex K is a mental hospital where experiments take place involving a disembodied brain and a prisoner pardoned on condition he take part. Guard, Nena, is scared and turns to her friend, Toxine, when she begins to be stalked by a new weapon that appears to have developed a life of its own. Roger Licot's rough, but not unpleasant, artwork adds to the atmosphere of these pulp/noir adventures, produced with a very European feel.~NF

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* Available in a collected edition

TOYBOY

Continuity: *7 issues 1986-1989*

Oh, this is so tedious. Toyboy is Jason Kriter, whose father is probably the richest man in the world. Twelve-year-old Jason has everything, and he's also an electronics genius who makes his own toys – exo-skeletons, etc. – which function in the plots on the level of magic, effectively removing any logic or tension. Avoid.~FC

TOZZER and the Invisible Lap Dancer

Ablaze Media: *1 volume 2002*

The unfortunate Tozzer's journey from trailer park to film school. The threadbare story is just an excuse to cram in as many movie-related jokes as possible, with transparent cameos. This can hardly be sustained over seventy-six pages, which makes the publication choice of full colour paperback an ambitious one. The jagged cartooning of Peter Lumby is very good, though. One to flick through in the shop, rather than buy.~WJ

TRACKER

Blackthorne: *2 issues 1988*

William Van Horn's funny private eye is a pussycat... in every sense of the word! Where VanHorn is concerned the charm and humour in a strip are practically guaranteed but his choice of the PI genre as a comedy vehicle is a little off-the-boil. For devotees only.~SW

TRAGG AND THE SKY GODS

Gold Key: *8 issues 1975-1977*

Taking their cue from the Von Daniken books popular at the time of publication, humanity is given a giant step forward when aliens endow two foetuses with intelligence way above your average caveman. Just as well, because twenty years later more aliens arrive, and they aren't as benign. A modicum of plot is stretched to breaking point. Don't bother.~FP

TRAILER TRASH

Tundra: *6 issues 1992-1993*
Fantagraphics: *3 issues + (7-9) 1996-1997*

Homing in on Middle America, Roy Tompkins delivers the zany goings-on of Harvey the Hillbilly Bastard and his colourful pals, such as Tony, the alien-obsessed schizophrenic who's receiving hidden messages in re-runs of *C.H.I.P.S.*, and Davy the drug dealer. Without question one of the most disturbed, repellent and unremittingly offensive comics ever published, *Trailer Trash* comes with the highest recommendation. Tompkins' Wolvertonesque art delights in detailing almost unimaginable scenes of degeneracy, reaching its apogee in 3 and 4's back-up strip 'The Lousy Bad Kid in Very Bad Times'. From 6 on the title has concentrated on equally appalling über-brat Billy Dalton, and has had a greater sense of continuity. 9 collects Tompkins' strips from elsewhere and is equally offensive. Recommended only for the very strongest of stomachs.~DAR

Recommended: 1-8

TRANCERS The Adventures of Jack Deth

Eternity: *2 issue microseries 1991**

The preposterous name of the lead character indicates the quality of the film and direct to video special on which this series was based. Deth is a cop in the future, who has his mind transplanted into an ancestor living in 1991 in order to stop a criminal able to transform people into zombies. It's not a bad action plot, but the jagged and spartan art drains any excitement.~FP

TRANQUILITY

Dreamsmith Studios: *3 issues 1998*

Tranquility was grown in a laboratory with her genetically identical sisters to serve as a prostitute for a moonbase's workers. Now a member of the Moon's Security Operations force, she has been secretly helping an underground resistance movement smuggle people off the Moon, but is assigned to eliminate all of her sisters after her DNA is found during a raid. This is a grim story only moderately lightened by Tranquility's talking pistol. Written by Fred Van Lente and drawn by Steve Ellis, it's done well.~NF

TRANSFORMERS

Marvel: *80 issues 1984-1991, 3 issue miniseries ('Movie') 1986-1987, 4 issue miniseries ('Headmasters') 1987-1988*

The toys were a brilliant concept: cars and planes that transformed into battle robots by some deft twisting about. Having comics to promote the toys was also a good idea. No, the problem was the execution. The basic plot is that the nasty Decepticons wage war on the Autobots before fleeing to Earth, where they exist disguised as cars and planes plotting to take over. Luckily the Autobots also arrive to save us. Aiming the comics at children, who'd have no complaints anyway, Marvel expended a minimum of effort, and art and story throughout were of a very low standard. Planned as a limited series, it ran for eight years, so in a sense Marvel were right. Notable creators are few and far between. There's early and anonymous inking from Kyle Baker on 7 and 8, while 33 and 34 reprint a John Ridgway illustrated story from Marvel's UK *Transformers* title. Otherwise, to apportion the blame, Bob Budiansky wrote most issues between 4 and 56, largely pencilled by Frank Springer, Don Perlin, then José Delbo, while Simon Furman wrote thereafter with Andrew Wildman offering slightly better art. It's Furman and Geoff Senior who produce the best issue with 75, set on Cybertron. Bizarrely, despite the poor quality, these are fondly remembered and highly sought after, but a quick glance at any of the recently issued collections confirms that what enthralled at seven, might not have the same appeal fifteen years later.~FP

TRANSFORMERS

Dreamwave: *4 issues + 2002 to date*

Adding credence to the idea that there's no such thing as a bad concept, just bad treatments, this was the best-selling new comic of 2002. Dreamwave's prescience in realising a market for a new *Transformers* title played a part, but this is a stylish and well considered relaunch with the art of Pat Lee a major factor. His pencils emphasise the sense of awe any human would have on seeing these creatures, and their relatively sparing use so far increases the effect. In terms of plot Chris Sarracini doesn't budge from the old standby of Autobot vs Decipticon and Optimus Prime vs Megatron, but he dresses it up nicely.~FP

TRANSFORMERS miniseries

Dreamwave: *6 issue miniseries ('Aramada') 2002, 3 issues + ('The War Within') 2002 to date*

'Aramada' by Chris Sarracini and James Raiz, is set during the Transformers distant past and tells of the battle between opposing camps for the strategically vital Mini-Cons. For 'The War Within' veteran *Transformers* scripter Simon Furman joins artists Don Figueroa and Elaine To four million years in the past to reveal the origins of the great war between the Autobots and the Decepticons. Impressive eye candy for the nostalgic kids of all ages.~WW

TRANSIT

Vortex: *5 issues 1987-1988*

Extraordinary début comic by Ted McKeever, reportedly written and drawn in a fortnight while the fledgling artist was under house arrest recovering from a contagious illness. Crooked Boss Traun is trying to use tele-evangelist Reverend Grisn as a puppet mayor, and graffiti artist Spud is the only witness to Grisn committing a murder. *Transit* is a confusing mix of metaphor and chase sequences, centred around a city's transport system, with wasted characters drifting through a nightmare urban landscape. Ideas spark off the pages, and if it is a little muddled in places it's worth the extra thought required to work out what McKeever's getting at. Unfinished, the last issue ends with Boss Traun ranting about the new

order as flames sweep through the city. Characters from *Transit* turn up in *Metropol*, where their story is resolved.~FJ
Recommended: 5

TRANSMETROPOLITAN

DC/Helix: *12 issues 1997-1998*
DC/Vertigo: *48 issues (13-60) 1998-2002, one-shot ('I Hate It Here') 2000, one-shot ('Filth of the City') 2001*

Spider Jerusalem is a writer with a problem. He ran away from the big city into the mountains five years ago but his publisher is finally demanding that Spider honour his contracts. Back in the city, Spider persuades an old friend, now editor of *The Word*, that he should be given a staff job and regular column, along with journalist insurance, an apartment and all modern conveniences. In his new hovel, the "voice-keyed physical cleaning unit" takes all his hair off and his household appliance is found to be on drugs. The first storyline establishes Spider in the city, reporting on riots between the police and a group of fetishists who have become part alien. In the process, he becomes famous again, something he'd claimed he wanted to avoid. Spider gets a two-headed cat and an assistant, Channon, assaults the President (4), surfs the TV channels (5) and makes a violent statement at the New Religious Movement Convention (6). In three vivid and thought-provoking issues (7-9), Spider takes Channon to watch her boyfriend download his mind into a cloud of minute machines, meets someone who, when freed from cryogenics, can't cope with the world of the future and investigates several reservations where ancient cultures are kept alive.

10-12 explain something of Spider's history when a cult, insulted by his ex-wife, seeks his death because his wife's had her head frozen. Along the way we learn why the French have sent a headless bomb after him and why an ex-assistant is tying to kill him. The rest of the series is pretty much a single story-arc, beginning with 'Year of the Bastard' (13-18), in which Spider decides to cover the Presidential elections, which resulted in his retreat from the city the last time he did it. He also gains a new assistant, Yelena Rossini. After presidential candidate, Callahan, has his press officer, Vita Severn killed to enhance his ratings, however, Spider takes it very personally, effectively setting out to bring down the Presidency, aided by Yelena and Channon, going on the run and in failing health. There are occasional digressions that offer examples of Spider's journalism and insights into the life of the city. 31, for instance, has guest strips by Frank Quitely and Eduardo Risso amongst others, while 40-42 are examples of Spider's journalism freed from the limitations of his employment. The two one-shots are single-page extracts from his articles, illustrated by about sixty-four different artists.

This is arguably Warren Ellis' finest work, literate yet vitriolic, intelligent but utterly 'in yer face'. The future world postulated has everything yet is still profoundly corrupt and full of fools. The artwork by Darick Robertson (ably inked by Rodney Ramos) is completely complementary, clean lines adapted to a bright yet crowded, hallucinatory future. Excellent. DC have been releasing collections of all issues.~NF
Recommended: 1-24, 49-60

THE TRANSMUTATION OF IKE GARUDA

Marvel/Epic: *2 issues 1991-1992*

It's the future and we have teleportation technology, but Transit Authority has a monopoly with all the opportunities for corporate conspiracy plots that this implies. Ike Garuda is a private detective drawn into the plotting. It starts well, with very effective writing and artwork, but the goodwill from this beginning expires pages into the second issue. Here it's clear that the plot is hopelessly convoluted, and you suspect that it's going to be a lot of running around and, "Ah, but X was really working for Y". And so it proves. Most disappointing.~FC

TRASHED

Slave Labor: *One-shot 2002*

Subtitled "True Tales From the Back of a Garbage Truck", this contains three strips describing the nineteen-year-old author, Derf's true-life experiences during a year as a trash collector in his Ohio hometown. Everything that can make the job more objectionable is encountered, including heat, rain, split bags, maggots and rotting food, and the practical jokes played by the road crew (though the final strip depicts his revenge, when they're back on his route after he's left). Derf's artwork is knobbly, but his stories are well told and entertaining.~NF

A TRAVELLER'S TALE

Antarctic: *3 issue miniseries 1992*

It's a fatal, yet surprisingly common conceit among new comic creators to claim they were inspired to produce by the lack of good material available. Has anyone arrogant enough to make this claim produced anything of note within the same pages? Here we have a cliché-riddled and poorly drawn effort confirming the uninitiated's every negative preconception about fantasy comics. Perhaps divine retribution was responsible for issue 2 being numbered '16' on the cover. That or the evil General Tykor.~WJ

TREASURY OF VICTORIAN MURDER:

NBM: *1 volume 1987, 1 volume ('Jack the Ripper') 1995, 1 volume ('The Borden Tragedy') 1997, 1 volume ('The Fatal Bullet') 1999, 1 volume ('The Mystery of Mary Rogers') 2001*

Rick Geary's strips are characterised by rococo black and white linework, the formal use of language, and dry humour revealed through the ironic juxtaposition of the high-minded and the commonly vulgar. These celebrated 19th century crime cases and true life melodramas, have proved the perfect vehicle for his utterly distinctive talents. The first, initially published in a larger format than the later comic sized editions, contains three separate stories, rather than the one long narrative of subsequent volumes. Despite the relative brevity of each strip, Geary's obsession with the Victorian era's suppressed passions and dirty secrets is already firmly in place, as is his unerring instinct for the macabre image, or the surreal incidental detail.

'Jack the Ripper' inevitably suffers in comparison to the more exhaustive *From Hell* series. The idea of the story being narrated by a contemporary amateur crime buff is, however, a clever one, and Geary's woodcut-style artwork is appropriately dark and knotty. The third and fourth volumes are American tragedies sharing a muted sympathy for both killer and victim. 'The Fatal Bullet', the story behind the assassination of President James A. Garfield, is the finest volume to date. It sharply contrasts the life and fortunes of the saintly Garfield with his wretched assassin Charles J. Guiteau, and is full of fascinating historical details indicating the breadth of Geary's research.

'The Mystery of Mary Rogers', is the longest book so far. Set in a sleaze-ridden mid-nineteenth century New York City that inspires some of Geary's finest drawing, this chronicle of the unsolved disappearance and murder of "the beautiful cigar store girl" is enriched by the involvement of comically gloomy author Edgar Allen Poe, who penned his own solution to the crime. 'The Beast of Chicago' is promised for 2003.~AL

Bart Simpson's TREEHOUSE OF HORROR

Bongo: *8 issues + 1995 to date*

The comics equivalent of the annual *Simpsons Halloween Special*, this doubles as a chance for comic creators to dabble with the *Simpsons*. It's odd that they almost all come up short, most surprisingly Peter Bagge in 2, whose own comics obviously influenced The Simpsons. Among the better material is Evan Dorkin's script in 3, Geof Darrow's spectacular panorama in 4, a good issue overall, and the combination of Mark Hamill and Bill Morrison in 7, which also has Stan Sakai's well-worked *Wizard of Oz* pastiche. Mike Allred's 'Little Shop of Homers' in 1 captures the humour and offhand comments of the TV show perfectly, with a tale of Springfield plagued by a man-eating plant. With 5 extra pages are added, and for the first time the artists are permitted to bring their own style, which results in some interesting visuals. Troy Nixey's combination of Homer Simpson and Victorian imagery in 7 is notable, as is Peter Kuper's take on *Metamorphosis* in 6, with Homer as a

cockroach, and Ian Boothby provides a gag-filled script unappealingly drawn by Jim Mahfood in 6. It's comforting to note, though, that the best issues of *Treehouse* are the most recent. 8 features excellently drawn horror limericks from Hilary Barta, more well drawn poetry from Gail Simone and Jill Thompson, and Ty Templeton's tale of the Simpsons as ghosts.~FP
Recommended: 7, 8

TREKKER

Dark Horse: *6 issues, 1 Special 1987-1989*
Image: *1 Special 1999*

Spun off from *Dark Horse Presents* (4-6), Mercy St Clair, a licensed bounty hunter augmenting the police in a far future world. Underlying the stories of tracking smugglers and mad-dog killers writer/artist Ron Randall creates an atmosphere of paranoia around the government's mysterious actions. 4-6 encapsulates both the appeal of the series and its recurrent themes: Mercy's on-off relationship with a police officer and her tendency to take risks due to inexperience. The Dark Horse Special fills in most of Mercy's past with a framing sequence dealing with a past lover trying to kill her old mentor. The Image Special features an alien conspiracy and Mercy considering her own lack of trust in people. Randall's writing is roughly crafted and his artwork's a little too stiff and illustrative, but the character's well thought out, and if the setting's not particularly original, it's well delineated and growing in depth.~NF

THE TRENCHCOAT BRIGADE

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1999*

A throwaway term used to describe Vertigo's magicians is used for this tedious miniseries teaming them. The fault lies not with artist John Ridgway, but with writer John Ney Rieber. Glenn Fabry covers are always welcome, mind.~FP

TRENCHER

Image: *4 issues 1993*
Blackball: *One-Shot ('X-mas Bites Holiday Blow-Out') 1993*

Keith Giffen's trademark in-your-face, off-the-wall humour is very dated, and an eccentric art style diffuses the grosser scenes of excessive violence in these cranked out tales of a supernatural Repo man and Phoebe, his disembodied secretary – and straight man – sent to Earth to reclaim escaped souls that have possessed superhumans in the Image universe.~WW

The TRESPASSERS

Known Associates Press: *One-shot (Bulletproof) 1995, one-shot (Wolf Run) 1995, one-shot (The Green Skull) 1995, one-shot (Runaway) 1996*
Amazing Montage: *5 issues 1996-1997, One-shot ('Oracle') 1998*

Joe Zabel and Gary Dumm are the creators behind Known Associates and Amazing Montage, essentially self-publishing a series of stand-alone thrillers and mysteries. The first series of one-shots were published without reference to The Trespassers, but are effectively part of the same series. Only *Bulletproof* contains no recurring characters, being the story of a hospital security guard's plan to fake his own shooting in order to convince the authorities that the guards ought to be armed. *Wolf Run* introduces amateur sleuths, Raymond Fish and Delphinia (Finn) Morgan, who stumble across a murderous couple while on a hiking trip. Ray and Finn return for *The Green Skull*, which is a more traditional locked-room mystery, and *Runaway*, in which they're part of a larger team trying to locate a missing teenager. *The Trespassers* is entirely concerned with Ray and Finn, initially just solving murders together, but, as Zabel takes complete control of the strip with 4, the stories become more character-led, albeit with mystery elements. In 4, a young woman writer in an isolated house faces her own nightmares and in 5, a blind woman has a mystery agenda. *Oracle* is a return to the murder-mystery, for a lengthy story that includes the first meeting of Ray and Finn. Dumm's own 'Mr Grey', a story of revenge, runs as a backup in 1-5. All the Ray and Finn mysteries are well plotted and likely to be of interest to fans of the genre. Though the scripts and artwork display few frills, the clarity of the storytelling makes the complexities of the stories easy to follow. There is a also a long Ray and Finn story in *SPX '98*.~NF

TRIARCH

Caliber: *2 issues 1990*

A half human/half alien hybrid with teleporting abilities is appointed head of a mission to assassinate the Soviet President. Two other superpowered agents will participate, and a psychologist is brought in to train them. An extrapolation of a future 200 years hence, the scenario is now very dated, although science-fiction novelist Mary Ann Bramstrup conceived an intriguing cast and background. The premature cancellation may have been due to publication just as Communism was giving up the ghost throughout Europe, or to the poor and over-familiar rendition of the future, looking remarkably like today.~WJ

TRIBE

Image: *1 issue 1993*
Axis: *2 issues (2-3) 1993-1994*
Good Comics: *1 issue (0) 1996*

Larry Stroman brought the high design values he'd picked up from Howard Chaykin over to this high powered supergroup operating in a world of political intrigue. Tribe members including Steel Pulse, the superfast Shift and the unforgettable Thunderthighs. Stroman and writer Todd Johnson then promptly set up their own imprint: Axis Comics, where there was a visit from Erik Larsen's Savage Dragon in 3. After a couple of years Stroman resurfaced with another imprint, where the story and guest from *Tribe* 3 continued their fight with Lord Deus. This last issue has rushed written all over it.~SW

TRIDENT

Trident: *8 issues 1989-1990*

Ambitious UK anthology that tried to offer something for everyone, from Neil Gaiman and Nige Kitching's 'cyberpunk' superheroes, The Light Brigade, to Grant Morrison and Paul Grist's downbeat 1980s fable 'St Swithin's Day' (1-4), in which an angst-ridden teenager sets out to assassinate Margaret Thatcher. Morrison has rarely matched the perfectly observed, faux-cynical voice of his young narrator in 'St Swithin's Day', and the strip is undoubtedly the highpoint of the title. The central ideas of many of the other contributions were often too ambitious for the space allotted, and many of the creators involved were not really ready for professional publication, but any title that featured Eddie Campbell's Bacchus, plus early efforts by the likes of Mark Millar, D'Israeli and Mark Buckingham, is worth a look.~FJ

The TRIGGER TWINS

DC: *1 issue 1973*

Western reprints featuring the twins from *All-Star Western* and a great Pow Wow Smith story by Gardner Fox and Carmine Infantino make for an interesting one-shot.~SW

TRIGGERMAN

Caliber: *2 issue microseries 1996-1997*

Matthew Harris is a serial killer (first seen in *Negative Burn*) who's been executed and then brought back to life by the 'Outfit'. In order to ensure obedience a bomb is placed in his head and he's then to track down other serial killers. Of course, it isn't quite as simple as all that; Matt still has an itch to do some killing and he's not about to let anyone keep him on a leash for long. This noir thriller is boldly and brutally illustrated by Mark Bloodworth, matching Malcolm Bourne's gruesome characters. The bloody fencing is quite neatly handled but the ending seems unnecessarily enigmatic.~NF

TRILOGY TOUR

Cartoon Books: *One-shot 1997, one-shot (Trilogy Tour II) 1998*

The first issue is little more than a few sample pages and

background pictures and articles as Linda Medley, Jeff Smith and Charles Vess toured together to promote, respectively, Castle Waiting, Bone and Book of Ballads and Sagas. II is an impressive anthology commemorating an expanded second convention tour. Smith contributes a Bone short and writes a Rose piece that Vess illustrates, while Medley concocts a Castle Waiting story, Stan Sakai produces a Usagi Yojimbo ghost story and Mark Crilley's first full colour Akiko on the Planet Smoo is also featured. Best gem in a field of little diamonds, though, is 'Tea For Orson', a delightful Scary Godmother tale from Jill Thompson. An absolute must for lovers of comics and storytelling in general.~WW
Recommended

TRINITY ANGELS

Acclaim: *12 issue limited series 1997-1998*

There were few comics in the 1990s that were so much plain fun as *Trinity Angels*. Kevin Maguire begins with three women waking up in the woods with shortened memories, but increased mammaries and ludicrous costumes. That's fun. He then introduces a horde of monsters that creak like the rubber-clad b-movie cannon fodder they're intended to resemble, as the women learn to adapt to their new circumstances. More fun. Memories return, the Angels discover their purpose, more ridiculous monsters continue to appear, and there's some even sillier superheroes. How much fun can you have? Maguire's writing is sharp and witty throughout, and it's a shame he only draws 1-5 and portions of 12 in his glorious clean and expressive style, meaning it could have been even more fun. The other contributing artists are decent enough to varying degrees, and it's fun, fun, fun all the way.~FP
Recommended: 1-12

TRIPLE DARE

Alternative Press: *1 issue 1998*
Alternative Comics: *1 issue (2) + 2002 to date*

An anthology of strips linked by a set of rules that all of the creators are dared to follow, such as specific words or objects, etc. 'A Frequent Contributor' (1) has a Tom Hart ghost story, a smoking tramp from James Kochalka, an old man who's paid to help first dates along from Jon Lewis and, despite the title, a back cover from Steven Weissman, along the same lines. 2 features Hart and Kochalka again, this time joined by Nick Bertozzi and Matt Madden, whose 'Una Ballata Di Malo Cortese' appears on the back cover. Essentially experiments in storytelling, only Lewis and Bertozzi offer any character with their strips.~NF

TRIUMPH

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1995*

One of DC's perennial revamps, this time a retroactive continuity implant concerning a founder member of the Justice League who then vanished for decades without anyone noticing. So far we have something that's silly, but no sillier than many other superhero comics. Our bog-standard blond jock type must have motivation, though, so, inspired by his father's inglorious criminal career, he's determined to become a superhero. And whaddya know, after some intense training latent superpowers just happen to manifest themselves. Unbelievably, that's the better stuff, and it slides downhill from here with the nonsensical plot passed off with the explanation that the villain of the piece is a nutcase. *Triumph* is an all-time turkey – no TR7, rather a battered and rusting old Herald at the bottom of the junkyard.~WJ

TROLL

Image/Extreme: *6 issues (all number 1's!) 1993-1994*

Bartholomew J. Troll is a member Youngblood who happens to look a bit like a troll. The first number one, by Rob Liefeld with Jeff Matsuda pencilling, sees Troll fighting for possession of a Daemonite orb, concepts borrowed from Jim Lee. *Troll II*, by Robert Napton and Karl Alstaeter, involves Shaft and Badrock from Youngblood plus a bonus British superheroine called The Jack, which may or may not have anything to do with a British flag costume. A Halloween special has the Maxx playing Leather Apron in a Victorian setting. A Thanksgiving special and a "stocking stuffer" help bulk out the number ones, along with a story set in World War II. Occasionally funny but rarely rising above its clichéd origins.~NF

TROLLORDS

Tru Studios: *15 issues, 1 Special 1986-1987*
Comico: *4 issues 1988-1989*
Apple: *6 issues 1989-1990*

An odd, and strangely compelling for some, series, presumably an attempt to teach responsible behaviour to young readers, about Three Stooges-like playful monsters who live with a realistic suicidal female character and learn lessons about decent human interaction. It can be pious, though it's usually funny, but hanging around on the off-chance of the arrival of amusing little green chaps is a dubious hope for a cure for depression. Story and art, by Scott Beaderstadt and Paul Fricke, improve fairly consistently throughout the run but the late Tru Studios issues, in black and white, are the best representatives.~GK

TROMBONE

Knockabout: *1 issue 1989*

Given that Europe is awash with fine humorous cartoonists and there are precious few in Britain and the USA, this anthology was a sensible attempt to bring the best of them to an English-speaking audience. Quel dommage! It transpires that while the drawings are as funny as ever, the text is far from hilarious, struggling to raise even a smile on most occasions. There are redeeming Hunt Emerson pages, but even he's not enough to make this worthwhile.~FP

TROUBLE MAGNET

DC: *4 issue miniseries 2000*

Witlock is a robot with an artificial intelligence. When his memory bank is stolen, he and his friends, Gwen, Herkimer and Dr Auster, find themselves on the run from the army. Trying to stay one step ahead, they must discover the secrets behind a conspiracy that's apparently aimed at resurrecting a cryogenically preserved religious leader. This light-hearted, but intelligent science fiction tale is written by Ryder Windham and lovingly drawn by Kilian Plunkett.~NF
Recommended: 1-4

THE TROUBLE WITH GIRLS

Eternity: *Series one 14 issues, 1 Annual 1987-1989*
Comico: *4 issues 1989*
Eternity: *Series two 19 issues (5-23) 1989-1991*
Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

Will Jacobs and Gerard Jones' secret agent spoof follows the adventures of reluctant international playboy/spy Lester Girls, who would much rather have been living a quiet life in the suburbs, with 2.4 children, a friendly dog and Sunday mornings washing the car. Fate has other plans for poor old Les: he can never escape the glamorous women, fast cars, big guns, international agents and would-be world conquerors who are constantly on his trail. His friend Apache Dick is usually happy to relieve him of the burdens of unwanted wealth and half-naked nymphomaniacs. The basic joke is a funny one and almost all issues are well done, but it does wear thin quickly and seems a little too formulaic after an extended run. The only differences between the publishers are that the Comico and Epic issues are in colour, the others aren't. Pick up a few issues and re-read them when you've forgotten the plot.

The series is nonetheless popular enough to have spawned several spin-offs starring both Les himself (*Lester Girls* 3 issues, Eternity, 1990-1991) and other members of the regular supporting cast such as the Lizard Lady (Aircel one-shot 1991) and *Apache Dick* (Eternity, 4 issue miniseries 1990). During the short spell with Epic, a Lester Girls story appeared in the *Heavy Hitters* anthology, and the first nine Eternity issues were available in three collections.~JC

TROUBLEMAKERS

Acclaim: *19 issues 1997-1998*

A pharmaceuticals giant undertake illegal genetic research to modify four kids into something no longer human. From that woefully unoriginal starting point, Fabian Nicieza crafts a humane and thrilling series of tales that use superpowers to explore the human condition, without ever becoming pompous or forgetting that comics should be fun. The characters combine all the trials of adolescence in stories dealing with peer group pressure, isolation, parental break-up, underage sex, and loss with all the classic superheroics of the teen team genre. Zach, the youngest member of the team, is heartbreaking when he asks why, if the scientists can enable him to survive a two hundred mile drop from outer space, they have not yet found a cure for his friend, a boy dying of leukaemia. The characters are likeable, the situations exciting, dramatic and traumatic, and the stories themselves are an absolute joy. Not so much a superteam comic as a really cool brat pack movie.~WW

Recommended: 1, 3, 5, 7-10, 12

TROUBLEMAN

Image/Extreme: *3 issues 1996*

Heavy-handed references like 'Giraud Spaceport', Troubleman-5 and Troubleman-36 exist in a world of homage-ridden, scantily-clad sci-fi. It's not completely without interest, but far too dependent on superhero action rather than story, and was cancelled before completion.~NF

TRUE CONFESSIONS

Fox/Fantagraphics: *1 issue 1991*

Autobiographical story with odd digressions into space-opera parody from Dave Hodson. Primarily dealing with the death at birth of one of his twin children, Hodson's sketchy work neatly avoids dragging the reader down into depression, and, while it's visually inventive, there's a raw, minimalist feel to it.~NF

TRUE CRIME

Eclipse: *1 issue 1993*

A companion to Eclipse's series of *True Crime Trading Cards,* there was obviously little market for a continuing series. There are two stories, both drawn impeccably by Dan Spiegle. Jenny Proctor and Dave Robinson relate John Gotti's induction into the ranks of the Cosa Nostra, while Valerie Jones outlines the case against Aileen Wuornos, "the first female serial killer". The former works quite well as a story but the latter's really just a lot of exposition that, though nicely illustrated, doesn't really work as comics.~NF

TRUE LOVE

Jonathan Cape: *1 volume 1981*
Fontana: *1 volume 1983*

Janice is the homely secretary in an advertising agency given to romantic flights of fantasy. One is prompted when philandering executive Stanhope Wright, almost caught on the job, distracts Janice's attention by giving her a stilton cheese from the stack of Christmas presents delivered to the agency. From here Posy Simmonds takes us on a hilarious trawl through the illicit relationships of the middle classes. Delightfully absurd, keenly observant, very funny, and with great appeal to the wider word, why is it that Posy Simmonds has ploughed such an isolated furrow for twenty years?~FP

Recommended

TRUE LOVE

Eclipse: *2 issues 1986*

Selected reprints from 1950s romance comics, mainly from the defunct Standard line. Lovingly represented art from Alex Toth and others, and some imaginative scripts. Great stuff.~HS

TRUE SWAMP

Peristaltic Press: *3 issues 1994**
Slave Labor: *2 issues (4-5) 1994-1995**
Alternative Comics: *One-shot ('Stoneground & Hillbound') 2001*

A refreshing variation on anthropomorphic themes, in which Lenny the frog endures the dangerous world of the swamp. There are encounters with humans and fairies and many references to 'folktales' amongst the various inhabitants of the swamp. Jon Lewis has an unpolished drawing style but his unsentimental stories are clever and (blackly) humorous.~NF

Recommended: 1-5, one-shot

TRUER THAN TRUE ROMANCE

Watson Guptil/Ebury Press: *1 Volume 2001*

Jeanne Martinet re-dialogues hoary old DC romance stories, largely from the period 1958-1968, applying contemporary attitudes to great humourous effect. The original plots are presented in synopsis form, showing, for instance, how a story about a woman attracted to her brother's friend while believing he could only love her sister, has been transformed into that modern-day curse, the woman only attracted to gay men. For some the art will be an attraction, but by and large the material is by good artists coasting. It's an ideal toilet book, best read in short doses as repetition blunts the effect.~WJ

TRULY TASTELESS AND TACKY

Caliber: *1 issue 1992*

Aaron Ward's Garry Trudeau style one-panel gags. Some of them are funny, but Ward's cartooning skills are basic (to be kind), and off-putting.~FP

TRUMP

HMH Publishing: *2 issues 1957*

Harvey Kurtzman, still smarting from being evicted from *Mad*, meets Hugh Hefner, loaded with *Playboy* millions. There has rarely been a more lavishly produced comic, but as accomplished as it was, it was also a slight disappointment. With a line-up including Jack Davis, Will Elder, Al Jaffee and Wally Wood, and features that included spoofs of *L'il Abner*, Madison Avenue and Hollywood it was all eerily similar to *Mad.* While that's not necessarily a bad thing, and the quality is certainly unquestionable, there's a sense that we might have expected more. That said, there's still much to enjoy, particularly the beautifully rendered strip by Davis and Elder, both of whom embraced the improved production, and guest stars like Russ Heath and Arnold Roth.~DAR

TRUTH: Red, White and Black

Marvel: *4 issues + 2003 to date*

Wonderful and powerful addition to the legend of Captain America, using politics and history to scare the willies out of, and turn the stomachs of readers that no amount of blood and gore could affect. In the early days of World War II, Negro Americans segregated from white soldiers meet up in Camp Cathcart, Mississippi. Newlywed Isaiah Bradley, Maurice Canfield, communist son of wealthy black parents and career soldier Sgt. Lucas Evans try to get on with their lives and training immediately following the attack on Pearl Harbor. They're unaware that they and three hundred other black recruits are about to "disappear" as the US government looks for suitable – i.e. expendable – guinea pigs to test the new Super-Soldier serum developed by the mysterious Dr. Reinstein. Mirroring recent revelations in US history on the secret and illegal testing of VD drugs on black sections of the populace, Robert Morales and Kyle Baker use a deceptively seductive soap-opera and cartoon style to deliver a dynamite punch. So far, compelling stuff brilliantly told.~WW

Recommended: 1-4

TRUTH SERUM

Slave Labor: *3 issue miniseries 2002*

This is a strange, bathetic comic offering disassociative vignettes of largely blue collar superheroes and villains in slim digest size pamphlets. Characters drift in and out, often to little purpose, and Jonathan Adams seems to have no clear story in mind; these are glimpses, take them or leave them. Visual ticks and storytelling elements are appropriated from Chris Ware, but Adams lacks Ware's facility for observation, and in isolation the design quirks are intrusive. For all this, the art is good, and while *Truth Serum* is not compelling, it's easy to become sucked in.~FP

TRYPTO the Acid Dog

Renegade: *1 issue 1988*

Given the title one might assume this is a joke that came up in the bar one night, then got out of hand. It's an oddly affectionate homage to the old Krypto stories in *Superboy*, throwing in some exaggerated ecological villains along the way. Nicely drawn by Steve Leialoha and charmingly written by Bill Mumy and Miguel Ferrer, Trypto is fun, but hardly essential. He reappears in early 1997 issues of *Dark Horse Presents*.~FP

TSUNAMI GIRL

Image: *3 issue miniseries 1999*

Ostensibly, Tsunami Girl is a DJ caught up in drug gang shootouts and falling in love with a dissolute journalist at the *Ministry of Sex* club in LA, in this foolish jump on the techno bandwagon. However, the back-plot crammed story reveals her history of DNA from ancient Japanese mythical figures, which explains why government agents are hunting her in helicopters utilising Roswell UFO technology. One might have guessed. The Waltrip brothers' art is hampered by writer Mark Paniccia's dull layouts and the insides don't look anything like Hajime Sorayama's slick cyberpunk/porno covers.~GK

TUESDAY

KRP: *2 issue microseries 2002*

Artist Henrik Rehr lives a couple of blocks away from where the World Trade Centre once stood in New York, and in Tuesday he recounts his experiences of the day it collapsed. With far more space than people relating events in the *9-11* collections, Rehr is able to recount the smaller details that heighten a personal perspective. He fears for the safety of his wife and son, while interacting with others evacuated from his area. This is well-drawn autobiography covering a chilling event, and should have broad appeal.~WJ

TUG AND BUSTER

Art & Soul: *7 issues 1996-1998*
Image: *1 issue 1998*

Mark Hempel's "lusty, zesty, four-fisted he-man misadventure", is the adventures of a pair of misbegotten losers, one a big, quiet lump obsessed with machismo, who never talks, the other a gibbering child who worships him. Most of the humour comes not from situations, but from Buster's incessant chatter, full of sexual innuendo and scatological humour, and that wears thin after a while. Hempel works hard to give it a different visual look to *Gregory* and *Sandman*. He's been studying O'Neill or Muñoz, probably both, and has roughed things up considerably. Like *Gregory*, this is initially engaging, features repeated jokes and catchphrases that soon become tiresome, suffers from a limited set of scenarios, but contains some brilliant cartooning and visual jokes to offset this. The characters return in shorter strips in *Marc Hempel's Naked Brain*.~FJ

Recommended: 1, 3, 5, 6, Image 1

TUMBLING BOXES

Eros: *One-shot 1995*

A sequence of hardcore episodes by Reed Waller, beginning with cheerleader, Connie and boyfriend, Bobby, who turn out to be on a video being watched by Janni and Honey, who are themselves on a video being watched by two couples just starting an orgy. At the end, it's revealed that they're all part of a video being watched by a final couple. Waller uses computer-generated backgrounds for his excellent cartooning, thought the faces are occasionally weak (probably not a problem for readers here).~NF

TUROK Son of Stone

Dell: *29 issues 1954-1962*
Gold Key: *62 issues (30-91) 1962-1974*
Gold Key/Whitman: *34 issues (92-125) 1974-1980*
Whitman: *5 issues (126-130) 1980-1982*

Turok and his younger companion Andar are two 19th-century Native Americans who chance on a tunnel leading them to a region populated by both humans and, more pertinently, dinosaurs. Unfortunately, there's no return trip, since the land is surrounded by sheer cliff walls, and Turok must adapt to a unfamiliar new world. As largely written by Paul S. Newman, exclusively from 8, *Turok* is a basic lost-land scenario, and, while individually fine, the stories tend to become repetitive with more thorough immersion. What raises the 1960s material above the remainder is the excellent artwork of Alberto Giolitti, replacing the pedestrian Rex Maxon from 24. Largely predictable, Newman occasionally surprises, and in 58 aliens from a crashed UFO are thrown into the mix. In testing the repairs Andar actually surmounts the cliffs to view his tribe. It came to nothing, though, and Turok and Andar never returned home here. As with other Dell titles, Turok was introduced in issues of *Four Color* (596 and 656 respectively) before starting his own title from 3. Oddly, *Turok* was published under both Gold Key's imprint and that of affiliated Whitman from 92, with the final Whitman issues very ordinary. This incarnation of Turok is best (and cheaply) sampled through Valiant's 1994 four issue *The Original Turok Son of Stone*.~FP

TUROK, Dinosaur Hunter

Valiant: *48 issues (0-47), 1 Yearbook 1993-1995, 2 issue microseries ('The Hunted') 1996*
Acclaim: *One-shot ('The Empty Souls') 1997, one-shot ('Spring Break in the Lost Land') 1997, 2 issue microseries ('Turok/Timewalker') 1997 one-shot ('Redpath') 1997, one-shot ('Child of Blood') 1998, one-shot ('Tales of the Lost Land') 1998, 4 issues 1998, one-shot ('Seeds of Evil') 1998, one-shot ('Adon's Curse') 1998, one-shot ('Evolution') 2002*

After Valiant's Unity crossover, Turok returns from the now named Lost Land into contemporary South America. Along with him come bionically enhanced dinosaurs, thus hanging a massive millstone around the comic's metaphorical neck. The dinosaurs are boring. Boring, boring, boring. A couple every now and then would be okay, but Turok comes across so many in 1-20 you'd swear they're mass-produced by General Dinosaurs. This all-action Turok bears little relation to his predecessor, and a selection of creators are mixed and matched, producing one story arc at a time. Tim Truman turns in the best scripts, recognising Turok is a 19th-century Kiowa Indian, whereas others treat him as The Punisher with a bow and arrow. Truman's is the best story of the run, in 20-23, set in a Jurassic Park equivalent as a couple of old adversaries return and a pair of unconventional bounty-hunters are introduced. Rags Morales consistently tops a respectable selection of pencil artists used, depicting a powerful and dynamic Turok.

There are frequent return trips to the Lost Land, and Turok wasn't the only person to become stranded there, leading to some interesting stories, not least the group of demented Nazi women in 37-38. Truman and Morales have them attemptimng to transfer Hitler's brain into Elvis Presley's corpse! It's followed by a good Paul Gulacy illustrated story in 39-40, with a far more serious approach. The series ends on a high, but very abruptly and the heavy-handed ecological preaching of Mike Grell, Simon Furman and Mike Deodato in 'The Hunted' is dull.

The Acclaim revival is a different Turok on another world, so drops the "dinosaur hunter" appendage, although it's equally applicable. It establishes Turoks are a dynasty sworn to protect Earth from evolved dinosaurs their ancestor inadvertently let loose from the Lost Land. The latest, and reluctant, heir to the power is college baseball star and all-round stud Joshua Fireseed. Fabian Nicieza opts for the lighter side of superheroics, well illustrated by Rafael Kayanan, their issues offering a diverse and likeable cast and diverting plots. The microseries, illustrated by Paul Gulacy includes three Turoks and assorted other heroes to ultimately unsatisfying effect. The magazine size 'Seeds of Evil' and 'Adon's Curse' tie-in to the Turok platform video games. Despite impressive colouring and art they were the weakest of the Acclaim issues until the wretched 'Evolution'. That ties-in with another video game, but by this point Acclaim seem content to let amateurs produce the comic.~WJ

Recommended: 0, 20-23, 39-40, 47

2099

Marvel: *6 issue miniseries ('World of Tomorrow') 1996-1997, one-shot ('Manifest Destiny') 1998*

When *2099* titles were cancelled with plots unresolved these arrived to milk an ever dwindling audience. Earth is in a bad way. After flooding the only habitable portions seem to be Latveria, ruled with an iron fist by Doctor Doom, and The Savage Land in the Antarctic, and aliens have infected much of what remains of humanity with a techno virus. The entire 2099 cast (and the Fantastic Four in 1-2) battle to save the world. Those familiar with the characters may enjoy the interaction between a usually unrelated cast. Otherwise this sprawls. 'Manifest Destiny' neatly ties up all loose ends in optimistic fashion, and has the benefit of Mike McKone pencils, although a familiarity with the cast is desirable.~FP

2099 UNLIMITED

Marvel: *10 issues 1993-1996*

Although ostensibly an anthology of short features based in the Marvel Universe of 2099 this title is a sneaky attempt to publish some quality material on the back of standard fare. Lead features Spiderman 2099 and Hulk 2099 are substandard and forgettable, but much of the filler material is sharp, challenging and surprisingly good. Of special note are R-Gang by Bob Fingerman (2, 10), Metalscream 2099 by Warren Ellis and D'sraeli (4, 7) and Duke Stratosphere by John Moore and Kyle Baker (5).~WW

20 NUDE DANCERS 20

Tundra: *2 issues 1990-1991*

Collection of one-page strips originally published in Comic Buyer's Guide. With few limits on content and a great artistic talent, Mark Martin's imagination and invention is astounding, with the pages including ridiculous cartoon characters, fake Mexican comics, fake Marvel ads, full-page posters, brilliant autobiographical pieces, and lots more. And it's almost all very funny. That's just the first issue, by the way, which measures about 15 inches by 12 (and is called the Year One Posterbook). The second is conventional magazine size; it has more strips, which, although still magnificent, require a little knowledge of comics for the full effect.~FP

Recommended: 1-2

21

Image/Top Cow: *3 issue miniseries 1996*

Scrap Freeman is accidentally transported to the future, where a resistance force is trying to combat the tyranny of the Internex. 21 is a robot, the twenty-first in the series, whose creator is now a part of the resistance and who acts as guide and protector to Scrap while he tries to recover the vehicle in which he travelled to the future. A clichéd and scantily conceived science-fiction series from Mark Silvestri and Len Wein with pencils by Billy Tan Mung Khoy.~NF

21 DOWN

WildStorm: *4 issues + 2002 to date*

Jimmy Palmiotti and Justin Gray tell the story of Preston Kills, a young man with dreams of superheroism, cursed with a naff superpower (He can see the deaths of other people) and an unbeatable deadline. Like a number of others, he was given his ability by a mysterious intruder who also programmed everyone thus gifted to die on their twenty-first birthday. When rogue FBI agent Mickey Rinaldi offers him a chance to find some answers before his own demise, Preston discovers that dreams have dangerous consequences. Jesus Saiz compellingly illustrates a uninspired tale set in the same continuity as *Gen*^{13}.~WW

TWENTY-THREE SKIDOO

BB/DB Productions: *2 issues + 2001 to date*

Extended shaggy dog stories with a vague conspiracy grounding that never really take off in any fashion. Having them narrated, then sub-narrated in 2 doesn't help, and the art is functional at best.~FP

2020 VISIONS

DC/Vertigo: *12 issue limited series 1997-1998*

Four self-contained three-part stories, only tenuously connected, mainly by being set in 2020 (nice title pun, eh?). Writer Jamie Delano weaves some interesting, but downbeat tales, and the artists are excellent choices for the mood of story they portray. Frank Quitely illustrates 1-3, where in a sharply divided New York a now old former pornographer, tries to rid himself of a plague virus, but instead infects his old flame, and off they're whisked to a detention area. Good characters and excellent storytelling make for the strongest segment. Warren Pleece illustrates 4-6, as a moustached lesbian private eye who stumbles into a plot involving the kidnapping of young girls for breeding. It's not as corny as it sounds, with a compelling lead character. The same however can't be said of 7-9's hotch-potch religious intolerance and private militia drawn by James Romberger. Hollywood is the setting for 10-12, as illustrated by Steve Pugh about a young hunk whose sperm is sold to rich child-yearning women. He's kidnapped by poor women wanting children, but it all goes horribly wrong. At least this time Delano offers us some hope. Exaggerating facets of present day USA was a clever idea that only gelled completely for the first two stories.~HY

Recommended: 1-6

22 BRIDES

Event: *4 issue miniseries 1996-1997*

Snappy, sassy and fearless, the 22 Brides are a girl gang living a precarious existence involving them with mobsters. Artist Scott Lee has an appealing big-eye style and creates commendably grimy and realistic locations. He also knows which parts of girls he likes, and manages to emphasise them throughout. Let's hope he sees some real ones some day. Fabian Nicieza writes up a storm. There's wit and imagination and some very funny dialogue, especially from an erudite enforcer who quotes from Bertrand Russell, and a gangster who takes Huggy Bear as his inspiration. Don't expect much beyond girls and guns and you'll be pleasantly surprised, but come expecting anything more and you'll be disappointed.~FP

Recommended: 1-4

TWILIGHT

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1991*

The innocent and bland characters who populated DC's 1950s science-fiction titles are the focus of *Twilight*. There's no real nostalgic glow around them, so writer Howard Chaykin plays fast and loose to good effect. Everything necessary to the plot is explained along the way, while readers familiar with the cast can have a wry smile or rage at their progression. Thankfully there's little resemblance to the unsophisticated characters of old. Chaykin uses the worldly-wise and amusing Homer Glint of The Star Rovers to narrate events in hindsight. As the story begins, Tommy Tomorrow has become an Oliver North figure, popularised as a war hero and becoming powerful on the basis of his standing. By the end of 1 humanity is immortal, which proves both blessing and curse, and their religious conflicts spread throughout the galaxy. In the end *Twilight* is a simple story, very well told; the excellent art of José Luis Garcia-Lopez raises this well above average.~WJ

Recommended: 1-3

TWILIGHT

Avatar: *2 issue microseries 1997, 1 issue ('Live Wire') 1997, 2 issue microseries ('Raw') 2000*

Twilight is the daughter of Zeus and the demon, Strife, newly awakened after centuries and sought by two groups as a weapon against the return of Zeus. The first series is a brief introduction little plot and straightforward, but not unattractive, artwork from Richard Pollard. It's then expanded, with added sex scenes, for 'Raw'. Unfortunately, 'Live Wire' was supposed to be two issues, so readers will never know whether Twilight managed to defeat her brainwashed, best friend.~NF

The TWILIGHT AVENGER

Elite Comics: *2 issues 1986*
Eternity: *8 issues 1988-1990*

In 1937, Reece Chambers, looking for revenge after gangsters run down his girlfriend, joins forces with her father, Dr Herth, and dons a costume to fight The Centipede. The two Elite issues were intended as a four issue miniseries, but were never finished. The regular series introduces reporter, Joan Casey, whose life is endangered by Dr Warner Norwood's attempts to raise the dead. Other issues feature a giant vampire bat (2), a hypnotist out of his depth (3), a bank robbery by someone impersonating the Avenger, causing him to become a wanted man (5) and old-fashioned mayhem of gun-molls, Satan's Sisters (8). John Wooley has fashioned some quietly satisfying tales with a pulp feel and Terry Tidwell is a good storyteller, though the overall quality of the artwork varies depending on the inker.~NF

TWILIGHT MAN

First: *4 issue miniseries 1989*

The old tyrant gods want to reclaim Earth, but there's one man with the ability to prevent them, because the knowledge has been passed from father to son for 10,000 years. Half-baked tosh.~FP

TWILIGHT X

Pork Chop Press: *3 issues 1995-1996**
Antarctic: *6 issue miniseries ('Interlude') 1992-1993*, 4 issue miniseries ('Ascension') 1993*, 3 issues ('Quarterly') 1994*, 3 issue miniseries ('-tra') 1999-2000**

Set in 2002, *Twilight-X* is a survivalist, action adventure, with a heavy reliance on military machinery and terminology. Jed Saxon, ex-military Special Forces, and girlfriend, Toots encounter Richard Goldman after a breakdown of society and return to feudalism. 'Interlude' precedes this with Jed and Toots on a yacht, confronting the White American Nationalist Klan (satire, see). 'Ascension' has Dr Melissa DuVall join Jed, Toots and Richard in time for the yacht to sink and the group take to a submarine, the Sappho 3. 'Quarterly' continues the storyline, adding Nigel Thomas, who happens to have a nuclear submarine, the Neptune, which has attracted the attention of the Klan. '-tra' takes place between 'Ascension' 3 and 4, as the Sappho 3 is pursued by the Klan fleet, but the coloured art is a big improvement, over the normal, primitive manga style of creator, Joseph Wight. A new miniseries is due and a single volume collects the series to date, including new material and early strips from *Mangazine* and *Apex*.~NF

THE TWILIGHT ZONE

Gold Key: *91 issues 1962-1979*

The pattern was unwavering from start to finish: either three or four sting-in-the-tail stories featuring a generally high standard of script and art. Many top-notch artists are featured alongside creators who went on to better things but started here, with Howard Chaykin in 54 your starter for ten. Frank Miller allegedly contributed to 84 and 85, although you'd be hard pressed to recognise it.~WJ

THE TWILIGHT ZONE

Now: *One-shot 1990, Series one 16 issues, 4 Specials 1991-1993, series two 6 issues 1993*

Prompted by the generally inventive TV shows, this fails to spark the imagination. "As ye sow, so shall ye reap" is an all too common plot, closely followed by the last panel twist ending mined by comics for decades. In the first series TV writer J. Michael Straczynski turns the formula on its head in 2, a story diluted by duff art, and Steven Dorfman writes two unpredictable surprise-ending stories in 10. Gimmicks and variant editions are commonplace. The 1990 one-shot is available in a bewildering array of formats, all containing a decent Harlan Ellison and Neal Adams story, 9 has a long 3-D section and series three 2 is totally computer-generated, although not very well, so indicative of the remainder of the series.~FP

TWIN EARTHS

R. Susor: *Series one 9 issues (2-10), 1 Special 1990-1994, series two 5 issues 1993-1994*

This magazines collect the newspaper strip feature that ran ten years from June 13th 1952 to May 25th 1962. The story concerns another planet named Terra, in Earth's orbit but hidden from us by the Sun. Terra is greatly advanced scientifically and 92% of its population are women. When Vana, an undercover Terran, finds her life threatened by her fellow agents on Earth she surrenders to the FBI. Her case is taken by assistant director Garry Verth. Invasion from Terra is inevitable but there are unexpected factions on both sides. Written by veteran comics editor Oscar LeBeck and drawn by Al McWilliams at the peak of his abilities. The collections of daily strips are eighty pagers and cover roughly a year each from beginning with May 1953. The Special is the delayed first issue with early strips back to June 1952 completing the daily run. The second series covers the never previously reprinted Sunday adventures, each covering a year's continuity. The great charm of this story is how the technologies of Terra are compared to the carefully illustrated commonplaces of 1950s America.~SW

TWIN SPARK GIRLS

Redlight Manga: *1 volume 2001*

Explicit sex content is the main reason for this collection of stories, held together with slim plots. The longest of them, the titular Twin Spark Girls, are the teenage daughters of a wrestler who enact revenge on rapists and other unsavoury types. When they're not shagging them voluntarily, that is. The art is as undistinguished as the content.~WJ

TWIST

Kitchen Sink: *3 issues 1987-1988*

The only common thread among the strips in these comics is that they deal with things that aren't quite acceptable, whether it be Daniel Clowes' dangerous child Freddy Brown The Squirt, J.D. King's forthright 'Sammy' or Peter Bagge's 'Geniuses'. With short contributions from Robert Crumb, Richard Sala, Basil Wolverton and the Friedman brothers it certainly is an eclectic collection. As a bonus, 3 reprints Harvey Kurtzman and David Levine's 'Return of a Christmas Carol' from *Esquire*. As with most anthologies of this kind the stories are a little hit-and-miss but editor J. D. King tried hard to provide something a little bit different.~NF

THE TWIST

Dell: *1 issue 1962*

That's right, folks, a comic devoted to the dance Chubby Checker made world famous! In a "Why don't we do the show right here?" plot two rival establishments compete for the custom of young and old mad keen to twist wherever they can, even in the police station. Very much a daft timepiece: read and believe.~FP
Recommended

TWISTED SISTERS Comics

Kitchen Sink: *1 volume 1993, 4 issues 1994**

The aim of promoting female cartoonists in a male dominated industry is admirable, not least because the topics interesting women have appeal beyond the comics ghetto. The diversity of approach is such, though, that little connects the material beyond the premise. Diane Noomin edits both the introductory 256 page volume and the magazine size series, and provides a career highlight with her strip for 4 about miscarriages. Humour is a priority for most contributors, and Carol Lay and Carol Tyler come up trumps. Would ,contributions from Fiona Smyth and the tedious Dame Darcy would be published anywhere outside such a display of solidarity project? Storytelling isn't a priority for either, yet the equally off-putting art of Aline Kominsky-Crumb is used to provide extremely moving stories in 4. There's something to enjoy in each issue, but no readers will agree on which those stories are.~FP
Recommended: 4

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*Available in a collected edition

TWISTED TALES

Pacific Comics: *7 issues 1982-1984*
Eclipse: *3 issues (8-10) 1984, Graphic Album 1987*

Bruce Jones wrote just about every story in this horror anthology he edited with April Campbell. Modelled on the 1950s EC anthologies, as the series progressed the stories became longer. It allowed Jones to produce something more penetrating than an eight-page shocker, but also encouraged him to stretch thin suspense tales via unnecessary characterisation.

Twisted Tales benefited from some superb realistic artists, John Bolton and Richard Corben among them, maintaining a high artistic standard throughout. Probably the most notable story is 'Banjo Lessons' in 5, which Jones and Campbell managed to turn into a cause célèbre by writing an editorial about it to pre-empt any charges of racism that might arise from misunderstanding. Since stories of this type hammer you over the head with their morality their worries are particularly hard to swallow. The story has a very dull structure and the editorial completely ruins any element of surprise.~FJ

TWISTER

Harris: *1 issue 1992*

Twister murders serial killers by twisting their necks. Always a step ahead of the authorities in tracking the killers, he becomes both an FBI target and an acupuncture adept, using the vicious Animal as bait for his trap. The latter earns his name by eating his victims. James Hudnall explores a singularly unpleasant, yet riveting, mindset while Bill Koeb's art varies between great beauty on the panels he likes, to dashed-off on those he doesn't care about. The fainthearted can be relieved that only one of four planned issues saw print.~FP

Justin Hampton's TWITCH

Aeon: *One-shot 1994*

A collection that charts the artistic development of former Jim Woodring assistant Justin Hampton, with strips dated between 1991 and 1994. The star turn is the cover feature 'Fraidy Cat', which shows Hampton in full, lucid control of the storytelling and the graphic weight of each night-time panel. It would be impossible to match Woodring's back cover soundbite that *Twitch* "licks your eyes like frisky ectoplasmic weasles" although the stretched photo of Hampton thinning down an obviously chubby face does him no favours.~SW

Batman: TWO FACE STRIKES TWICE

DC: *2 issue microseries 1993*

Being in two parts and telling two stories each issue, this is a play on the duality of the Batman villain, of course also heavily featuring the Dark Knight himself. Mike Barr and Joe Staton do the Batman 1940s-style, complete with giant props and a proper detective story. Barr returns with Daerick Gross for the other half of the title, but few stories would be good enough to overcome the awfulness of the painted artwork, especially not this slight tale.~NF

THE TWO FACES OF TOMORROW

Dark Horse: *13 issue limited series 1997-1998**

Yukinobu Hoshino's adaptation of James P. Hogan's novel is both a simple action adventure and a complex 'hard' science fiction treatise on the nature of intelligence. Supercomputers running the World's affairs are becoming incapable of handling the complex decisions required. In order to test man's ability to control a new breed of intelligent computers an experiment is organised in space. Scientists will systematically antagonise a fast-learning computer, provoking it to defend itself against their assaults, and predictably the computer resists more strenuously than anticipated. The series starts slowly with a great deal of technical exposition and character build-up, but that stands the reader in good stead as the strip attempts to mirror the fast-paced responses of the computer. Hoshino seems to use too few lines, giving an impressionistic feel to some pages but overall, this is thoughtful and well-crafted.~NF

TWO-FISTED SCIENCE

G.T.Labs: *1 volume 1996*

Jim Ottaviani attempts to present scientific theory and biographies of famous scientists in populist fashion. Much of the volume concentrates on the life, work, and extra-curricular exploits of Richard Feynman, a Nobel Prize winner who contributed to the development of the Atomic bomb, dealt with in greater detail in *Fallout*. Feynman's capricious character is well portrayed, and the humourous touches applied to other scientific problems certainly sweeten the pill, particularly Sean Bieri's depiction of a heavyweight disagreement between Newton and Liebnitz, with a cameo from Sid The Sexist! Other artists contributing a significant amount of pages include Mark Badger, David Lasky, Bernie Mireault, and Scott Roberts, while there's a gorgeous back cover illustration from Gene Colan. If science mystifies you, you could do far worse than investigate this. Safecracker was an excerpt released as a comic detailing Feynman's hobby.~FP

TWO-FISTED TALES

EC: *24 issues (18-41) 1950-1955**
Gemstone: *24 issues 1992-1998**

Before *Two-Fisted Tales* war stories in comics had never developed beyond the "Eat leaden death you Ratzi goosestepper" school. As editor, chief writer, layout artist and often illustrator Harvey Kurtzman presented stories of ordinary people involved in conflicts through the ages. Continuing its numbering from *Haunt of Fear*, *Two-Fisted Tales* was conceived as an adventure title, but after a dreary first issue, and two stronger follow-ups, Kurtzman took full editorial control and war became the focus. By 21 the artists most associated with the series, Jack Davis, Wally Wood and the John Severin and Will Elder team, had arrived, with Kurtzman initially illustrating the fourth tale in each issue. Few other artists matched the consistently high quality of the regulars.

The initial publication coincided with the Korean War, and while using the conflict for stories Kurtzman never glamourised the action; indeed his stories often plotted the downfall of characters too eager to participate. He also detailed the effect of war on innocent Koreans, a poignant example being the story of the Chun family house in 24. Detailed research and historical accuracy characterise the title, particularly in stories concerning the day-to-day lives of those occupying submarines (32) or the biographical tales featuring Custer, Grant, Washington and others. It's also apparent in the Civil War issues (31 and 35), which depart from the template to encompass wider themes. 22-32 can be ranked among the best comics ever published, each containing four superbly written and illustrated stories. The often reprinted 'Corpse on the Imjin' (25) is a masterpiece that typifies Kutzman's approach to war stories. A G.I. sitting on the Korean riverbank notices a corpse floating down the Imjin and, as he begins his lunch, speculates on how the person died. The soldier is then ambushed by a Korean, and, having laid his rifle to one side, becomes involved in desperate hand-to-hand combat. Emerging victorious, the G.I. staggers away as the story comes full circle with his assailant now floating down the river.

Initially successful enough to spawn the companion *Frontline Combat*, sales eventually didn't match the quality. With 36 the format revived the original concept of an adventure comic under the editorial aegis of John Severin, switching the title to *The New Two-Fisted Tales* in recognition of the change. The previous attention to detail was absent under chief writer Colin Dawkins, who preferred a rollicking good yarn. 36-39 certainly aren't bad, in fact 36 is very good, but neither do they match the war era. Kurtzman returned for the final two issues, which stuck to the adventure theme and contain some great artwork, but still fall short of the earlier material, though they provide a template for the later Valor.

All numbering refers to the original EC publications, which were sequentially reprinted by Gemstone, who ran the numbering from 1 to 24. Any issue of *Two-Fisted Tales* stands alone, so sample these affordable reproductions of some of the best war comics ever produced. A slipcased set collects all issues in black and white.~WJ

Recommended: 22-36

The New TWO-FISTED TALES

EC/Dark Horse: *1 issue 1993*

It was a worthwhile idea to create a new version of what was arguably Harvey Kurtzman's finest achievement. Sadly, he seems to have had little to do with the day-to-day editorial duties, and died before the comic was published. While the stories are fine, the artwork for the new material would never have been acceptable to Kurtzman in the 1950s.~WJ

TWO-FISTED ZOMBIES

Last Gasp: *One-shot 1973*

A suitably demented tale living up to the title from Tom Veitch, with some plot and art from then very young younger brother Rick, who can't decide if he wants to be Jack Kirby or Jim Steranko. Tom has no doubts. He's read his *New Gods*, and recycles elements with the additional gore and nudity permitted by Last Gasp. Given their later careers, this is an amusing curiosity, but no more.~FP

TWO FOOLS

Last Gasp: *1 issue 1976*

Veteran underground creator Ted Richards collaborated with his peers Justin Green and Willy Murphy on this anthology of mostly silent gag strips about a pair of Laurel and Hardyesque buffoons who bumble through various historical settings in a mildly amusing fashion. By far the most interesting strip in this collection is Richards' autobiographical eulogy to the then recently deceased Murphy, which touchingly captures some of the long gone, freewheelin' fun of the early 1970s underground scene.~AL

TWO-GUN KID

Marvel: *136 issues 1948-1949 (1-10), 1953-1961 (11-59), 1962-1968 (60-92), 1970-1977 (93-136), 2 issue microseries ('The Sunset Riders') 1995*

Lawyer Matt Hawk secretly keeps law and order in the Wild West of the 1870s as the Two-Gun Kid. While notable artists such as Jack Davis, Jack Kirby, John Severin and Al Williamson worked on the title during the 1940s and 1950s, only Kirby gave anything resembling his best, and the stories are identikit Westerns with little resonance once the comics are closed. Stan Lee and Kirby revamped the masked man in 1962, giving him a revised origin in 60 and an extraordinary sidekick named Boom Boom in 64. The secret identity twist and comedy touches made entertaining reading throughout the 1960s, with the mid-period team of Steve Skeates and Dick Ayers producing the most noteworthy stories. From 99 it's reprints all the way.

The microseries presents Matt Hawk being his own murderer as Two-Gun Kid, effectively destroying both identities. Teaming with a Native American, a Canadian spy and a samurai, Two-Gun then has to stop a potential international incident sparking a global war in the 1890s. Nicely designed and decently created, but the cover price was extortionate.~SW/WJ

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DC: *2 issue microseries 2000*

When T.O. Morrow changes the past by sending inventions from the present back in time, the JLA attempt to retrieve them. When they run into the newly formed JSA in 1941, however, the Spectre is convinced that the horrors of 2000 need to be prevented, imprisons the JLA and leads the JSA towards world domination in place of Morrow. This prestige-format series, written by Tom Peyer and drawn by Val Semeiks, is a better than average time travel adventure, if you enjoy that sort of thing.~NF

2000AD

Eagle: *6 issue miniseries 1985, 4 issues 1986*

Quality: *50 issues 1986-1988 (5-26 2000AD Presents), 1988-1990 (27-54 2000AD Showcase)*

Fleetway/Quality: *15 issues 1991-1992*

With their reprints from *2000AD*, Eagle tested the waters with a "mega-series". The Judge Dredd is by John Wagner and Ron Smith, who manages some of Brian Bolland's detail while retaining the looseness of Mike McMahon, though with static layouts. Wagner includes the usual mix of humour and action in 'The Black Plague' (1, 2, mutant spiders in the Cursed Earth) and Pirates of the Black Atlantic (5, 6). Alan Grant and Carlos Ezquerra send Johnny Alpha, Strontium Dog on a mission to bring back Adolf Hitler for trial (3-6), which about sums up the sophistication on show here. Fun, but neither of the creators at their best. 1-5 feature Alan Moore and Alan Davis' bad boys D.R. and Quinch*. These hooligans seem to ruin pretty much everything around them in their quest for fame and fortune, but it's very pretty and very funny.

The regular series dropped Dredd and Strontium Dog, who had their own titles, adding Judge Anderson of Psi Division, beginning with a rematch against her old nemesis, Judge Death (1-6), and Skizz, Alan Moore's *ET* in Birmingham (1-8). Anderson gives writers Wagner and Grant more room for characterisation and she's a strong lead. Jim Baikie draws a good scratchy Skizz, but it's not Moore's best. The transposition to England allows satirical digs at Thatcher's government, but it doesn't come across as a fresh approach to the subject. D.R. and Quinch last a couple of issues (and return briefly for 12) but the title is otherwise reliant on Tharg's Future Shocks for light relief (with an early Grant Morrison piece in 13). With 7, the page-count increased to add Dan Dare. Written by Gerry Finlay-Day and drawn by Dave Gibbons, it's not good. Finlay-Day also wrote 'Harry Twenty on the High Rock', drawn by Davis, an unconvincing escape from prison plot, set in space. Judge Anderson appears again for a story of demonic possession (9-12), with art again by Brett Ewins, which has its moments. By the time Zenith begins (31) we're left with a number of long-running strips of little merit. 'Return to Armageddon' is about the discovery of a frozen planet that was once Hell, 'Inferno' is a Rollerball rip-off and 'Meltdown Man' features an ex-SAS sergeant thrown into an alternate universe where animals have been engineered into human forms. They all suffer from poor pacing and quickly become tedious. Zenith*, by Grant Morrison and Steve Yeowell, is an okay attempt at serious superheroes, but highly overrated.

The Quality issues are poorly printed on cheap paper. After S.Q.P. Inc. starts to appear in the credits there are no dates (bearing in mind that 5 is dated 1985 according to the indicia) and little editorial content. The final issue concludes 'Meltdown Man', but 'Mean Arena' ends without explanation mid-episode.

The final attempt to reprint from *2000AD* in a regular series is on expensive paper and in colour to show off the painted artwork. Rather than cover several characters it concentrates on one main story with various one-off back-ups. It begins with 'Below Zero', by John Brosnan and Kev Hopgood, and features Zero City's bionic taxi-driver, Tanner, in a case involving frozen bodies but wandering minds. It ends with the ABC Warriors' Khronicles of Khaos, in which Kevin Walker's painted artwork is surprisingly effective. However, there's still no editorial content or dates.~NF

Recommended: Miniseries 1-6, 1-4

2000AD Graphic Novels

The first to issue collections of 2000AD material were Titan Books throughout most of the 1980s, with an admirably broad choice. Most are dealt with in separate entries (*Halo Jones, Robo-Hunter, Slaine, Zenith* etc). D.R. and Quinch, though, never had their own American comic title, due to the finite amount of material. Most of it, though, is in the Titan collection. When presented with damning evidence, Alan Moore admitted to appropriating the characters and their attitude from a *National Lampoon* feature, but the plots are his. D.R. and Quinch are alien hoodlums, using all the means available in the future to cause mayhem. It's very funny, and graced by some fine Alan Davis art. *Hewligan's Haircut* from the short-lived 2000AD Books imprint, is the addled minds of Peter Milligan and Jamie Hewlett with very little, if any, editorial constraint.

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* Available in a collected edition

Escaped psychiatric patient Hewligan's haircut changes the universe. There are some nice images from Hewlett, but nothing else worth bothering about.

Mandarin published *Killing Time* with some stylish early art by Chris Weston, but John Smith's initially engaging plot of proper Victorians falls to pieces amid bloody satanic goings on. Thereafter Hamlyn dispensed with the Mandarin imprint. In the volume of the same name Nikolai Dante is a swashbuckling Russian rogue fighting Tsarist control in 2666. Robbie Morrison's introductory run relies entirely too much on convenient coincidence, but Simon Fraser's detailed art is a joy. Both improved as Dante became a *2000AD* regular, but nothing since has been collected. Only the earliest *Missionary Man* stories are collected as well, which are at least those with Frank Quitely art. Gordon Rennie writes a character dispensing the Lord's vengeance in small outback communities in The Cursed Earth, known to Judge Dredd readers. He adopts a faux-Western style for a diverting read featuring mutants, ghosts and aliens. Durham Red was a popular latter-day Strontium Dog, but her collection propels her a millennium away from a familiar environment. The item of wonder here is Mark Harrison's art, mixing painting with computer wizardry for an effect that still impresses six years later, rare for computer technology. Unfortunately writer Dan Abnett is on autopilot, but he's far better on *Sinister Dexter*, possibly his best work to date. The improbably named Finnegan Sinister and eccentrically named Ramone Dexter are guns for hire in a sprawling future central European city. They're also the classic buddy act so beloved by TV and film, yet rarely seen in comics. Abnett's dialogue is sharp and witty, served well by the imaginative elements to his plots and outlandish leads. It's very well painted by S.B. Davis, Simon to his mother, in a splattered, blotchy fashion that's heavily photo-referenced. The static effect this produces, though, adds to the overall style. The strip became even better in *2000AD*, but, again, later stories remain uncollected.~FP

Recommended: *D.R. and Quinch, Sinister Dexter*

2001: A Space Odyssey

Marvel: *One-shot (Treasury Special) 1976, 10 issues 1976-1977*

After a spectacular and faithful adaptation of the visually stunning, if plotless, Kubrick film, Jack Kirby embarks on a procession of intriguing variations on the theme of forced evolution. Proto-hominids (1-2), prehistoric conquerors (3-4) and even thinly disguised comic geeks (5-6), all get a boost towards destiny by the mysterious Monolith. The obvious restrictions of the story format soon force Kirby to expand beyond the limitations. 7 shows the cosmic wanderings of a Star-seed, the usual result of a human encounter with the Monolith, and the last issues tell of X-51 (Mr Machine, and eventually Machine Man) a robot that must evolve or die. It's everything Kirby fans love, but also a good casual read for the dilettante.~WW

Recommended: Treasury Special

2001 NIGHTS

Viz: *10 issue limited series 1990-1991**

A comic deserving the term 'epic' as mankind journeys to the furthest reaches of the universe to gradually colonise the stars. The title harks back to both *2001: A Space Odyssey* and the *Arabian Nights* format of vignettes: together they're used to tell the story of how mankind pushed further into space. It's a wide-reaching and complex science-fiction saga that initially seems disjointed and somewhat ethereal, but it rewards careful reading when the pieces start falling together with 3. The stories thereafter show glimpses of continuing progress. Yukinobu Hoshino's art is astounding, but his tendency to dwell on the technical aspects denies the warmth that's definitely there. 6 is probably the best sample, as humanity discovers there are forces of nature it can't control, but 8's heart-wrenching tale of love's longevity is the best single chapter.~FP

Recommended: 8

2000 MANIACS

Aircel: *3 issue miniseries 1991*

No-Budget auteur Herschell Gordon Lewis pioneered hardcore gore flicks. *2000 Maniacs* was a gothic hillbilly horror that had innocent tourists offed by inbred psycho rednecks. Kids went to see it for full-on gutpuke in livid Technicolor, and that's what they got. It's therefore hard to imagine a more pointless exercise than this turgid black and white adaptation, but even the remotest chance of fun is scuppered by the monumentally lousy artwork of one Nigel Tully. This geezer is so slapdash he can't even be arsed to draw a large rock properly.~AL

TYKES

Alternative Press: *1 issue 1997*

Steven Weissman brings us another tale – in black, white and pink – of Li'l Bloody and the Pullapart Boy. Based on an earlier story from *Yikes*, we're introduced to 'Sweet' Chubby, a new neighbour who's something of a bully. Dark and surreal this is an intriguing take on childhood fears and playground rituals.~NF

Recommended

TYPHOID

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1995-1996*

Daredevil's foe Typhoid Mary manifests multiple personalities. While Mary Walker, detective, investigates the murder of prostitutes, Typhoid has a more direct manner. Simultaneously the third personality is a shy artist. Complicating the plot are two film students who want her to star in a movie. That Ann Nocenti and John Van Fleet are attempting something out of the ordinary is to be commended. This aspires to be more than a simple punch-'em-up, but peel away the affectation and obfuscation and there's very little left. A triumph of style over content.~WJ

TYRANNOSAURUS TEX

Monster: *3 issue miniseries 1991*

Science-fiction adventure in old-fashioned style. Very slim plot about ne'er-do-wells wanting to steal dinosaur eggs is padded over three issues. Entirely pointless.~WJ

TYRANT

Spiderbaby Graphix: *5 issues 1994-1997*

Steve Bissette's beautifully detailed but extremely slow-moving dinosaur adventure. Every fern, every twig, every drop of moisture is beautifully delineated as Bissette recreates antediluvian landscapes. As the second-best living dinosaur artist (Bill Stout still holds the crown), Bissette is the best person to tackle this epic history, but the real question is, can anyone tackle it entertainingly?~FJ

UFO FLYING SAUCERS

Gold Key: *13 issues 1968 (1), 1970 (2), 1972 (3), 1974 (4-5), 1975-1977 (6-13)*

The giant sized 1 concentrated on adapting actual UFO sightings to comic strip form with artists such as Alberto Giolitti, Luis Dominguez, Joe Certa and Dick Giordano. Thereafter the series carries on with abduction tales and alien encounters in a more traditional, though not particularly inspiring, anthology format with occasional 'factual pages'. The title changed to *UFO and Outer Space* with the 14th issue. Competent but dull.~WW

ULTIMATE ADVENTURES

Marvel: *2 issues + 2002 to date*

Ron Zimmerman writes an extremely well worked twisting of the Batman mythos, as rich guy with a secret Jack Danner adopts smart, but troubled and troublesome teenage orphan Hank Kipple. The witty dialogue fair crackles, the plot surprises (within limitations) and Duncan Fegredo's art is excellent. As samples of the current Marvel renaissance as well as very good comics in their own right, you can't try better than these.~WJ

Recommended: 1-2

ULTIMATE MARVEL TEAM-UP

Marvel: *16 issues 2001-2002*

The title's a misnomer; this series is really *Marvel Bendis Showcase* with the significant team-ups being between star writer Brian Michael Bendis and a parade of artists. Bendis gradually works his way through Marvel's cast of characters, reshaping their origins and motivations for a contemporary audience. In 1, drawn by Matt Wagner, Spider-Man meets Wolverine who leaves a strong impression on the youngster. The fight with the Hulk in 2-3 has appropriately dynamic art from Phil Hester and Ande Parks, while the meeting between Iron Man and fan Peter Parker in 4-5 is handled with a suitably awkward feel by artist Mike Allred. The team-up idea is sidestepped completely during the following three issue Punisher/Daredevil story where Spidey appears in just a few panels. Bill Sienkiewicz's artwork is remarkably consistent and complements Bendis' dialogue strings excellently. This is followed by Jim Mahfood's tongue-in-cheek depiction of a team-up with the Fantastic Four in 9. The meeting with Man Thing in 10 is really a story about Spider-Man villain The Lizard, but features great sewer artwork by artist John Totleben. 11's encounter with the X-Men in a shopping mall is fun, but the semi-manga style and poor colouring don't really sell the script and the Doctor Strange story in 12-13 is a bizarre rewrite of 1965's *Spider-Man Annual* 2. Spidey then encounters distinctly teenage versions of The Black Widow drawn by Terry Moore in 14 and Shang Chi, Master of Kung-Fu in 15-16. With Bendis being the prime mover, the crux of each team-up presented becomes "does this artist's work mesh well with the script?" In too many issues this is not the case and the results, and the colouring in particular, are disappointing. A collection gathers 1-5~SW

ULTIMATE SPIDER-MAN

Marvel: *30 issues +, 1 Super Special 2001 to date*

This re-boots *Spider-Man*, starting with his origin and continuing through early adventures and first encounters with allies and foes, unveiling a fresh character devoid of the baggage carried by his counterpart. The eleven pages that introduced Spider-Man in *Amazing Fantasy* 15 are expanded upon to occupy 1-5 (without crediting Stan Lee or Steve Ditko), recreating the character and cast for the 21st century. This occasionally means tinkering with the expectations of *Spider-Man* readers. Mary Jane Watson is present from the off and a redesigned Green Goblin from 6, while Gwen Stacy, one of Marvel's greatest casualties, is re-cast as a rebel who's no stranger to school expulsion. After 5, other than reintroducing villains, the comic wends its own way, quashing all accusations of retreading a familiar path with 13. Marvel President Bill Jemas had a strong hand in devising the initial direction, but it's the snappy dialogue of Brian Michael Bendis that's most effective in establishing the contemporary nature of the comic from 1. Bendis writes alone from 8, while the teaming of Mark Bagley and Art Thibert for the art results in career highs for both. They're not as successful on the covers, which strive to accentuate Spider-Man's physical dexterity, but sometimes look plain bad. This is a minor caveat regarding what is otherwise a successful and enjoyable superhero comic. Highlights include Peter Parker's initial meeting with newspaper proprietor J. Jonah Jameson in 8, a bruising first encounter with Dr Octopus in 14 and a return in 18, teen life and the rabid Norman Osborn in 22, followed by the Green Goblin in 24-27. During the latter Bendis toys with the minds of long-time Spider-Man fans, and throughout he excels at providing a fresh twist on familiar scenarios, even down to the likes of Parker having to escape school to fight a villain in 28.

The instant popularity of this title caught everyone by surprise, meaning any of the first half dozen issues are relatively scarce. Those just wanting to read the stories can purchase books collecting story arcs, and 1-3 were also collected in a cheap format. The Super Special is a codicil to *Ultimate Marvel Team-Up*, and has Spider-Man considering his new career in the course of encountering numerous other Marvel characters. There's a surprise in seeing the likes of Frank Cho, Craig Thompson and James Kochalka among over twenty contributing artists, but after a decent start the script resorts to accommodating pin-ups to the detriment of any story.~FP

Recommended: 1, 2, 4, 8, 13, 14, 22, 27

ULTIMATE STRIKE

London Night: *12 issues 1997-1998*

Strike is the little – perhaps we should just say younger – sister of that leather-clad psycho bitch Razor, and naturally she's just as tough, depraved, mean and in-your-face. One day she wakes up amnesiac in an asylum with oddly gratuitous images dancing in her head and then the slaughter and disrobing begins. Over the next few issues many badly drawn stereotypes, millionaires who like to whip girls, bent politicians, killer lesbians and your everyday dumb thug, all get to see her naked just before they die violently. Embarrassing rubbish that's simply an excuse to be exploitative and that's being very kind.~WW

ULTIMATE WAR

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 2003*

When a revived Magneto makes his presence known, the Ultimates vow to track him down. The disappearance of the X-Men after they'd sworn Magneto was dead makes them complicit in his actions. 1-3 are very much set-up with the X-Men hardly seen with a big battle in 4. Writer Mark Millar does a professional job, while penciller Chris Bachalo looks rushed.~WJ

ULTIMATE X-MEN

Marvel: *19 issues + 2001 to date*

Mark Millar and Andy and Adam Kubert adjust *X-Men* continuity to cash in on the success of the movie with creditable results. The first story arc, 'Tomorrow People' (1-6*), sets the scene with a granite-hard Professor X gathering a team of young superpowered freaks as President Bush's Sentinel Robots burn down mutants in the streets and Joe Public is sanctioned to lynch anyone considered different. The greatest threat to the safety of the planet is the professor's old partner Magneto, who has gathered his own band of followers promoting an agenda of terror and death amongst their genetic inferiors. After the dust of the inevitable showdown settles, the X-Men are very public heroes waging a political and PR battle to win the hearts and minds of the populace, as well as their more traditional roles as crimefighters. 7-12 explores the early days of Wolverine via the return of a covert government agency that has been kidnapping mutants for years to use as living weapons. It's an obvious attempt to introduce a truckload of other mainstream "X" characters into this universe. Chuck Austen and Essad Ribic then produce a warm, yet chilling tale featuring Gambit and his efforts to save a kidnapped child. ' World Tour' sees the X-Men visit England to promote Professor Xavier's new book on human/ mutant integration, as a body hopping monster escapes to menace the world.

Slowly though the novelty gives way to the continuity soap-opera that was the bane and blessing of the regular series as Xavier threatens to disband the team. He changes his mind just in time for another go-round with the Brotherhood of Mutants (21-25) as Kitty Pride joins up and Jean Grey starts to lose her sanity. For long-time fans it must feel awfully familiar if not a little ominous. Generally of a high quality, the major failing of the series thus far has been the gratuitous shoe-horning of seemingly every X-property that Marvel owns into the narrative rather than concentrating on plot and character development. A solid read for newer fans, but die-hard X-Fans probably don't approve.~WW

Recommended: 1-6, 13-14

The ULTIMATES

Marvel: *7 issues + 2002 to date*

General Nick Fury, in response to the changing world of superheroes and with the backing of the government, assembles a team to address threats to the world consisting of Captain America, Iron Man, Giant Man, and The Wasp. After trying to recruit a hippy-ish Thor, Dr Bruce Banner, embittered and depressed by his failings, becomes the Hulk after mixing his serum with super-soldier blood. The Ultimates' first mission is therefore to defeat the Hulk, who's pursued Betty Ross to a restaurant in New York (1-5). Thereafter Giant Man goes into hiding, and is hunted by Captain America. This superior soap opera that just happens to be an alternate version of the Avengers, comes courtesy of Mark Millar and Bryan Hitch.~NF

Recommended: 1-5

ULTRA GASH INFERNO

Creation Books: *Graphic Novel 1999*

A compilation of 9 short stories by outlaw Ero-Guru ("erotic-grotesque") artist Suehiro Maruo dwelling on the dark and tainted world of sexual violence, bondage and fetishism. Images designed to shock in a blend of mixed media including drawing, photography and collage use many of the icons of erotica from uniforms and Victoriana to Punk Rock to tell stories of degradation and debauchery. Revoltingly beautiful product but only for the strong-stomached and open-minded.~WW

ULTRAFORCE

Malibu: *11 issues (0-10) 1994-1995*
Malibu/Marvel: *16 issues (∞, 1-15) 1995-1996*

The zero issue reprints a two-part preview that ran in *Wizard* magazine. Written by Gerard Jones and drawn by George Pérez, it ought to have been a promising team comic mixing new and existing Ultraverse heroes, but the selection of members and the first villain, Atalon (from an underground kingdom), didn't bode well. Most of the character subplots were so dull that readers were more likely to be asleep than paying attention to the action. 8-10 were part of the countdown to 'Black September', which merged the Marvel universe with the Ultraverse. This was pretty much the death knell for the latter as its writers, attracted by independence and a new world with which to work, mostly found themselves with no further control of the characters. 10 isn't even the end of a story, continuing as it does into *Ultraforce/Avengers Prelude*, *Avengers/Ultraforce* and *Ultraforce/Avengers*.

The infinity issue preceding the second series is a forgettable 'Black September' tie-in with an alternate version of the Avengers. The new series proper was started by Warren Ellis and drawn by Steve Butler (1-3). Now led by the Black Knight and government-sanctioned, the team gained a headquarters, but, as far as characterisation went, nobody seemed to know who was going to be in the team anymore. If the writers weren't really putting their best into it, it was a minor miracle to get the same artist one issue after another until those journeymen the Deodato Studios came on board with Len Wein from 10. Two back-up strips, though short, are worth mentioning: 'A Lonely Place' (10), featuring Lament, drawn by the Kelley Jones-influenced Kyle Hotz, and a Ghoul story, drawn by the Pander Brothers (11), but don't go out of your way for them. All in all, a terrible waste of effort.~NF

ULTRAFORCE/SPIDER-MAN

Malibu: *1 issue (1A) 1996*

Written by Marv Wolfman but drawn by committee. Spider-Man and the Green Goblin team with Ultraforce to try to prevent their two worlds declaring war on each other as events are manipulated by a mysterious, pointy-fingered alien. Oh dear.~NF

ULTRAGIRL

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 1996-1997*

Marvel finally joined the grim-and-gritty backlash with this cross between *Gen*^{13} and *Impulse*. Suzy Sherman, trying for a modelling job in Los Angeles, is attacked by a Sentinel that claims she's both mutant and alien (specifically Kree). In a nice touch, Suzy beats the robot and then dismantles everything but the head so that she has someone to talk to about what's happening. Written by Barbara Kesel, with artwork by Leonard Kirk and Bob Almond, it could have been a cult hit but presumably fell foul of Marvel's financial problems.~NF

ULTRAMAN

Harvey: *3 issues 1993*
Nemesis: *4 issues 1994*

Skyscraper-size robot Ultraman has starred in countless unintentionally funny, cheaply made Japanese TV shows. Sadly, the comics aren't as bad as the TV shows, but there's little to recommend them either.~WJ

UNBOUND

Image: *1 issue 1998*

Prometheus, creator of humans and stealer of fire in ancient Greek myth, as a longhaired leatherboy in present-day urban USA, has to protect brother and sister twin sceptical disco kids, illegitimate offspring of Zeus, king of the gods, from their daddy's hitmen. Don't make the mistake of starting to care. It's just like 'What If Conan the Barbarian Walked the Earth Today?', only less thoughtful.~GK

UNCANNY ORIGINS

Marvel: *14 issues 1996-1997*

A schizophrenic series re-presenting the origins of Marvel's superheroes in a low-priced package. 1-7 are cartooned by Dave Hoover, and thereafter Marc Campos moves towards a more traditional approach. Origins of characters previously detailed in bite-size chunks over several years are presented in their entirety, and while concentrating on assorted X-Men – Cyclops (1), Angel (3) Beast (6), Storm (9) – commendably, more obscure characters are also spotlighted – Quicksilver (2), Black Cat (10), Iron Fist (14) – alongside the more obvious

Hulk (5) and Daredevil (13). Some issues offer previously unknown facets of the characters, such as Firelord in 4, Nightcrawler in 8 and Doctor Strange in 12. Most are competent (although 11's Black Knight is dire) rather than spectacular, making them essential only for staunch fans of the characters concerned.~WJ

UNCANNY TALES

Marvel: *12 issues 1973-1975*

Yet another title recirculating Marvel's 1950s horror short stories. During the period when this was being published bi-monthly Marvel had another seven similar titles on the go. That they all sold defies belief.~FP

THE UNCENSORED MOUSE

Eternity: *2 issues 1989*

Early 1930s Mickey Mouse daily newspaper strips by Floyd Gottfredson portraying a character yet to metamorphose into the wholesome corporate symbol, and therefore never previously reprinted. While the racist caricatures are offensive, completists will probably still want to investigate.~FP

UNCLE SAM

DC/Vertigo: *2 issue microseries 1997**

Uncle Sam, the superheroic personification of the American Dream, goes on a journey through the USA's dark past in this confused and confusing piece of liberal heart bleeding. Such a generally downbeat and disgusted take on American culture and politics is rare in a comic, and writer Steve Darnall certainly doesn't shy away from accusing his country of racism, corruption and exploitation – it's difficult to imagine DC publishing this post-September 11th. The problem is that the structure is far too fragmentary and pretentious to ever amount to a coherent argument, and the final showdown offers a form of symbolic redemption far more trite than the standard superhero fistfights it appears to disdain. On this occasion Alex Ross' painted artwork, as ever derived from models and photographs, also seems far too literal and concrete to do justice to the script's impressionistic sweep.~AL

Walt Disney's UNCLE SCROOGE

Dell: *39 issues 1952-1962*
Gold Key: *134 issues (40-173) 1962-1980*
Whitman: *36 issues (174-209) 1980-1983*
Gladstone: *33 issues (210-242) 1986-1989*
Disney: *38 issues (243-280) 1990-1993*
Gladstone: *38 issues (281-318) 1993-1999*

In terms of quality Carl Barks' *Uncle Scrooge* stories stand alongside *Asterix* and *Tintin* as the greatest childrens' comics. In common with the European strips, *Scrooge* works almost instinctively on two levels, appealing to the young with stories opening the imagination and by the simplicity and humour of the artwork, and additionally to adults with impeccable plotting, research and a repertoire of fine comic touches. Unlike the creators of *Tintin* and *Asterix*, Barks crafted a wealth of material, but Scrooge is corporate property and has therefore been sullied by lesser hands until being rescued in the 1990s by the more than capable Don Rosa.

Scrooge is fabulously wealthy, yet resents spending a dime more than he has to unless his status as the world's richest duck is challenged, in which case he becomes a spendthrift. He keeps his money in a giant structure known as the money bin, through which he dives like a porpoise and burrows like a gopher in a memorable sequence of creative inspiration that opened Scrooge's first issue. Beneath the miserly front, though, Scrooge has a better nature that's readily appealed to. Despite the often-repeated work ethic, materialism is a central theme to Barks' Scrooge, yet the most fondly recalled aspects of his stories are the exotic locations. Scrooge, often accompanied by Donald Duck and nephews Huey, Dewey and Louie, travels the globe, if not in search of some fabulous treasure, then for a way of increasing his fortune by a business opportunity or other means.

Scrooge débuted in 1947's *Four Color* 178, a Donald Duck Christmas tale, and proved popular enough to return again and again. His first solo outing was 1952's 'Only A Poor Old Man' in *Four Color* 386 (reprinted in 1965 as *Uncle Scrooge and Donald Duck*), followed by *Four Color* 456 and 495. The series title Four Color only appears in the indicia, and it's an Uncle Scrooge logo on the cover, so these issues are commonly referred to as *Uncle Scrooge* 1-3. Scrooge's own title picks up the numbering with 4. Barks writes and draws every issue to 70 (although 67 reprints 10), and writes 71, and while they stagger off a little towards the end, this is a fabulous run of comics. A 1995 comic titled *Uncle Scrooge in Arabia* reprints 'The Mines of King Solomon' from 19, as good an example as any of how Barks excels. Scrooge decides to inspect his properties throughout the world, accompanied by Donald and by Huey, Dewey and Louie, who've been practicing their bird and animal calls for the Junior Woodchucks. The combined tickets stack up to Donald's shoulders. Assorted attempts at attracting wildlife go comically wrong, and Scrooge learns the location of the legendary lost diamond mines of King Solomon. Unfortunately local gangsters have arrived first, so Scrooge and Co. must outwit them, eventually succeeding by surrendering portions of the tickets to Arab ruffians who've always wanted to travel. Comedy, action, adventure, excellent art and an unexpected ending add up to a great story, and Barks pulled this off almost every issue. The assorted schemes of the criminal Beagle Boys to separate Scrooge from his wealth, and of the sorceress Magica De Spell to acquire the first dime Scrooge ever earned, are plentiful in later Barks issues. Magica believes possession of the dime will spark her good fortunes, and the Beagle Boys are just out to steal. Except in cases where Barks produced an extra-long lead story, issues also have a shorter back-up strip and a one-page Scrooge gag strip. Additionally, almost all issues between 13 and 48 also have a short story starring nutty inventor Gyro Gearloose, equally immaculately crafted by Barks, and collected in six volumes by Gladstone.

Barks seems to have lost interest towards the mid-1960s, and while never poor, most of his later stories lacked the spirit of earlier work. He retired in 1966, after writing 71 for his successor Tony Strobl, but his replacements were unable to capture the essence or scope of his best work. Between 1970 and 1979 *Uncle Scrooge* consisted almost entirely of Barks reprints before Whitman began running stories originally prepared for the European market. They're mediocre, indistinguishable from the feeble gag material produced for other Whitman titles and shown up by the occasional Barks reprint. Stories produced by the Europeans themselves are better, but tend to concentrate on Scrooge's wealth more than any other facet of his character or the exotic adventure tales that continue to thrill. The Italian Romano Scarpa grasped Scrooge, but his work is all too rarely reprinted, although 241 and 242 are good samples. The latter introduced Brigitta MacBridge, the woman who wants to marry Scrooge. The Barks stories are all reprinted in later issues, most in several. Dell marked the splash page of each story with the original issue number, so it's easy to piece together a run without having to pay premium prices. 9's 'The Lemming with the Locket', for instance, has been reprinted in 104, 179, and 250, with 179 considered particularly rare, having only been circulated in packs with two other Whitman Disney titles.

Gladstone, who'd had some success producing expensive hardbound editions of Barks' work, inherited the Disney license in 1986 and dispensed with five decades of anonymity by running credits. More significantly, they began running new material from American creators, a practice continued for Disney's run. William Van Horn is good (see 252), but better in the pages of *Walt Disney Comics & Stories*, while Don Rosa is the spiritual heir to Carl Barks. Rosa fashions his stories to the Barks template, but isn't a mere copyist. Even when drawing heavily on Barks's work for his excellent 'Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck' (285-297*, 306 and 318) Rosa displays his own touches. There are background visual gags aplenty, his new characters are memorable, and he's confident enough to show a developing Scrooge rather than presenting the familiar character from day one. Rosa's stories, here and in the other Disney duck titles, are all worth finding. Look for his work in 219, 220, 224, 235, 261-263, 268, 276, and 314. He's also in 226, 227 and 242, but only with a page or two. Rosa's contribution to 311 is particularly outstanding, a quest in the best Barks tradition, and 310, with a fine Rosa story about Gladstone Gander's annual unlucky day, is extremely rare. Also of note is 216, with a previously unused Carl Barks plot commissioned from Disney's Danish licensee and illustrated by their anonymous artists. It's not the best Barks, but is nonetheless a decent story.

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* Available in a collected edition

Sadly, while the European market for Disney duck comics remains undiminished, with Rosa, Van Horn and others now commissioned directly from Europe, the home market proves problematical. Gladstone ceased publishing citing the difficulties of working with the Disney organisation, and attempts to continue selling the comics to a young audience had instigated several format changes. Prices were kept down between 294 and 303 by dispensing with the traditional glossy cover, but eventually Gladstone stopped all other *Uncle Scrooge* titles in favour of a single squarebound comic aimed at collectors. This sixty-four page package was adopted with 309, and the final issues of the run are thoroughly entertaining comics, packed with Barks, Rosa and fine contributions from Van Horn (318) and Romano Scarpa (315-316). Since Gladstone there have been no Disney titles published in the USA, while Rosa has continued to produce fine stories abroad. Such is his standing that most are available translated into English on web sites, or if you can read another language, collections of his and Van Horn's work are available throughout Europe.

Uncle Scrooge is well served by collections, with Gladstone reprinting the entire Barks run chronologically in fifty-six books, having previously dipped in for volumes of their *Gladstone Comic Album* series. Hardbound and slipcased reprints are available in black and white as *Carl Barks Library* volumes 3-5, and a good, if poorly coloured, sampler is the 1981 Celestial Arts collection *Uncle Scrooge His Life & Times*. Gladstone also collect Rosa's early stories in four volumes, and the Disney published *Donald and Scrooge* reprints 261-263 and 268.~FP

Recommended: 1-13, 15-17, 19-23, 25-30, 32-40, 42-52, 54-57, 59, 60, 65, 219, 220, 224, 230, 235, 242, 261-263, 276, 285-297, 306, 309-311, 314, 315, 318

The Adventurous UNCLE SCROOGE McDuck

Gladstone: *2 issues 1997*

A short-lived series, meant to take over from *Uncle Scrooge Adventures*, but cancelled with Gladstone's cutbacks. The first issue contains '24-Karat Moon' by the ever-reliable Carl Barks and 'Time Bandits' by Daniel Branca. The second issue's main story is 'A Little Something Special' in which Duckburg celebrates Scrooge's 50th Anniversary, but his most persistent enemies, Glomgold, Magica and the Beagles unite to try to spoil the occasion. Don Rosa's love of the material is evident and his rich, detailed artwork is a joy.~NF

Recommended: 1, 2

Walt Disney's UNCLE SCROOGE ADVENTURES

Gladstone: *54 issues 1987-1990 (1-21), 1993-1997 (22-54)*

Vintage Carl Barks Uncle Scrooge stories occupy the majority of issues, with European reprints filling most of the rest, particularly towards the end of the run. That alone would make a quality package, but the occasional new stories by Don Rosa are the highlights. In 5 he provides a sequel to Barks' story of how Scrooge made his fortune, resurrecting the cast of 'Back To The Klondike'. He contributes full length stories to 14, 27 and 51, with shorter contributions in 9 and 20. 'Horsing Around With History' in 33 was a considerable coup, a new Carl Barks script illustrated by William Van Horn. It possesses all the elements of the classic Barks, and the issue also reprints Uncle Scrooge 1. 21 is of note as a curiosity, containing a Gyro Gearloose story started and abandoned by Barks, completed by Rosa thirty years later. The European material falls short of the Barks and Rosa stories, although is never poor and always well drawn. For the best of it try Romano Scarpa's stories 'The Man From Oola Oola' in 28-29, 'Lentils from Babylon' in 30-32, or 'Colossus of the Nile' in 37-38.~FP

Recommended: 5, 9, 14, 20, 21, 27-29, 33, 51

Walt Disney's UNCLE SCROOGE & DONALD DUCK

Gladstone: *2 issues 1998*

Reprints Don Rosa's 'The Crocodile Collector' in 1 and presents three Christmas stories from Disney's European Studio in 2, all starring the miserly millionaire and his long suffering nephew Donald. All the usual duck ingredients are there but it's a second rate collection at best.~WW

Walt Disney's UNCLE SCROOGE GOES TO DISNEYLAND

Dell: *One-shot 1957*
Gladstone: *One-shot 1985*

Two years after Disneyland opened Dell published this one-shot anthology featuring some odd teamings of Disney characters. Mickey Mouse and Goofy, and Donald Duck with Huey, Dewey and Louie are straightforward, but how about Daisy Duck alongside Alice from Wonderland, or Pinocchio with Pluto and Mickey's nephews Morty and Ferdy? Carl Barks drew a fine twenty-pager pairing Uncle Scrooge with Gyro Gearloose, but this is more a curiosity than a must-have. The Gladstone issue reprints the Dell comic.~FP

THE UNDEAD!

Chaos!: *One-shot 2002*

Gratuitously unpleasant saga of cannibalism among the undead without any leavening sense of irony or satire. Will appeal to teenage tossers.~WJ

Andrew Vachss' UNDERGROUND

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1993-1994*

Stories by various creators using a setting devised by crime novelist Vachss, some in comics form, and some in prose. It's a short time in the future, after some sort of social breakdown, and almost everyone is living in gangs in tunnels underground, with the Rules and the police imposing a degree of order. Most of the stories are well done, but there is little variety in tone or plot. 1 is the best, with 'Pooch' by Phil Hester and 'Way Down' by Bill Crider (a prose piece with subtlety and surprise). 2 has a humorous piece by Bob Fingerman, 3 has stories by Jason Lutes and Al Davison, and 4 is mostly forgettable prose.~FC

U.N.D.E.R.S.E.A. AGENT

Tower: *6 issues 1966-1967*

This sixty-eight page title stars Lt. Davy Jones, a Navy pilot seconded to Atlantis, the secret underwater base of U.N.D.E.R.S.E.A. (United Nations Department of Experiment and Research Systems Established at Atlantis). The director dubs Davy U.N.D.E.R.S.E.A. Agent number 1 and allows him to work with kid sidekick Skooby Doolittle and lovely marine biologist Ramona Delmar. In 2 Jones is fitted with a belt that gives him magnetic powers. Another agent, codenamed Merman, is given super-strength and the ability to breathe underwater, and appears in 5 and 6. Most of Davy's strips are drawn by Ray Bailey with stories in 2 and 3 by Mike Sekowsky and in 3-6 by Gil Kane. Bailey's syndicated strip style makes for dull colour comics, not helped by pedestrian scripts. Kane's stories stand out as the most exciting on offer, the best being 'Doomsday in the Depths', in 6, scripted by Gardner Fox, which centres on a lost underwater civilisation. The Merman/Davy Jones story in 5 by Manny Stallman includes a visit to the Planet Venus – barmy stuff. Davy Jones also appeared in *T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents* 13.~SW

THE UNDERSIDE

Caliber: *1 issue 1996*

The Underside is the magical realm in which investigators Beck and Caul operate, and this is a poorly drawn and ponderously written fantasy about a demon escaping to wreak revenge on a magical society. At least one presumes that's what it's about because only the first issue was published. When the Beck and Caul back-up is the highlight you know it's not worth bothering.~WJ

UNDERSTANDING COMICS

Kitchen Sink: *1 volume 1993*
Harper Perennial: *1 volume 1994*
Paradox Press: *1 volume (Reinventing Comics) 2000*

Here Scott McCloud attempted to provide an in-depth appreciation of comics' structure, reasoning the synthesis of words and pictures is a separate and unique artform. The irony is that he does so by borrowing heavily from established sources. It's presented by a cartoon McCloud in witty and accessible fashion, and a major victory is that the book doesn't disappear up its own arse. It could be argued, though, that given much of our appreciation is instinctively acquired, was it really necessary in the first place? There's a reserved "yes" to that question because no matter how long you've read comics, McCloud has something new to tell you. He dissects exactly how comics work, methods of presentation, and explains our responses to them. Eventually, though, his theories, while entertaining and thought-provoking, are no more valid than anyone else's, and woolly liberal that he is, he'd agree. Except no-one else has pulled themselves from the armchair to provide an alternative, so McCloud's ideas, or more accurately, people's interpretations of his ideas, have seeped into the more erudite comic reading audience. Ultimately, it's likely that the most enduring legacy has been as a rallying call for creators, because your average *X-Men* reader couldn't give a toss. And there's no reason why they should, which is the book's inbuilt failing. Still, in a field of one, it's number one.

Understanding Comics was released to almost universal acclaim among the comics community, leading to the Harper reissue for a more general audience (libraries, probably). McCloud then produced *Reinventing Comics*. While linked by author and method of presentation, this is an altogether more personal and unwieldy beast. By and large, it's an evaluation of the recent and prevailing status quo in the comics industry at the time of publication, with McCloud maintaining a website updating topics discussed. The best aspect is that while he elaborates the many faults of the comics industry, he's not short of viable suggestions on how to improve matters. Over half the book is occupied with McCloud's proselytising about the potential of computers relating to comics, encompassing a brief history, and it's too soon to say whether he's right or not.

Something seemingly irrelevant to the message of both books, but surely a factor in their success, is rarely mentioned in the rush to discuss the topics presented. McCloud's cartooning throughout is wonderful. It's simple, expressive, and a joy just to look at. Anyone just flicking through the book will be immediately captivated by the skill and charm, and the multitude of effective symbols. If you want a deeper insight into the mechanics of comics, these are the places to start, although by now it'll probably be www.mccloud.com.~FP

UNDERTAKER

Chaos!: *10 issues 1999-2000*

Series based on the character of the WWF wrestler and his assistants, casting our lead as "the guardian of hell's prison". It's all pretty much what one might expect, although unaccountably popular when first released in a bewildering array of covers. Adolescent boys who've perfected their satan salute in front of a mirror while listening to Korn should now advance to the next level of cliché and read this. To make it easier 1-4 are collected.~FP

UNDERWATER

Drawn and Quarterly: *11 issues 1994-1997*

Underwater doesn't immediately appear to make sense. By following the pictures, the reader can tell that a woman is giving birth, but any language that appears is gobbledygook, a mixture of nonsense words and odd sounds. As the story progresses it becomes clear that you're experiencing the world through the eyes and ears of the woman's new-born twins, and nothing makes sense because they don't yet understand it. The dialogue starts to become clearer as the babies start to recognise more words, one or two to start with, more as the series goes on, and the twins understand each other more than they do the adults, who don't always understand them either. Chester Brown's idea is interesting and nicely presented, but it's really only a one-issue joke and the continued package isn't all satisfying, especially in such small doses. All but issue 1 also contains Brown's adaptations of Bible stories; 4 has a short piece on his thoughts regarding the nature of schizophrenia. Publication was suspended to enable Brown to work on another project, but six years on there's no sign of a revival.~JC

UNDERWORLD

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1987-1988*

Each issue is a separate story in the lives of a group of New York cops. The stories are simple – chasing pickpockets, talking a potential suicide off a ledge – but Robert Loren Fleming's writing makes them rich, and Ernie Colón's artwork does them justice and more. This deserves another series or seven.~FC

Recommended: 1-4

UNDERWORLD

Fantagraphics: *4 volumes + 1995 to date*

These collections of Kaz's weekly comic strip from alternative newspapers are peopled with grotesques, anthropomorphic and fairytale creatures, hillbillies, babies and, occasionally, girls. Recurring characters include Creep (a rat), Sam Snuff, Newton (with a miniature head on a huge body), Nuzzle (a junky), and Petit Mort (a philosopher with an accommodating arse). Full of sex, death, drugs, religion and bodily functions, the strips are irreligious, disgusting, nihilistic, disturbing and, importantly, very funny.~NF

Recommended: 1-4

UNDERWORLD Unleashed

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1995*, one-shot ('Abyss – Hell's Sentinel') 1995, one-shot ('Apokolips – Dark Uprising') 1995, one-shot ('Batman – Devil's Asylum') 1995, one-shot ('Patterns of Fear') 1995*

In the miniseries, the demon, Neron, tempts DC's supervillains and sends them off, powers enhanced, to battle throughout DC's titles. At the same time, he tries to tempt the superheroes – with some success. The final issue reveals Neron's true plan, which is only thwarted by a group of heroes invading Neron's hell. Mark Waid has written a clever story that, though contrived and rather unappealing in its treatment of the supervillains, at least makes better use of a large number of heroes than most crossovers. The art by Howard Porter and Dan Green is, unfortunately, stiff and gimmicky. As well as the crossovers in the regular monthly titles, several one-shots are also connected to the miniseries. In 'Abyss', Alan Scott (Sentinel), gathers a group of supernatural heroes to rescue his wife's soul from Neron. Darkseid's lieutenants are seduced in 'Apokolips' and in 'Devil's Asylum' Neron promises the world to an inmate of Arkham Asylum, as long as he can make Batman kill one of the other inmates. 'Patterns of Fear' is more of a 'who's who' than anything else as Neron visits Oracle to inspect her files (and tempt her, of course).~NF

UNEARTHLY SPECTACULARS

Harvey: *3 issues 1965-1967*

The editorial staff appear to have been thrashing around in the dark to produce this very strange anthology, which mixes the truly inane with some excellent material. Cover stars Jack Quick Frost (a gimmicky Iceman) and Tiger Boy are both dreadful. The latter has to be seen to be believed, having a human head on a tiger's body, but that's not all: he's also the robot Steelman and stretchy Rubberman. Astonishingly, the erudite Gil Kane was involved with this

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* Available in a collected edition

fiasco. 'Clawfang', drawn by Al Williamson, is better, but the highlights are Wally Wood, again proving he's without peer when it comes to science-fiction adventure in 2's excellent 'Earthman' and then turning his hand to superhero spoof with Miracles Inc. Joe Orlando takes on a longer Miracles Inc story in 3, which also has a nice Archie Goodwin and Reed Crandall story and the preposterous 'Never Say "no" To Dr Yes'.~WJ
Recommended: 2, 3

UNEEDA Comix

Print Mint: *One-shot 1970*

Coming at the end of R.Crumb's hippie period, *Uneeda* reflects his growing lack of interest in the counterculture. The centrepiece, 'Honeybunch Kominsky, The Drug Crazed Runaway', is a very unconvincing procession of counterculture clichés that even seems to have bored Crumb. Rounding out the comic are a short Mr Natural strip and a few Bo Bo Bolinsky shorts that have far more power (even poetry) than the lead strip. Middling Crumb.~DAR

UNEXPECTED

DC: *118 issues (105-222) 1968-1982*

Originally titled *Tales of the Unexpected*, this continued the numbering and, initially, the somewhat half-baked mystery stories. The very uninspired Johnny Peril (106-117) and the very odd Mad Mod Witch occupied the comic, but the first items of any note were a few early Berni Wrightson strips (116, 119, 121, 128). By 120 the title had become a typical DC horror comic, but with far fewer contributors than others, relying on George Kashdan, Carl Wessler and editor Murray Boltinoff for almost all its stories, and George Tuska and Jerry Grandenetti for most of its art. Consequently, though never less than professional, *Unexpected* never lived up to its name.

Packed with Filipino artists, 140-165 are the best of the run, with the hundred-pagers (157-162) the ideal jumping-on point. Along with Alfredo Alcala and Rico Rival, Nestor Redondo drew some nice strips (133, 155, 195), as did token non-Filipinos Lee Elias and Ralph Reese (145). The single best story was a swamp-based Michael Fleisher/Alex Niño tale in 152, and Niño had other strips in 159 and 162.

The last few years were a very mixed bag, with the occasional delight (such as lovely Noly Panaligan jobs in 186, 187, 189 and 214) surfacing among much grade Z hackery. 189-195 were dollar comics and amongst the eighty pages of new strips were a few nice surprises from Vincente Alcazar (189, 191), Marshall Rogers (191) and Doug Wildey (193). They also featured material commissioned for the cancelled *House of Secrets*, and *Witching Hour* and *Doorway to Nightmare* stories in 190, 192, 194 and 195, the last of which, 'Deadly Homecoming', by Denny O'Neil and Johnny Craig, was actually quite good. With 200 Mike Barr and original artist Jack Sparling revived Johnny Peril, though only the very brave are advised to sample it. Far more exciting was some lovely artwork by the hopelessly obscure Arthur Geroche in 202. In retrospect the most unexpected thing about this comic was how it managed to outlive most of its competition.~DAR
Recommended: 152, 157-162, 186, 187, 189, 191, 195, 202, 214

Tales of the UNEXPECTED

DC: *104 issues 1955-1968*

The 1955 introduction of The Comics Code Authority, whose stringent guidelines had to be observed in order to obtain the parent-assuaging stamp of approval, resulted in the collapse or disembowelling of many early 1950s horror titles. DC stepped into the gap with several Comics Code-approved anthologies. The predominantly science-fiction-flavoured stories here were by editor Jack Schiff's crew of writers, including Ed Herron, Otto Binder, Jack Miller and Ed Hamilton, with fine if conservative artwork from the likes of Ruben Moreira, Bill Ely, Mort Meskin, Nick Cardy, Bernard Baily and, in some early issues, Jack Kirby.

With August 1959's 40 the title became home to Herron and artist Bob Brown's 'Guardian of the Space Lanes' – the Space Ranger who had débuted in *Showcase* 15-16 the previous year. The Ranger was Rick Starr, who patrolled in his rocket ship The Solar King in a yellow and red outfit complete with salad-bowl helmet. He operated out of a secret asteroid base with the assistance of his blonde 'Girl Friday', Myra Mason, and a little pink shapeshifter called Cryll, who resembled nothing more than a walking pair of testicles. The stories managed a drab mix of private eye and Western lawman in outer space. The Ranger ran until 88 in 1964, when the title was shaken up by Schiff, with the story content becoming more farcical, typified by the new feature, a wish-fulfilling cloud known as 'The Green Glob'. One of DC's obscurest heroes, Automan, a sentient bop-talking robot, also appeared in 91, 94 and 97, drawn by Bill Ely. In 1968 the title continued as simply *Unexpected*.~SW

UNICORN ISLE

WaRP: *4 issues, 1986-1987*
Apple: *1 issue (5) 1987*

It was supposed to run to twelve issues so didn't even get halfway, but is still worth a look if you like lively, imaginative fantasy. The people of Unicorn Isle have custody of the two sacred unicorns, the last of their kind. But some baddies want the power of the unicorns, manage to abduct one, and the young twins Nils and Nola are sent on the rescue mission. Your standard soft-fantasy quest, but Lee Marrs brings a fresh touch to the writing, making the unicorns distant and strange and the other characters thoroughly human. The black and white artwork is suitably otherworldly (and particularly strong on costume), though the storytelling tends to fall apart during the action sequences. Not perfect, but a story that deserves to be finished.~FC
Recommended: 1-5

UNION

Image/WildStorm: *4 issue miniseries 1993, 10 issues (0-9) 1995-1996, one-shot ('Final Vengeance') 1997*

Written by Mike Heisler and drawn by Mark Texeira, the Union miniseries establishes the character on Earth after he's accidentally passed through a dimensional gate during a battle with the Directorate. As a Protectorate soldier Union confronts a group of his enemies resulting in the destruction of a whole town. Believing himself responsible, he decides to stay on Earth and with the help of a woman called Jill becomes accepted as a superhero. 0, published as a precursor to the regular series, provided a background to the war between the Protectorate and the Directorate and explained Union's appearance on Earth. Lack of a regular artist can't have helped sales, and while overall it's unimpressive, Heisler's interest in the characters shines through. The one-shot concludes the three-parter begun in 8. Of note, Union meets Savage Dragon in issue 3 of the second series and Majestic in 4 (as part of the 'WildStorm Rising' crossover). 5 and 6 are the best of the series, as Union is kidnapped into a parallel world to be its champion and meets an alternate Fairchild (from Gen^{13}).~NF

UNION JACK

Marvel: *3 issue miniseries 1998-1999**

British flag-wearer Joey Chapman in his own series, once again battling the vampires that have been the patriotic hero's nemeses since his boyfriend's grandfather first donned the mantle in WWI. The entertainment that could be gleaned from this is ruined by the incipient homophobia of couching AIDS in metaphors of obscure blood diseases. Even then the guts are lacking to come out and say the lead characters are gay in case some rednecks in the bible belt are offended. Marvel, not to mention the usually reliable John Cassaday and Ben Raab, ought to be ashamed of themselves.~JC

Lady Death/Chastity/Bad Kitty: UNITED

Chaos!: *One-shot 2002*

Dedicated "to the victims and heroes of the 911 tragedy", Brian Augustyn's tale concerns a woman looking for her husband and attracting the help of Bad Kitty, Lady Death (fortunately, during her period as a human) and Chastity. As a celebration of heroism and resilience, it's as unsubtle as you'd expect, with plenty of flag-waving and inspirational dialogue. Despite the dedication, there is no evidence that this was published to raise money for any charity associated with September 11 2001.~NF

UNITY

Valiant: *2 issues (0-1) 1992*
Acclaim: *3 issues 2000*

The Valiant issues bookended the first big crossover story involving the then fledgling line. Each title contained two chapters of an eighteen-chapter ongoing crossover. Read in its entirety it's a well plotted, if sometimes meandering, story of every major Valiant character involved in the machinations of The Mother God. She originated in the Solar series, and here unites past, present and future in a land out of time. Barry Windsor-Smith illustrates, and although these issues won't make much sense on their own the larger picture is worth a look, best absorbed via four Unity collections. Not all company crossover sagas are bad.

Given his seemingly shoddy ousting from a company whose characters he'd largely created, it was astonishing to see Jim Shooter return to write the sequel. It reunited the original Valiant heroes rather than Acclaim's reboots, and the plot stems from Solar's guilt regarding the plethora of alternate realities he spawned and a determination to rectify them. Meanwhile Master Darque (reboot version) has an agenda of his own. Shooter sets up a decent moral conundrum and drops a few pointed comments amid an okay plot, and artist Jim Starlin makes more effort than he has in years, but the series only ran half its projected span.~WJ

UNIVERSAL MONSTERS

Dark Horse: *4 issues 1993*

In partnership with Universal Studios, Dark Horse commissioned these adaptations of four of the most famous horror films of all time. The best is *Creature from the Black* Lagoon, by Steve Moncuse, Art Adams and Terry Austin – bright, detailed artwork contrasting with the dark human emotions that are at the heart of the tale. Tony Harris and Dennis Beauvais make distinctive visual attempts at *The Mummy* andI respectively, but *Dracula* is less successful. The advertised adaptation of *Wolfman* was never published.~NF

Recommended: *Creature from the Black Lagoon*

UNIVERSE

Image/Top Cow: *8 issues 2001-2002*

Lapsed priest Tom Judge acquires a power known as The Rapture. It's an essential step in a forthcoming war between demons, during which hell will literally burst loose while Satan attempts to gather more power by becoming mortal. With The Rapture, Tom can enter hell, consort with dead souls and give demons a fair jolt. It all starts decently enough in 1-3, as Judge meets the predictable glamourous female co-star, and a lounge-lizard Satan, but then Paul Jenkins introduces a largely redundant supporting cast, a bog standard all-powerful adversary, and having introduced the premise, does little to progress it. The art team of Clayton Crain and Jonathan Glapion is more impressive, and a rushed conclusion was provided in the *Tom Judge* one-shot.~WJ

Titans/Legion of Superheroes/UNIVERSE ABLAZE

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1999*

Reasonably fresh from a stint as regular *Titans* scribe, Dan Jurgens joins penciller Phil Jimenez on this entertaining miniseries. It has a team of time-tossed Titans ganging up with the 30th Century's Legion of Superheroes to stop a conglomerate of their arch villains from taking over the universe. The prestige format's extra pages provide the space needed for the story to avoid being swamped by its huge cast, and Jurgens' skill at pacing team comics ensures the action is fast and furious. The result is a surprisingly readable romp that never descends into the pointless fight scenes that so often plague crossovers. That said, there's no really useful reason for this series to exist and unless you're a die-hard fan of one or the other of the teams involved, no real reason to go near it.~JC

UNIVERSE X

Marvel: *13 issue limited series (0-12) 2000-2001*, one-shot ('Beasts') 2000, one-shot (4) 2000, one-shot ('Cap') 2001, one-shot ('Iron Men') 2001, one-shot ('Spidey') 2001, one-shot ('Omnibus') 2001, one-shot ('X') 2001*

Unnecessary sequel to *Earth X*. Jim Kreuger and Dougie Braithwaite expand the tale of an Earth still reeling from the physical shock of mass mutation, and the psychic trauma of discovering that the human race had been built by Celestial aliens to act as savage junkyard dogs for an alien embryo gestating at the world's core. What's left is a world of superbeings trying to make sense of the mess that remains. Reed Richards has devised towers to cure the populace of their superpowers whether they want a cure or not, but the planet has been destabilised by events in *Earth X* and a new Ice Age is coming. Meanwhile the mystic beings gather to fight for position as it's revealed that all the dead of the world are not at peace but are trapped in a perpetual state of battle in the world beyond. Mephisto who might actually be the Devil is making his play to take over creation. Beautiful artwork fails to lift this dreary dystopic montage of doom and despondency, which feels like a deconstructed Gotterdamerung played at half speed. Didn't entertainment used to be fun?~WW

UNKNOWN QUANTITIES

Funny Valentine Press: *One-shot 1999*

Charity anthologies, such as this black and white one in aid of an anti-poverty group, tend to have to take what they can get and so we end up with the didactic, the pious, the dashed-off, the mad, reprints, and leftovers. Exceptions here include Jay Stephens' sweet Jetcat, an elegant O. Henry adaptation by Gary Gianni, and a funny strip about Betty Page and Tor Johnson by Mitch O'Connell and Hilary Barta. Wooden spoons for Alan Moore's unreadable text piece and a horrid drawing by Donna Barr. Alex Ross produces a heavily symbolic cover of Uncle Sam with a blindfold on.~GK

UNKNOWN SOLDIER

DC: *64 issues (205-268) 1977-1982, 12 issue limited series 1988-1989*
DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1997*

This anonymous allied agent with the bandaged head finally inherited his own title when *Star-Spangled War Stories* was renamed in 1977, having starred there since 151. A watered-down World War II version of G8, the famous pulp master of disguise and espionage from the 1930s, the Soldier had been facially disfigured in the Philippines by a hand grenade that also killed his brother Harry. Thereafter, the Immortal GI pledged to stay officially dead, operating on the principle that "one man in a pivotal position can exert an influence on hundreds, even thousands, of others". His wartime impersonations had settled into something of a rut by the late 1970s. Filipino artist Gerry Talaoc, aided by veteran war artist Dick Ayers for much of the title's run, reduced the Soldier to a hackneyed cartoon character, and scripter Bob Haney's stories were definitely off the boil. The title also featured other DC war series, including Robert Kanigher's Enemy Ace, drawn here by John Severin, (251-253, 260, 261, 265-267), and an elegant interpretation of Captain Fear (last seen in *Adventure Comics*) by David Michelinie and Walt Simonson in 254-256. The many single stories by young artists included Frank Miller in 219.

After an absence of six years, our redefined bandaged hero returns courtesy of Jim Owsley and artist Phil Gascoine. 1-2 contain, in flashbacks, the Soldier's childhood and the story of how he virtually became immortal. The series begins in the 1970s and ends in the late 1980s, with each issue

* Available in a collected edition

involving the Soldier in an international conflict of the time. Cambodia 1970 is the setting for 1, the US Embassy in Iran in 1977 is featured in 2, and for 3 in 1982 it's off to Afghanistan, and so on. It misses the Gulf War by two years, or you can be certain that would've featured too. It's a very well produced series with entertaining period pieces, which sadly highlights how little peace there's been in the world for the past few decades. It's interesting to see the Soldier's supporting cast grow older, while he remains young. We even apparently meet his grown-up daughter in 10. His first assignment is recalled in 6, which particularly stands out as it delves deeper into his origin. A worthy action and espionage successor to the earlier series.

The Vertigo revival was written by Garth Ennis writes for artist Kilian Plunkett. Set in the present day, CIA agent William Clyde's impromptu enquiries lead him to a taboo subject – Codename: Unknown Soldier. Ennis is kind enough to show us the Soldier's dirty tricks activities after VJ Day in places like Iran, Cambodia and Nicaragua. Clyde is all too aware of what a morally compromised anachronism the role would be. When the Soldier elects Clyde as his successor he meets with fierce resistance. It's left up to the reader to interpret who's left standing to "make a difference". Really excellent reading.~SW/HY

Recommended: Miniseries 1-4

UNKNOWN WORLDS

ACG: *57 issues 1960-1967*

What can one say about a comic whose cover for 28 boasted "4329 Gasps"? *Unknown Worlds* was ACG's third mystery anthology of the 1960s and as such resembled all their others content-wise. No one wrote stories quite like Richard E. Hughes (some might add "thank goodness"). The hokey O.Henry on medication flavour of Hughes' science fiction and mystery is, admittedly, an acquired taste. Nevertheless, his work does have an undeniable old-fashioned charm. By the early 1960s ACG had evolved a functional mythos for its fantasy tales, centred on an all-green afterlife called The Unknown. Familiar to regular readers of *Adventures into the Unknown* and *Forbidden Worlds*, this realm was inhabited by various light green ghosts, objects and supernatural entities. The ACG milieu is, in essence, a mixture of these verdant idiosyncrasies with the sentimental and the downright wacky.

Despite authors such as Shane O'Shea, Zev Zimmer, Ace Aquila, Lafcadio Lee and Kurato Osaki getting story bylines, everything was in fact written by Hughes. Once you know this, the mini author/artist portraits that preface many of the early 1960s stories are particularly amusing. Highlights of the distinctly conservative artwork came courtesy of Ed Ashe, John Rosenberger, Pete Costanza, Paul Reinman, John Forte, Chic Stone and the incomparable Ogden Whitney. Later in the 1960s occasional stories by Johnny Craig (Jay Taycey) and Steve Ditko also cropped up. Several classic ACG stories appeared here, the most famous being 'The People Versus Hendricks' in 36, a courtroom drama involving artificial humans, romance, jealousy and murder. '1000 Years Ago... in 1962', in 20, was an alien invasion story with a difference and featured a guest appearance by ACG's oddest protagonist, Herbie Popnecker. Other well-received stories include 'Witch Boy' in 38, '100 Year Witch' in 43 and 'Goodbye Johnny' in 48. The further, less than inspiring, adventures of ACG's supernatural superspy John Force, Magic Agent, appeared in 35, 36, 48, 50, 52 and 54.~SW

Recommended: 20, 36, 38, 48

THE UNKNOWN WORLDS OF FRANK BRUNNER

Eclipse: *2 issues 1985*

Horror and sword-and-sorcery tales drawn by Frank Brunner during his Berni Wrightson phase. The stories are written by Brunner himself plus Nicola Cuti, Gerry Conway, Jan Strnad, Phil Seuling and Buddy Saunders, but none of them offer any surprises.~NF

UNKNOWN WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION

Marvel: *6 issues, 1 Special 1975-1976*

One has to assume the marketing department vetoed the title *Largely Familiar or Predictable Worlds of Science Fiction.* Attempting to carve a slice of the black and white magazine market mined so well by Warren in the early 1970s, Marvel hired away Warren contributor Bruce Jones, who's responsible for writing approximately a third of the run, although adaptations were cover-featured. In selecting and commissioning largely twist-ending stories the editors (and there are four credited by the final issue) resisted the opportunity to move on from an anthology formula in place since the 1950s. There's nothing bad here, but beyond the art there's nothing very good either. Artists of the calibre of Neal Adams, Howard Chaykin, Mike Kaluta and Gray Morrow are used among the more formularised selection of Filipino draughtsmen. The best issue is the first, which could pass for a Warren comic, with art from Angelo Torres, Wally Wood, Al Williamson and even a Frank Frazetta reprint.~WJ

UNLIMITED ACCESS

DC/Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1997-1998*

The fourth Marvel/DC crossover event featuring Access, who is the guardian of the gate between the respective universes. This time he discovers one of the secrets of his powers and gains the ability to travel backwards and forwards in time. Which is just writer Karl Kesel's trick for teaming up the Legion of Superheroes, the X-Men and Avengers from 1963, the contemporary JLA and the electric-costumed Superman. Darkseid and Magneto are the bad guys this time out, and it's all lavishly illustrated by Pat Olliffe and Al Williamson. Surprisingly enjoyable.~WW

Recommended: 1-4

UNNATURAL SELECTION

Active Images: *One-shot 2002*

Currently the premier computer lettering company in comics, Comicraft's advertising often featured a humanoid hippopotamus called Hip Flask. Here's an origin, a puzzling affair indeed, in which he's barely featured. He was created and raised as part of a warrior society featuring other humanoid animals, and this would be instantly dismissible were it not for the stunning art of Jose Ladronn. He's surely been noted elsewhere as a fusion of Kirby and Moebius, and his imaginative rendering astounds.~FP

THE UNSEEN HAND

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1996*

Terry LaBan's script for a secret-society-who-run-the-world thriller is a let down. There's too little scepticism at work, as our student hero, Mike, accepts in a flash that his dying father isn't his 'real' father, and that the Bildenberg-like group of superfinanciers are out to get him. LaBan writes like we can't handle anything very complicated, although there are some deft touches of student dialogue. Mike sets out to find his lost sister in Russia and, after falling foul of some rock'n'roll-obsessed militia crossing Serbia, stumbles upon a cult of White Russians who've built a new city under Moscow, where they're growing the foetus of Czar Nicholas III with the help of the midget, Siamese-twin descendant of Rasputin. On paper it sounds like a ridiculous piss-take, and it's like that when you read it, too. Ilya illustrates this ludicrousness with aplomb, turning in clean, cartoony artwork and concentrating on getting expressions right. He is surprisingly well-suited to drawing panoramic scenes of urban life and destruction, although he falls back on a 1960s cliché for Mike's drug experience. Overall, very unsatisfying.~FJ

UNSTABLE MOLECULES

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 2003*

A glimpse into the lives of the real people on whom Stan Lee and Jack Kirby supposedly based their *Fantastic Four* cast. It's a clever manipulation presenting one Sue Sturm as a discontented housekeeper looking after a teenage brother heading towards delinquency. She has an unsatisfactory romance with scientist Reed Richards, whose old college room-mate Ben is now a boxer. A further layer of enjoyment is provided by contrasting Sue and Johnny's life with the fictitious 1950s comic *Vapor Girl*. Writer James Sturm delivers an insightful glimpse into a past ideally rendered by Guy Davis. Very satisfying.~FP

UNSUPERVISED EXISTENCE

Fantagraphics: *6 issues 1990-1992*

An infuriatingly inconsistently written slice of bohemian life, with consistently excellent underground style cartooning from Terry LaBan. The primary cast are cab-driver Danny, who dreams of a writing career, his partner Suzy, whose career is indolence and staring into the middle distance, overweight performance artist Bob and the bisexual object of his unrequited love, Annadette. Intertwined stories of their lives switch back and forth, soap-opera style, over 1 and 2, and while passing the time they're hardly compelling. A leap forward is achieved by cleaving Bob off from the remaining cast and sending him on a world tour. His naïvety and depression lead to some very funny moments, primarily 3's arrival in Greece and 5's Bob solo, the highlight of the run. Danny and Suzy also benefit from the extra attention, with some fine farcical concepts thrown into the Danny stories, particularly the idea of the cab-drivers' writing collective. Overall, though, the cast is too flawed and irritating to retain long-term interest, and freed from the shackles of continuity with *Cud* LaBan blossoms. The final two issues were conventional comic-size, while 1-4 were magazine-sized. The Bob stories are collected as *International Bob*, the remainder as *Love's Not A Three Dollar Fare*.~FP

UNTAMED LOVE

Fantagraphics: *One-shot 1987*

Collects several 1950s romance stories illustrated by Frank Frazetta at the height of his power. Outstandingly stupid stories, but lovely, glorious artwork.~HS

The UNTOLD LEGEND of the BATMAN

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1980*

Len Wein's potted history of then definitive Batman, succinctly summarises the origins of Batman and his friends, allies and enemies (including such snippets of information as who builds the Batmobiles). This is despite a rather undemanding framing sequence that has someone sending Batman messages about how all that he holds dear will be destroyed. Though John Byrne pencils 1, with inks by Jim Aparo (who then draws and inks 2-3), it's Aparo's moody style that stands out.~NF

UNTOUCHABLES

Eastern: *4 issues 1988*

This was published on a weekly schedule and the covers claim it's "Korea's #1 Comic". It's difficult, however, to see why this tale of a baseball player, Haesong, and the conflicts with his team manager and other players, should be popular, on the evidence of the choppy narrative and overwrought emotions displayed here.~NF

UNTOUCHABLES

Caliber: *4 issues 1997*

A not intolerably bad alternative history premise, that prohibition was so successful that Chicago had to legalize gambling to raise some revenue. It's played out by writer Joe Pruett's seemingly dice-rolled excuses for characters, thus a waste of some impressive chunky woodblock-like art by John Kissee.~GK

UNUSUAL TALES

Charlton: *49 issues 1955-1965*

One of Charlton's late 1950s wave of mystery anthologies that began as a quarterly. Gill, Hart, Memling and Newman's stories were drawn by inept Charlton regulars like Molno, Mastroserio, Nicholas and Alascia as well as the more bearable jobs by Ditko in 7-15, often behind one of his covers. 1950s highspots include the atmospheric 'Night of The Red Snow' in 9 and 'Charmed I'm Sure' in 11 guest-starring Abe Lincoln. In 1960 Ditko returned to do some masterful five-pagers with Gill in 22-27 and 29, these include 25's 'The Confederate Girl', about a broken promise of marriage, and the beatnik comedy of 29's 'Way Out, Man!' The title limped on to 1965 with nothing further of any interest and then became *Blue Beetle* with 50.~SW

Recommended: 25

UP FROM BONDAGE

Eros: *One-shot 1991*

Eros apparently felt that while heterosexual porn needed no purpose other than titillation, their first gay comic should have an 'agenda'. Thus this strange comic. A liberal attorney is abducted and sexually tortured to death by people who object to his political actions. Browsers should be warned that the on-panel torture and murder is very unpleasant indeed. It's disturbing and thought-provoking, but to market it as a simple gay stroke book is wildly misleading.~HS

URBAN HIPSTER

Alternative Comics: *1 issue 1998*

This is a collection of short stories and vignettes featuring student of astronomy, Penelope, Chloe and Natasha of *You Go Grrrl 2nd Hand Clothing*, and a slob, whose thought "maybe living in filth is a turnoff to some chicks", causes him to decide that moving in with two girls will help him turn over a new leaf. These strips by David Lasky and Greg Stump are telling, honest, witty and poignant, and despite being simply told, they are not lacking in detail. After a prolonged absence further issues are planned in 2003.~NF

Recommended

URBAN LEGENDS

Dark Horse: *1 issue 1993*

This has since been superseded by *The Big Book of Urban Legends*, containing most of the material plus plenty more besides, but it's nonetheless entertaining for all that. Plenty of artists who don't contribute to the Big Books are to be found here, including Art Adams, Peter Bagge, and Matt Wagner. Intended as a two-issue series, only the first issue ever saw publication.~FP

URTH 4

Continuity: *4 issues 1989-1990*

An elemental supergroup consisting of, yes, you've guessed it, Urth, Ayre, Fyre and Watr, Urth 4 specialised in righting environmental wrongs. Beyond this quirk, though, it was a typical superhero title. The writing is absolute tosh, but the comic looks nice enough, courtesy of Trevor Von Eeden (1-3) and, amazingly, Ron Wilson in 4, with the inevitable visual tinkering from Neal Adams.~DAR

US WAR MACHINE

Max: *12 issue limited series 2001-2002**

Bodyguard James Rhodes is fired by Technocrat genius Tony Stark and is compelled to work for spy outfit S.H.I.E.L.D. His job? Training and leading a strike force using stolen and retooled Iron Man armour against a secret society planning to unleash race-specific genocide viruses. Insubstantial tale, heavy on action, done in a Manga style by Chuck Austen.~WW

USAGENT

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1993, 3 issue miniseries 2001*

The first series is hoary superheroics from Mark Gruenwald, again trying to tie up loose threads in the Marvel universe. This time he pits the one-time successor to Captain America against a group of vigilantes and along the way he retells USAgent's origin, brings back an old hero and tries to make the title character seem a little more innovative. A second series follows in the wake of one of Marvel's company crossovers. Jerry Ordway produces a story of mind-controlling parasytes, the Superhuman Tactical Response Squad (S.T.A.R.S.) and corrupt politicians. Throw in an attitude and some costuming derived from Judge Dredd and a guest-appearance by Captain America, and you have an incredibly tedious comic with surprisingly unsympathetic artwork from Ordway himself and Karl Kesel.~NF

USAGI YOJIMBO

Fantagraphics: *1 special 1986, 38 issues, 3 specials 1987-1993*
Mirage: *16 issues 1993-1995*
Dark Horse: *63 issues +, 1 special (4) 1996 to date*
Radio Comix: *2 issue microseries ('The Art of Usagi Yojimbo') 1997-1998*

The rabbit bodyguard was first introduced in *Albedo* 2 and then had some adventures in *Critters* before a one-shot collected the early stories as a prelude to the regular series. Stan Sakai's lettering on Groo, much praised by Mark Evanier in an introduction, would not, however, have prepared anyone for the quality of his storytelling.

Usagi is a ronin (masterless samurai), allowing Sakai the freedom of having his character wander through an anthropomorphic Japanese landscape that's full of mystery, intrigue and the occasional supernatural demon. There's obviously a heavy debt to Japanese comics like *Lone Wolf and Cub*, both in the choreography of the sword fights and in the way that the background to many stories is based on specific Japanese traditions or professions. Sakai uses an underlying humour to lessen the brutality of death (of which there is a great deal), much as Kurosawa did in *Yojimbo*; he has an emotional awareness that allows the characters to be more than just stereotypes in another adventure strip. In a similar fashion, his artwork is composed of simple lines, but never seems short of detail.

The story of Usagi's early life and the death of Lord Mifune, which led to his becoming a ronin, is told in flashback to the bounty hunter Gennosuke (1-4). 'The Dragon Bellow Conspiracy' runs through 13-18, featuring all major characters so far. Tamakuro plots to seize the Shogunate and rival clans are drawn together to help prevent civil war. Tomoe, Lord Noriyuki's retainer, is an old friend of Usagi's and the romantic potential between them is one of the constants of the series. 'Blood Wings' (21-22) features the Komori Ninja, bat-like, flying and very dangerous, and 24 is called 'Lone Goat and Kid', a tribute, of course, as the Lone Goat is deceived into accepting the job of killing Usagi. 'Circles' (28-31) harks back to Usagi's youth and then switches to the present as Usagi helps an old friend, now married to the mother of his son. The colour specials feature Tomoe's story (1), Tomoe and Usagi fighting a supernatural attempt on Lord Noriyuki's life (2), Tomoe rescuing Usagi from the spell of a fox-woman (3) and Tomoe and Usagi solving the mystery of the Green Persimmon (4). Most of the Fantagraphics issues also had back-up strips by alumni of Critters and Albedo.

The Mirage series picks up where Fantagraphics left off, with Usagi and Gen still wandering together, but now in colour (by Tom Luth). 1-3 co-star the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles as Usagi meets Chizu, a devious woman who has plans to become leader of the Neko Ninja, old sparring partners of Usagi's. 'Slavers' (9-12) is the story of a renegade general, Fujii, whose outlaw band has enslaved a whole village. In freeing the villagers, Usagi has his swords stolen and sets out to track down Fujii. In 'Runaways' (13-14), a tale of Usagi's past, he has to escort Princess Kinuko to her wedding but political intrigue means the Neko Ninja have been hired to kill her. Left for dead, Usagi and Kinuko have to make their own way to safety on foot. It's a classic tale of impossible love. At this point, Mirage stopped publishing and Sakai, as had many others before him, found a new home at Dark Horse, though it meant a return to black and white. Chizu returns in 4 as the Komori and Neko Ninja vie for possession of a scroll that contains the secrets of gunpowder, and Usagi seems to have met his match in Nakamura Koji (7), who is really looking for a fight with Usagi's old teacher. Major storylines include 'Grasscutter' in 13-22, in which the Conspiracy of Eight (from 9), decide to recover the sacred sword, Grasscutter, in order to further their claims to political power. Usagi and Tomoe are separately involved in an excellent extended story. 'Grasscutter II' concerns Usagi's journey to Atsuta Shrine with a small group of friends in order to hide the sword, but the Neko Ninja are determined to stop him (38-45). The Lone Goat and Kid return in 54, while 56-60 revolve around a duel between Nakamura Koji and Usagi's master, Katsuichi, who's now training Usagi's son, Jotaro, but first they must all overcome some bandits threatening a small town in a homage of sorts to the *Seven Samurai*. Each issue of the 'Art of Usagi Yojimbo' contains mostly sketches and pinups, but each also has a strip about how and where Sakai works. This is an intelligent adventure series, drawing heavily on Japanese and comic traditions, but always individual and never short on ideas. All issues to Dark Horse 52 are collected in sixteen reprint volumes.~NF

Recommended: Fantagraphics 13-18, 28-31, 38, Colour Special 3, Mirage 4, 5, 13, 14, 16, Dark Horse 4, 6, 13-22, 38-45

USER

DC/Vertigo: *3 issue miniseries 2001*

Meg Chancellor is your average computer office worker until she discovers the darkly seductive world of online role-playing. Her rapid addiction leads to disturbing revelations about her morality, her sexuality (her cyber alter-ego is a French omni-sexual knight called Sir Guilliame de la Coeur) and as her life spirals out of control, her very sanity. Intriguing psycho-drama from Devin Grayson with art by John Bolton (cyberworld) and Sean Phillips (real world).~WW

U.S.1

Marvel: *12 issue limited series 1983-1984*

Universally derided on publication, it now stands as the last time for about fifteen years anyone at Marvel apart from Peter David had fun. Writer Al Milgrom packs in aliens, ghostly truckers, highwaymen, Germans with Zeppelins and down-to-earth redneck folk. His tongue is planted firmly in the vicinity of his cheek, and lead Ulysses Solomon Archer is so wholesome, Peter Parker is Richard Nixon in comparison. You're not getting Dostoevsky here, but it's nowhere near as bad as you've heard.~FP

V

V

DC: *18 issues 1985-1986*

V the TV series was a none too subtle Nazi analogy in which nice friendly humanoid aliens offered technological advances in exchange for a few minerals, all the while plotting to subjugate humanity. Furthermore, they were really lizard-like creatures. TV budget restrictions made the latter aspect a surprise revelation, but lacking those restrictions and able to supply armies of lizards, the comic is surprisingly dull. Initially concentrating on the resistance movement, particularly the resilient Diana, V might spark fond memories in those who enjoyed the TV show as kids, but is otherwise best forgotten.~FP

V FOR VENDETTA

DC: *10 issue limited series 1988-1989*

Alan Moore's dystopian look at a near future England in the grip of a totalitarian government was written when Margaret Thatcher was British Prime Minister and rioters were burning cars on council estates. It reflects a bygone age of political activism, and appears to be a fiercely left wing comic (albeit spotlighting one highly individual renegade). Nowadays Liberal tendencies flood the genre, but twenty-five years ago they were hardly common. Originally serialised in short chapters in the British monthly, *Warrior*, in black and white, the DC edition controversially coloured David Lloyd's striking, blunt-lined artwork.

V is very much a young man's work, full of radical passion, cleverness, hoarded tricks that can finally be demonstrated and game playing, packed into short British comic style episodes with a climax every six or eight pages. However, it remains a favourite among Alan Moore's oeuvre for all of the above reasons and because it is charged with emotion. It is both wild and incredibly tightly plotted and, as the story unrolls, you become aware that almost nothing in the strip, from things glimpsed in the background to the misquoting of a reference, are without meaning. It's also a strikingly English story, with its roots in the gloomy tradition of British SF, and a hero whose unlikely costume echoes the explosive radical tradition of Guy Fawkes.

V is a living nightmare for the repressive regime isolated from Europe, and suffering food shortages and civil unrest, after, Khmer Rouge-like, destroying the clever lefty elite and relocating anyone who might prove a threat to the clean white future. V barely appears human, darting out of shadows and appearing to kill without effort, putting his fingers through his targets, popping up where no-one can be and ambushing them. Moore rapidly explores V's world, immensely rich and colourful in contrast to the stark style in which it's illustrated, through the eyes of Evey, an orphan match maker he rescues from a couple of bent coppers. He introduces her to the country's repressed rich popular culture, now replaced by an endless round of manufactured pop and substandard sitcoms, and at first seems to want nothing of her, but her company. It's a classic structure that Moore exploits to quickly set up the parameters of his world and the scope for his social commentary. He offers teasing multiple explanations for V's origins, while filling in the characters of many of the police and government officials chasing him. He shows allegorical conversations between the country's leader and the statue of Justice before we all get carried away by socialism, and demonstrates how the tiny, unplannable events in history can set off huge chain reactions. And yet they all tie back to V.

Then Moore really messes with our heads. Evey is captured and interrogated, facing her worst nightmares under torture, only to discover that it's not the police who've been doing it to her. *V* is a subtle and engrossing exploration of volition, part a debunking and part an exoneration of the "one man can make a difference" ethos. The denouement, highly symbolic, appeals to the adolescent radical in all of us. Once you've got over it you can go back for a second, well-deserved read and start unpicking some of the more deeply buried subtexts, clues and patterns and the numerous literary references (from Victor Hugo to Enid Blyton!).~FJ

Recommended: 1-10

Star Wars VADER'S QUEST

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1999**

A curious title for a series set shortly after the destruction of the Death Star, contrasting new hero Luke Skywalker, vengeful Darth Vader and a jealous hotshot pilot. Darko Macan's script relies a little too much on convenience plotting, but so do the source films, while Dave Gibbons produces his usual impeccable art. Any *Star Wars* fan should enjoy this.~WJ

VAGABOND

Image: *1 issue 2000*

Forget about the story; it's rubbish with rotten computer 'enhanced' art by Ryan Benjamin, who can usually draw. Let's hone in on the hypocrisy of publisher Matt Broome, claiming the moral high ground in his editorial while pumping out barely edited comics for the tits and ass market. Where are you now Angus Deayton?~WJ

VAGABOND

Viz: *14 issues + 2001 to date*

Beginning with the battle of Sekigahara in 1600, which established the Tokugawa clan as rulers of Japan, Shinmen Takezo and his friend, Matahachi, from the village of Miyamoto, are survivors. After an adventure with thieves, Oko and her daughter, Akemi, Shinmen returns home, but without Matahachi, whose mother helps set the village and authorities against him as an outlaw. Captured by the monk, Takuan, he's left to die, but fate comes to his aid and he resolves to become "invincible under the sun" by taking on the best fighters in Japan. Written and drawn by Takehiko Inoue, this is based on Eiji Yoshikawa's novel, *Musashi*, which is a fictional account of the life of Miyamoto Musashi, master of the sword, and revered as a 'sword-saint' in Japan. It is a terrifically told and deliberately paced story, brutal, brash, haunting, and yet full of delicate images when it wants them. The series is being collected as it progresses, with four volumes to date.~NF

Recommended: 1-14

VALENTINO

Aardvark-Vanaheim: *1 issue 1985*
Renegade: *2 issues (2-3) 1986-1988*

On the basis of his mediocre superhero comics, the prospect of autobiographical snippets from Jim Valentino may not be enticing. They're worth investigating, though, offering a breadth of topics encompassing a range of emotions. There's life and commitment, and the honesty and humanity are endearing, with the third issue a little lighter than the previous two. A collection of 1-3 was published by Image as *Vignettes*.~FP

VALERIA THE SHE-BAT

Continuity: *2 issues (1 & 5) 1993*
Windjammer: *2 issues 1995*

Another beautifully drawn Continuity title whose publishing complexity is ultimately more interesting than its content. Briefly: Issue 1 was a dealers' only incentive to persuade them to order more copies of the 'Deathwatch 2000' storyline, of which it's a chapter, and 5 is material originally intended to appear in a Valeria and Spawn team-up, substituting Knighthawk for Todd McFarlane's character. The

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* Available in a collected edition

Windjammer run reprinted the first issue, and printed for the first time what would have been the second issue. Neal Adams did most of the writing and drawing himself, but typically it's absolutely unreadable.~DAR

VALERIAN

Hodder/Dargaud: *4 Volumes 1984-1985*

This much-loved French science-fiction strip débuted in *Pilote*'s in 1967. Valerian and his companion Laureline are spatiotemporal agents operating in 2070, by which time humans occupy the entire galaxy. Pierre Christin's scripts are based on the thrill-a-minute adventure reels of 1940s cinema, with exotic locations, inventive ideas and last-gasp escapes, well suited to children's fiction. The strength of J.C. Mézières' art lies in his imaginative, other-worldly landscapes and creatures, but beyond that his work lacks distinction. English language Valerian is ill served by uninspired translations and shoddy colouring. The best of four translated volumes is *Heroes of the Equinox*, in which Valerian competes with heroes from other civilisations to father a new generation for a humanoid race that undergoes a mass reproduction only once each generation. If you enjoy that, sample *Ambassador of the Shadows, Welcome to Alflolol* and *World Without Stars*.~FP

Ben Dunn's VALHALLA

Antarctic: *1 issue 1999*

With a lesbian Nazi commander, giant Nazi robots, and genetically enhanced Nazi dogs, one might reasonably expect this to be a B-movie treat. There's nothing wrong with confounding expectations, and creator Ben Dunn attempts to make this a character driven story, but it's all rather undermined by the nonsense elements. It never continued.~WJ

VALKYRIE

Eclipse: *3 issue miniseries 1987*

Airboy's reformed Nazi girlfriend's past returns to haunt her as she's captured by Steelfox, a Soviet villain who believes she led the Nazi bombing raid on his home village during World War II. While Val is put up before a Russian war crimes tribunal, her flatmate sets about tracking down her former Airmaidens comrades to help clear her name. The unexpected resolution leads to the formation of a modern-day Airmaidens. Chuck Dixon, Paul Gulacy and Willie Blyberg provide constant surprises: even once you're expecting them they are still well enough plotted to shock and keep the pages turning.~JC

Recommended: 1-3

VALKYRIE

Marvel: *One-shot 1997*

An attempt by writer J.M. DeMatteis to revive the former member of the Defenders as a modern-day "chooser of the Slain" amongst the junkies, winos and vagrants of the urban jungle. A germ of an idea is smothered under DeMatteis' laughable efforts to be lachrymose, and the ghastly pseudo-Shakespearean dialogue ("Paulie... thou hast AIDS?"). Horrible stuff.~HS

VALOR

EC: *5 issues 1955**

Gemstone: *5 issues 1998-1999**

Considering this wonderful series of historical tales only ran five issues, maximum mileage was eked out of ancient Rome, as illustrated by Al Williamson in 1-3. Other recurring themes were the Crusades, with gorgeous art by Reed Crandall (3, 4), and the Arthurian legend, illustrated by Wally Wood (1, 2). France was also a popular setting, with stories concerning the French Revolution (1, 5) and the Napoleonic era (2), expertly rendered by Graham Ingels, while Bernie Krigstein and Joe Orlando chipped in other beautiful period pieces, making the entire comic a visual delight. None of the stories, many written by Carl Wessler, are bad, but on occasion they tend to be heavy on the narrative. This sometimes restricts the art, and the twist at the end of stories isn't always that surprising. On the whole, though, the diversity of material presented provides a flattering contrast with the superhero-dominated market of today. It's a great pity that distribution problems ended the series. The Gemstone editions are reprints also available in one bound edition, and a hardback black and white collection is also available.~HY

Recommended: 1-5

VALOR

DC: *23 issues 1992 -1994*

Once upon a time in the twentieth century, there was a hero named Valor, destined to live a thousand years and play a pivotal role in future history, including helping to settle the homeworlds of many of the Legion of Super-Heroes. Sadly, things didn't work out that way. This started out, courtesy of Robert Loren Fleming and sundry artists, as an attempt to establish the former Mon-El as a "Johnny Appleseed of the Cosmos", wandering the universe and helping new cultures flourish and develop. Unfortunately, both stories and art were uninspired, until Mark Waid had the brainwave of tying in with *Legion of Super-Heroes* and *Legionnaires*, two titles, which, like *Valor*, were going to have their reasons for existing undermined by the time-rewriting *Zero Hour* series. The series begins with the 'D.O.A.' story-line (12-17), in which Valor, suffering from a nameless malaise, consults his colleague Vril Dox of L.E.G.I.O.N., who informs him that he's suffering from a form of poisoning. It's untreatable and terminal. Meanwhile, in the thirtieth century, the Legionnaires discover that Valor's name has been erased from history, including his role in their founding. And Lori, Valor's companion and lover, turns out to have a secret plan of her own. These strands are deftly tied together (aided by the striking art of Colleen Doran from 14) into a heady mix of romance, drama and tragedy, which ends, at the conclusion of 17, with the Legionnaires looking on awestruck as Valor dies. Who steps in to fulfil his role in history, and how the fabric of time is prevented from unravelling...well, unless you're familiar with about thirty years of *Legion of Super-Heroes* history, it'll make rather a less enjoyable read, but they're still nice to look at.~HS

Recommended: 12-17

VAMPI

Harris: *8 issues 2000-2001*

Anarchy Studios: *17 issues (9-25) 2001-2003*

With litigation imminent over the ownership of their cash cow Vampirella, Harris created a re-boot, later transferring ownership to an associate company. Given the circumstances it's a surprising artistic success. Vampi is an attractive female with a need for blood, but otherwise there's little to connect her with Vampirella. She depends on martial arts skills, wields a sword and rides a motorcycle, and although still improbably dressed, it is more conservatively so than her inspiration. The influence of Japanese action comics and animation is apparent from the start in both the stylish artwork of Kevin Lau and the plots of David Conway. This is often gratuitously violent, but equally thrilling in small doses as over 1-18 Vampi battles for a cure to her addiction for blood while attempting to obtain a DNA strand from a corporation headed by a sinister individual known as Archangel. This is spliced throughout with confusingly inserted pages detailing an incident from her past. 16-18 shift the status quo and give Vampi some idea of who she is, but in the best tradition of such matters, leave her with more questions. 1-6 are collected, and although part of an ongoing story to 18, most stories within that break down to three issue segments. Read as a whole, there's little variety, but fans of fast-moving adventure comics might want to try any individual story arc.~WJ

THE VAMPIRE LESTAT

Innovation: *12 issue limited series 1990-1991**

Apart from the John Bolton covers, this adaptation of Anne Rice's cult vampire novels has little to recommend it. Sub-professional painted artwork and uninspired scripting make it unlikely that the elevated prices back-issues command are due to anything more than fans of the books or the film buying it for the name.~JC

VAMPIRE MIYU

Antarctic: *6 issue miniseries 1995-1996*
Ironcat: *7 issue limited series ('Volume One') 1997-1998*, 6 issue miniseries ('Volume Two') 1998*, 7 issue limited series ('Volume Three') 1998-1999*, 7 issue limited series ('Volume Four') 1999*, 7 issue limited series ('Volume Five') 1999-2000**

Miyu is a vampire whose role is to retrieve the demonic Shinma that have strayed into the human world, attracted by spirits in distress. The Antarctic issues introduce Miyu and her assistant, Larva, an enslaved demon. Her other role, examined in the Ironcat series (*The New Vampire Miyu*), is as defender of Japanese Shinma from other Shinma. Eight Occidental Shinma invade the Japanese realm, led by Cait Sith, who wants to resurrect his mother, Quarl, defeated in the past by one of Miyu's ancestors. Larva is released from his slavery and Miyu is killed, but her friends work towards her resurrection for a final battle with Quarl's family. Written by Toshihiro Hirano and drawn by Narumi Kakinouchi, Miyu is very minimalistic, with little dialogue and almost ethereal pencils at times. The storytelling does require close attention as this creates an appropriately ghostly, fragile atmosphere, interrupted by flashes of violent action, but the characters are too underdeveloped to be persuasive.~NF

VAMPIRE TALES

Marvel: *11 issues, 1 Annual 1973-1975*

Marvel s black and white magazines usually have something to keep your interest even if, overall, they lack the consistency that makes for a must-buy title. In the case of *Vampire Tales* it's Don McGregor and Doug Moench's scripts that save the day. McGregor writes the Morbius series (1-5, 7, 8), while Moench is responsible for some short stories and the two final Morbius episodes (10, 11). Morbius is a self-made, scientific vampire from the pages of *Spider-Man*, but McGregor, while flinging him into supernatural action, uses wit and humanity to guide Morbius' search for salvation. Moench's stories have clever twists in the tail. His anti-heroic 'Shards of the Crystal Rainbow' (9), drawn by Tony DeZuniga, marks him out as an expert storyteller. The quality of the artwork is variable, with many of the artists coming from Filipino studios. Yong Montano, Virgilio Redondo and Vincente Alcazar compare unfavourably with Pablo Marcos, Tom Sutton, DeZuniga, Alfredo Alcala and Sonny Trinidad. Other occasional artists of note include Russ Heath (9), Joe Staton (8), Paul Gulacy (5) and Howard Chaykin (5). Apart from Morbius, Blade the Vampire Hunter (8-10), Satana (2-3) and Lilith (6) were all featured. The annual contains reprints from the early issues and is a good place to start.~NF

VAMPIRELLA

Warren: *112 issues, 1 Annual, 1 Special 1969-1983*
Harris: *1 issue (113) 1988*

Another black and white anthology title, though uniquely it featured a regular strip starring the comic's eponymous heroine. Conceived by Forrest J. Ackerman as a camp *Barbarella*-style science-fiction strip, Trina Robbins conceived the costume, and Frank Frazetta sealed the visualidentity. It almost immediately lost direction, something that was to plague the strip for much of its life, and disappeared after 2. She was back in 8 along with original artist Tom Sutton and new writer Archie Goodwin, who wrote unquestionably the best stories in the strip's run. He placed Vampirella very much in the horror milieu and introduced the supporting cast of the vampire hunters, Conrad and Adam Van Helsing, and the drunk magician Pendragon. With 12 Goodwin was joined by Spanish artist José Gonzalez, whose beautiful draughtsmanship came to define the look of the strip. Goodwin's successor, T. Casey Brennan (17-21), concentrated on a romantic tryst between Vampirella and Dracula, to little effect, and following a number of fill-ins British writer Mike Butterworth (under the pen-name of Flaxman Loew) took over. All notions of continuity and characterisation were discarded, but visually it was getting better and better. Initially very inconsistent, Gonzalez really hit his peak from 31 on, though the increase in quality was matched by a decrease in productivity, and consequently other artists pitched in. The best of these were José Ortiz (35, 36) and Leopoldo Sanchez (39-41), although it was Gonzalez Mayo who eventually took over the strip. With 43 editor Bill Dubay became the character's principal writer, and for a while proved as clueless as his predecessor. One bright spot was a sequence in 61-66 which returned Vampirella to her homeworld of Drakulon, but this brush with decent writing was short-lived, and subsequent Hollywood-based tales were utterly risible. 82 was Gonzalez's final issue, and it wasn't until the arrival of the excellent Rudy Nebres (88-96) that Vampirella became noteworthy again. 100 contained a nice one-off story by Goodwin, with terrific art from Anton Caravana, but all other issues after 90 were written by Rich Margopoulos, and it's a brave man who claims they're any better. Gonzalez returned better than ever with 103, and it's a real shame the comic was cancelled when it was.

The strength of *Vampirella* was the accompanying stories. Following a period of substandard material typical of late 1960s Warren titles, the first works of note were a number of fantasy strips by Wally Wood (9, 10, 12) that sparked off a lengthy period of quality. Other fine artists contributing included Barry Smith (9), Frank Brunner (10), Neal Adams (1,10), Ralph Reese (10) and Mike Ploog (14), but Spanish artists dominated the comic from 15. Unusually, it developed its own roster of artists, who rarely drew for other Warren titles. Foremost were Felix Mas, José Bea, Esteban Maroto, Ramon Torrents and the exceptionally gifted Fernando Fernandez (28-32, 35, 36 and 40-43). 30-33 featured Steve Skeates' seedy Pantha, a ghetto variation on the werewolf legend, drawn by another regular, Raphael Auraleon. The best of the occasional American artists featured were Richard Corben (30, 31, 33, 54) and Jeff Jones (5, 12, 32), who drew Berni Wrightson's chilling masterpiece 'Cold Cuts' in 34. Towering above everyone else, however, was the nowadays obscure Spanish artist Luis Garcia, whose ultra-realistic art has yet to be bettered in the comics medium. While all his strips are excellent , of particular note is 'Wolves at Wars End' in 43, which contains possibly comics' finest-ever artwork.

20-60 are a cornucopia of quality not matched by later issues, though *Vampirella* never plumbed the depths of other late Warren comics. Notable later strips were a pair by the comic's best writer, Bruce Jones: 'Yellow Heart' in 58, the story of a young tribesman's rite of passage, exquisitely drawn by Russ Heath (also in 61, 67, 76-78), and 89's 'Sight Unseen', about a blind girl, drawn by José Ortiz. Alex Niño's 'Fishbait' in 67 was a treat, as was a nice Anton Caravana strip in 90, but from 93 a change of direction replaced the short stories with regular continuing strips. Cassandra St Knight and the revived Pantha were joined by The Fox with 101, an unusual series about a shapeshifter, by Nicola Cuti and Luis Bermejo, set in turn-of-the-century China. Even better were a pair of European strips, Jeremy of the Isles (104, 106, 108, 110) and Torpedo, by Sanchez Abuli and Alex Toth (108, 110, 112), though the title's final year was bedevilled by reprints. Warren regularly produced entirely or part reprint issues of its best material (18, 27, 37, 46, 55, 63, 74, 81, 83, 87, 91, 100, 105, 107, 109, 111) and these may be the best jumping-on points for new readers. There are also numerous collections and miniseries published by Harris in the 1990s. The 1972 annual contained a new origin story among choice reprints, and a 1977 special reprinted some of Gonzalez's early Vampirella stories in colour. In 1988 Harris published a one-off small-print-run issue that was largely reprint, and is now almost impossible to find. Finally, it's worth mentioning the superbly iconic covers by the Spanish painter Enrich, whose sultry depiction of Vampirella for much of the run was as much a selling point as any of the strips inside.~DAR

Recommended: 9, 10, 12, 15, 17, 18, 20-63, 65-67, 76, 85, 89, 100, 103, 104, 106, 108, 110, 112

VAMPIRELLA

Harris/Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1991-1992**

Distributed through Dark Horse, hence their logo on the covers, and tying in to the Warren Vampirella stories, this story occurs ten years after Vampirella was last seen. It captures the spirit of the original stories, but the best portions of the package are the gorgeous Mike Kaluta covers.~FP

VAMPIRELLA

Harris: *Series one 26 issues 1997-2000, series two 15 issues + 2001 to date*

A little more cohesion returned to *Vampirella* with the start of what was optimistically cover labeled "Monthly:. Guest creative teams work on different story arcs, as she becomes embroiled in a war between super scientific, anti-magic secret societies rife with gun toting holy nuns, black popes and shadow Vaticans. Kicking off with 'Ascending Evil' (1-3) from Grant Morrison, Mark Millar and Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti, followed in 4-6, by 'Holy War' with Steven Grant joining the writers and Louis Small Jr. taking over the art, Shi appears in 'Queen's Gambit' (7-9). 'Hell on Earth' brings a new costume (10-12), and 'World's End' (13-15) reintroduces Pantha. A couple of shared issues (16-17) confusingly have Pantha covers but Vampi returns for 'Rebirth' (18-20) written by David Conway and Grant, with extra material by Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale in 18, Christopher Priest, Alan Davis and Mark Farmer in 19 and Bruce Timm draws a seven page stand alone tale written by Ty Templeton in issue 20.

Once again the stories start to fall behind the art, and not for the first time it seems that the core concept carries a built-in redundancy. 'Dangerous Games' by Conway and Small sees the beginning of the end, followed by two awful team-ups with Lady Death (23, 26) and one last mindless pose-fest, 'Death Valley' drawn by Kevin Lau in 24-25, before cancellation. As one of the most popular icons of modern comics and with an absolute wealth of top-talent working on the series it's a total mystery why the material is so insubstantial and unmemorable. It just is.

The current *Vampirella* series hits the ground running as Mark Millar and Mike Mayhew take a few liberties with the back-story and generate some well produced thrills, with their first story to 3 collected. There's more plot progression, more action, less cheesecake and a genuine attempt to make this a horror title not an exploitation mag. In short order Vampirella goes on the road, taking on supernatural threats around the world, from cultists to haunted houses to the ever popular Nazis. Worth a look. At last.~WW

Recommended: series two 1-2, 7-8

Vengeance ofVAMPIRELLA

Harris: *25 issues 1994-1996*

The Harris Vampirella is a far more active succubus than her Warren predecessor. Wisely deciding a passive character wouldn't work in the 1990s, all-out action was the order of the day. Unfortunately, there was very little else for most of the run, and the downside of the more aggressive Vampirella was discarding the subtle sexuality of the original (in as much as anyone wearing that costume can claim subtlety). The six-part 'Mystery Walk' (14-19) is the highlight. It modifies Vampirella's origin, introduces several interesting characters and explains the bizarre costume, and there's an origin of sorts in 22, but all in all there's very little substance. Come to leer, by all means, but you'll grow out of it one day.~FP

VAMPIRELLA Miniseries and one-shots

Harris: *One-shot ('Summer Nights') 1992, 2 issue microseries (Vampirella Shadowhawk) 1995*, 5 issue miniseries (Vampirella of Drakulon 0-4) 1996, 3 issue miniseries ('Death & Destruction') 1996, one-shot ('Sad Wings of Destiny') 1996, one-shot (25th Anniversary Special) 1996, 4 issue miniseries ('Silver Anniversary Collection') 1996-1997, 3 issue miniseries (Vampirella Lives) 1996-1997, one-shot (Death of Vampirella) 1997, one-shot (Vampirella Pantha) 1997, 3 issue miniseries (Vampirella vs Hemorrhage) 1997, 2 issue microseries (Vampirella Wetworks) 1997, 2 issue microseries ('Blood Lust) 1997*, one-shot ('Crossover Gallery') 1997, one-shot (Vampirella Dracula: The Centennial) 1997, 3 issue miniseries ('Retro') 1998, 2 issue microseries (Vampirella Painkiller Jane) 1998, one-shot (Vampirella Lady Death) 1999, one-shot ('Legendary Tales') 2000*

As the 'bad-girl' craze of the 1990s slipped into high gear, Harris ensured their major asset was ubiquitous. Vampirella team-ups, one-shots and miniseries proliferated, including many retailer inducements and limited edition comics whose restricted circulation places them beyond the brief of this guide. Some promote comics that never actually appeared. As for the rest, it's worth pointing out that the nudie magazines with pictures of real women that Michael Bair copied (badly) for Hemorrhage are likely to be cheaper. The best art is on 'Blood Lust', where Joe Jusko's static paintings in the Frazetta tradition illustrate a very dull James Robinson story returning Vampirella to a transformed Drakulon. The collection adds pages for greater tedium. The poor 'Death and Destruction' continues from the *Vengeance of Vampirella* series, and, despite the order of publication, leads into 'Blood Lust', and then *Vampirella Lives*. Warren Ellis writes that with his characteristic nasty touches and evidence of some thought, which raises it above most Vampirella material of the period.

'Classic', 'Legendary Tales', 'Retro' 'Silver Anniversary Collection' and *Vampirella of Drakulon* all reprint stories from the first forty issues of the Warren run. The 'Drakulon' and 'Silver Anniversary' stories are coloured, while 'Retro' also presents Auraleon drawn Cassandra St Knight stories from 93-95. New versions of old stories are found in the 25th Anniversary Special under a Frank Frazetta cover, while 'The Crossover Gallery' features pin-ups teaming her with other characters drawn by their creators. The unlikeliest are contributions from Michael Allred and David Mack. Despite most team-ups being two issues they are not always connected stories, and contractual necessity ensures one portion published by the owners of each character and the billing alternating over the two issues, hence *Vampirella Shi* and *Shi Vampirella*. That proved popular enough for a reprise as 'Queen's Gambit' in the regular series. Don't be conned into buying *Vampirella vs Pantha* if you've already got *Pantha vs Vampirella*, or vice-versa. The contents are the same under different covers. It's gratuitously sordid, but Mark Millar provides a plot and artist Mark Texeira is admirably restrained in providing a gloomy palette. It's the best of the team-ups. Of the others, *Wetworks Vampirella* at least has interesting art with Richard Bennett inking Gil Kane. So does anything in the category pass muster? Surprisingly, yes. The one to get is *Vampirella: Dracula the Centennial*, celebrating a century since the publication of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Stoker and 1960s *Vampirella* writer Archie Goodwin star in a sentimental story by James Robinson, and Alan Moore and Gary Frank produce a terrifying modern day Dracula piece. Vampirella's not in it, but then Dracula's missing from the weakest contribution, turned in by Warren Ellis on autopilot. This and, Frank apart, artistic deficiencies preclude wholehearted recommendation, but it will surprise.

At first glance many miniseries may appear to be missing from the heading, but these are found under the Harris *Vampirella* entry. The series promoted the titles of story arcs with the designated number of individual issues on the cover with a bat wing motif.~WJ

VAMPIRELLA STRIKES

Harris: *8 issues, 1 Annual 1995-1996*

Yet another short series featuring the adventures of comics' most famous girly-vampire. It's an uninspiring run of cheesy nude shots and wanton bloodletting from a mixed bag of creators. 5 is a team-up with the Eudaemon by David Quinn and Rudy Nebres, and 7 is a flip-book with new material by Ian Edgington and Nebres and a specially coloured Warren reprint by Bill Dubay and José Gonzalez. One of the poorest showings since her revival.~WW

VAMPS

DC/Vertigo: *6 issue miniseries 1994-1995*, 6 issue miniseries ('Hollywood and Vein') 1995-1996, 3 issue miniseries ('Pumpkin Time') 1998-1999*

Hot babe book with an attitude starring five vampire tarts. Our bike-riding sirens wreak a carnage-littered, blood-splattered, semen-drained trail of mutilation across America. Unlike the blood, plot and character background are thin, yet it is hard to label the book gratuitous since it sets out to provide sensationalist titillation, and Elaine Lee and William Simpson achieve this aim admirably. The slightly inferior sequel by the same creative team is more wet-dream stuff as the biker vampires relocate to Hollywood to star in... a biker

* Available in a collected edition

vampire movie. Pity vampires don't photograph. 'Pumpkin Time' is the uninitiated in pursuit of the unknown on a unilateral course of uninformed insipidity whilst uninspired creators unwind a uniform monotone of uncultivated uncouthness.~APS

VAMPYRES

Eternity: *4 issues 1989*

Formula vampire stories by artists no more or less than competent, reprinted from Skywald's 1970s horror magazines, unsurprisingly look no better when poorly reproduced on smaller pages.~GK

VANDALA

Chaos!: *One-shot 2000, one-shot ('II') 2001*

Plotless tale of Vandala, a homeless valkyrie (and sister of supernatural demi-goddess Lady Death) as she flies about wearing little more than dental floss and a winged hat, trying to remember who she is. God-awful. Peter David writes the second one-shot but its still just eye-candy for adolescents of all ages.~WW

VANGUARD

Image: *6 issues 1993-1994, 4 issue miniseries ('Strange Visitors') 1996-1997, one-shot ('Ethereal Warriors') 2000*

Vanguard is an alien defender, created when still a fan by Erik Larsen, but written by co-creator Gary Carlson and drawn by a different artist each issue during the first series. All feature some interesting ideas, but they're largely subsumed by the overused 'superheroes misconstrue each others motives and fight' plot. The final issue is the best, but fans of Jason Pearson and Joe Madureira might want to see their pencils on 2 and 3 respectively. The second run, pencilled by Scot Eaton throughout, extends a sliver of plot over four issues. The one-shot has a would-be planetary conqueror arrive on Earth for a distinctly Kirbyesque story illustrated by Frank Fosco. It's the best of the bunch.~WJ

VANGUARD Illustrated

Pacific: *7 issues 1983-1984*

Vanguard succeeds in allying very good art with generally poor stories. Tom Yeates provided some nice Al Williamson stylings in 1-3, also featuring Peter Milligan and Brendan McCarthy's imaginative 'Freakwave', which preceded *Waterworld* by a good decade, but Mike Baron and an undeveloped Steve Rude's plain daft encyclopedia-salesman story was very tiresome by its conclusion in 4. Michael Gilbert's Mr Monster débuts in 7, and there's nice Rick Geary pontification on his early career in 5, but on the whole the covers are the best thing with a Mike Kaluta beauty on 5.~FP

VANITY

Pacific: *2 issues 1984*

Vanity is a cave-girl who finds a spaceship and ends up fighting aliens on the moon. Will Meugniot's attempt to recreate the light-hearted 'good girl' strip is only partly successful. The artwork's fine if a little flat, but the humour is very forced and the story not particularly thrilling.~NF

VAULT OF EVIL

Marvel: *23 issues 1973-1975*

Another title reprinting Marvel's seemingly inexhaustible supply of horror, mystery and monster shorts from the 1950s. There's the usual mixture of Steve Ditko and lesser artists, and only a muddy reprint of a Bernie Krigstein-illustrated story in 20 is of any note.~FP

The VAULT OF HORROR

EC: *29 issues (12-40) 1950-1955**
Gladstone: *6 issues 1990-1991*
Russ Cochran: *5 issues 1991-1992*
Gemstone: *29 issues 1992-1997**

The immediate popularity of the gore comics like *The Vault of Horror* and its companion anthologies permitted EC publisher William M. Gaines to underwrite less popular titles with greater merit. At the same time their violence and Gothic melodrama outraged parents, politicians and psychologists like Fredric Wertham. EC comics, totally forbidden in post-war England, were the 'video nasties' of the 1950s, killed off by moral panic, jittery distributors and the pusillanimous Comics Code Authority.

Inheriting the numbering of *War Against Crime*, a routine cop comic that introduced a *Vault* story from 10, the first issue proper (12) has host The Crypt Keeper in place. Early artists Harvey Kurtzman (12, 13) and the Wally Wood/Harry Harrison team (12-14) gave way to the regular quartet of Jack Davis, Graham Ingels, Jack Kamen and Johnny Craig.

Johnny Craig drew all covers and many lead strips, most of which he also wrote (and he even edited the last five issues of the title). He returned to favourite scenes and themes again and again, helping to define *Vault of Horror*'s identity through numerous stories about "voodoo, zombies, personality transference and above all the psychological aspects of fear", as John Benson puts it in his notes for the boxed set. Many of Craig's covers were among the most gruesome images EC ever published, but his strips were comparatively restrained, emphasising internal terror over the violent retributions doled out by Al Feldstein in *Haunt* and *Crypt*. 32's 'Whirlpool' is both typical and exceptional. Over eight brilliantly designed pages, Craig plunges an unnamed woman into a terrifying nervous breakdown, where she is haunted by demons and then (another recurring horror) buried alive. There is no twist ending. The nightmare is circular, as reality and fantasy have become indistinguishable. However, Craig's best drawn strip is 35's Christmas story 'And All through the House', another psychological masterpiece adapted for the 1971 movie *Tales from the Crypt*, where Joan Collins is menaced by a mad Santa. Craig's version is blacker, wittier, and much more scary.

The large size and crisp black and white reproduction of the Russ Cochran boxed sets do wonders for the artwork of modernists like Craig and Bernie Krigstein, a late contributor, with stunning stories in 36 ('Pipe Dream', an opium-drenched horror much admired by Gaines), 38 ('The Catacombs'), 39 ('The Purge') and 40 (a savage strip entitled 'The Pit'). Of course, Krigstein was something of a rare treat, unpopular with readers used to the more full-blooded work of an Ingels or a Davis. Graham Ingels was the master of ugliness and putrefaction, his style perfect for scripts about rotting zombies, creepy carnivals (see the truly vile 'Out of Sight' in 38), witches, and all things Gothic. Jack Davis was, like Craig and Jack Kamen, an extremely versatile artist, equally adept at horror, crime or humour. His frantic, cartoony style undercut the scripters' more ponderous moments, and emphasised the absurdity and black humour hiding under the surface of most EC comics. It's also worth noting how consistent all these artists were. It's rare to see a below-par job from any of the regulars, and Craig and Davis actually improved with every issue, both reaching an absolute pinnacle around issues 35-40. It's inspiring to see these artists giving their all at a time when the horror comic was considered indistinguishable from pornography. At the same time, prolonged exposure to the often overwritten scripts makes clear the limitations of EC's beloved revenge formula. Still, when read in small doses *Vault of Horror* remains one of the most varied and blackly entertaining horror comics ever published. All 1990s issues are reprints, with the Gemstone series representing each issue in original format.~AL

Recommended: 18, 32, 36, 38-40

THE VAULT OF WHORES

Eros: *One-shot 1998*

As with Eros' other EC parody comics, the joke doesn't really last beyond the title and the cover, but if you like your necrophilia and sado-masochism to feature preposterously large breasted women this may be the comic for you after all.~WJ

VAUXHALL

la comédie illustrée: *2 issues 1996-1997*

These are the first chapters of 'The Never-Ending Tales of David Watts', and unfortunately this translation of the French

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* Available in a collected edition

original hasn't been continued. Creator Christopher produces charming short stories that are always a little surreal. Characters, for instance, include Chaland the cat, Kurt Cobain, Death, Alexander Dumas, Michelangelo and Bono the clown. There are traces of Little Nemo in Slumberland in dream-like sequences, accompanied by a light-hearted but more cynical view of human nature. Note that the second issue has 'Boulevards' on the cover rather than Vauxhall.~NF
Recommended: 1, 2

THE VC'S

Fleetway Quality: *5 issue miniseries 1990*

This science-fiction series from the British *2000AD* was repackaged for the American market. Told through the first-person narrative of a new recruit sent to replace a dead member of the VC's, a platoon in an intergalactic conflict, the story focused as much on the horror and futility of war as on the glory and action one might expect. The saga's ending was particularly downbeat and far from happy, rounding off one of the stronger of *2000AD*'s long-running series.~JC

VECTOR

Now: *4 issues 1986-1987*

Author and technophobe Henry Vector gets a computer for a birthday present from his wife, but unfortunately it's second-hand and the previous owner was a Druid. The computer has a mind of its own which it promptly transfers to Henry, precipitating a series of chases and battles as the Druids send big monsters called Modems to retrieve the computer's contents by lopping off his head. This was the second comic title to use the fledgling computer graphics systems to produce artwork. Notable only in that the computer pages are hideous beyond belief, but the drawn pages are even worse.~WW

VEENA

Eric Thériault Press: *4 issues 1999-2001*

'Veena and the Time Machine' (1-3) concerns tracking down the origin of some sunglasses that create visions of Native American ghosts. 1-2 contain short backup strips with Luis Neves, while, in 3, Veena investigates the ghost of a suicidal young man and 'The Expanding Spiral' (4) is the story told to Veena of a man granted his wish by a genie to relive life with his memories intact. Major Valor (4), a World War II hero, meets Frankenstein's monster establishing that the same serum created both of them. The ongoing John Star strip is a science fiction adventure told (slowly) in newspaper strip format (though there are multiple episodes in 4). Thériault is a good cartoonist (4 shows a greater maturity and command of line and inks), and produces some thoughtful writing about serious issues all wrapped up in genre stories.~NF

VEGMAN

Checker Comics: *3 issue miniseries 1998*

A lightweight comedy about a self-appointed urban hero. The two-fisted vegetarian's adventures are presented like an underground comic, complete with a cod R. Crumb finish to the very basic artwork. Sadly, with the humour being zany rather than challenging, there is a danger that readers may lose the will to live after reading more than a few pages. Tastefully humble but throw-away.~SW

VELOCITY

Pleece Brothers: *5 issues 1988-1989*
Eclipse: *2 issues (6-7) 1991*
Pleece Brothers: *1 issue (8) 1996*

A collection of idiosyncratic features and tone pieces and text stories written by Gary Pleece and drawn by his brother Warren. A distinctly English feel abounds and the American issues even sport the cover blurb "Mad in the UK". Features like 'The Higsons' in 1-3 read like whimsical television documentaries, a connection borne out somewhat by 'God Box' in 1. The scope extends to period pieces like the 1940s 'Look Who's Listening' in 2, and the high seas of the 18th century in 3's 'Scurvy ...or is it?' 'Master Twaddlethwaite's Malaise' in 6 makes sure the period scenery is part of a set as an actor gradually goes bonkers. 6 also features twenty-two pages of the unfinished 'Montague Terrace', which promised to follow in the footsteps of 'Dead Souls' in 4 and 5 and the brilliant 'Great Unwashed' in 4-5. These cosmopolitan dramas hint that Warren has been looking at some of José Muñoz's work. 'The Higsons' and 'Hope I Die' in 5 are reprints from 1. Wonderful and all over too soon.~SW
Recommended: 6

VELOCITY

Image/Top Cow: *3 issue miniseries 1995-1996*

Velocity is the speedster of the superhero group Cyberforce, here on her own, targeted by the serial superhuman-killer Charnel and having to conquer her fears and self doubt if she's to survive. Kurt Busiek's script provides much more to enjoy than the premise above might suggest as Velocity's fear of conflict is explained and her predicament forces her to do more than simply run or fight. Anthony Chun provides some solid artwork and there are guest appearances from Cyberforce and the Savage Dragon.~NF

VENGEANCE SQUAD

Charlton: *6 issues 1975-1976*

The Vengeance Squad are ex-con Eric Redd, beautiful policewoman Candy Orr and burly Vietnam vet Tulsa Coyle. The Vengeance Squad will duff-up baddies for mucho dinero. The Vengeance Squad are a lot like TV show *The Protectors*. The Vengeance Squad are not very good. After a first issue drawn by Frank Bolle, Joe Gill's characterisation-free scripts were illustrated by Pete Morisi in his typically enjoyable style. Far better, however, was the Mike Mauser back-up, fresh from the pages of *E-Man* by Nicola Cuti and Joe Staton. The series featured short, well-plotted tales that mixed humour and drama in much the same way that Will Eisner had managed several decades earlier with *The Spirit*. Any of the six issues are worth searching out for the Mauser stories alone. Only the brave need read any further.~DAR

VENGER ROBO

Viz: *7 issue limited series 1993-1994*

Crazily fast-paced Manga by Go Nagai and Ken Ishikawa. The distorted faces are funny but the frantic robot action sequences are really quite abstract and almost impossible to follow. This one really is for psychotic speed freaks only.~GK

VENOM

Marvel: *6-issue miniseries ('Lethal Protector') 1993*, 3 issue miniseries ('Funeral Pyre') 1993, 3 issue miniseries ('The Madness') 1993-1994, 3 issue miniseries ('The Enemy Within') 1994, 4 issue miniseries ('Nights of Vengeance') 1994, 4 issue miniseries ('Separation Anxiety') 1994-1995*, 4 issue miniseries ('Carnage Unleashed') 1995*, one-shot ('Venom Special') 1995, 5 issue miniseries ('Sinner Takes All') 1995, 4 issue miniseries ('Along Came a Spider') 1996, 4 issue miniseries ('The Hunger') 1996, 3 issue miniseries ('Tooth and Claw') 1996-1997, 3 ssue miniseries ('On Trial') 1997, 3 issue miniseries {'License to Kill) 1997, one-shot ('Seed of Darkness') 1997, 2 issue microseries ('Sign of the Boss') 1997, 3 issue miniseries ('Finale) 1997-1998*

A monthly publication from the start, splitting *Venom* into miniseries avoided permanent creative staff while serving the feeding frenzy of the early 1990s with a new first issue every few months, initially with a glow-in-the-dark/sparkly/embossed covers. Venom is the unity of a symbiotic alien and the human Eddie Brock, with the resulting character resembling Spider-Man because the symbiote first attached itself to Peter Parker in years gone by. Formerly decidedly the villain, for his own series, if not quite transformed to benevolence, Venom works from the best of intentions, seeing himself as protector of the weak. There's little inspiration over the first six series, as fight scenes and guest stars substitute for plot, although the art is competent enough. 'Nights of Vengeance' is the best of a mediocre bunch. Larry Hama's appointment as writer for three miniseries with 'Carnage Unleashed' improves matters to the point of including a story each month, and he writes more of the remaining issues than anyone else, but *Venom* remains poor. The one redeeming issue of this largely turgid run is the one-shot 'Seed of Darkness', featuring Brock before he was Venom. There's an encounter with the alien symbiote with whom he will one day be joined, and the whole story is a pastiche of the Marvel monster short stories produced in such abundance during the 1950s and early 1960s.~FP

VENTURE

Image: *1 issue + 2003 to date*

A mysterious superhero, looking nothing like the chap on the cover, and holding down a day job as a teacher, deals with a few problems. Jay Faerber knows his way around this sort of material enough to intrigue, and while the mixture of Jamal Igle's art and on-screen inking is a little muddy, the story does its job. One to watch.~FP

VENTURE Graphic Novels

Venture is a joint project between Dark Horse and Strip Art Features, a company syndicating graphic novels throughout Europe, presenting English language versions of European material. To launch the line they couldn't have picked better than *Blood Ties*. Belgian artist Hermann's American publication has been sporadic, but his work is lauded throughout Europe. Here Hermann collaborates with his son, credited with the labyrinthine script for this tale of a naïve junior detective sucked into a plot beyond his understanding. Hermann draws a gloriously evocative damp and grimy 1950s New York that practically drips off the page, even finding time for an Edward Hopper homage. His characters are beautifully drawn, his sense of colour magnificent, and the plot keeps you guessing until the end. Hermann's *Jeremiah* and *The Towers of Bois-Maury* (including *Roderigo*) graphic novels are dealt with in separate entries.

Carlos Trillo is obviously a major Strip Art client, as fully a third of the Venture product to date features his scripts. *Zachary Holmes*, child detective in a pseudo-Victorian Britain stars in two brightly coloured volumes of children's fantasy stories, the first involving him proving the innocence of Frankenstein's Monster, the second having him save the Queen from the ghost of Moriarty. They'll just about charm children, but no more, although there's a definite improvement in Juan Bobillo's art for the second volume. Any child buying the introductory volume of *Bird*, 'Tattoo', another Trillo and Bobillo collaboration, is in for a shock, as it's the sexually explicit year in the life of a delusional drug-addict following a family schism. It highlights a problem for the nascent line, that of design. Usually a Dark Horse strength, here it's all over the place, with nothing to differentiate childrens material from adult. Bird has a compelling perversity as it unfolds, but the paperback size *Video Noire* by Trillo and Eduardo Risso is very disturbing. Also explicit, it involves the blackmail of a wholesome kiddies TV presenter and a down at heel investigator, and throws up surprises to the end. Risso's black and white art is an astonishing visual treat: detailed and joyful, while the postures convey life and emotion.

Domingo Madrafina's art for Trillo's *The Big Hoax* and *The Iguana* also impresses, continuing the tradition of Milt Caniff and Frank Robbins for stories of death and corruption in 1960s South America. *The Big Hoax* concerns the difference between the perception of the supposedly virtuous niece of the President, publicly beloved as "The Intact Virgin", and the horror of her reality. When a disgraced, but virtuous, ex-cop agrees to facilitate her escape, a relentless killer known as The Iguana is set on their trail. It's a commendable adventure novel packed with memorable characters. *The Iguana* is an earlier episode in the killer's life, also returning camp writer Melitón Bates. Slimmer in page count and content, Madrafina modifies his style, often emphasising cartoon elements in the wrong places, thus disrupting the mood. Two paperback volumes of *Otto Porfiri* each present three stories of an overweight middle-aged private detective. Italian creator Franco Saudelli may deliberately vary his style for each story, or these volumes gather stories produced over a long period. Either way, however he's working, it's with a naturalistic easy line seemingly capable of illustrating people with poise whatever the activity, be it the hallucinations of a drunken Porfiri in 'Drama on the Cliff' to the caricatures of well known football players in 'Red Moon' He also loves his naked women. Porfiri contrasts well with the glamour he investigates, although he's very much the stone-faced cipher secondary to the plots. It's not worth attempting to second-guess these, as capricious elements often intrude, so just go with the story.

Four volumes offer the traditional comic versions of a ghastly future. *Genetic Grunge* looks ugly. The preposterously proportioned and heavily stylised figures are ugly, the layouts are ugly and the colouring is ugly. Luckily the story's not much cop either, so you don't have to bother at all. Gordon Rennie writes *Glimmer Rats* and *Rain Dogs*, both of which premiered in the UK's *2000AD*. The first is basically *Platoon* in Hell, relentlessly grim and negative as convicts and revolutionaries are slung through a dimensional warp to combat monsters big and small in an environment where technology designed to aid becomes a hindrance. Mark Harrison draws this splatterfest in dull and gory fashion. *Rain Dogs* is illustrated by Colin Wilson, and more resembles a traditional European adventure album. It's set in New York populated by scavengers and zealots as civilisation has devolved after a flood of biblical proportions. When an exploration vessel from outside crashes, the survivor teams with an eighteen year old scavenger looking to escape. *The Darkness Behind* is a little more imaginative. Evolved technology permits memories to be downloaded into storage while the brain is refilled with data, or someone else's memories, for an almost foolproof method of transferring information. If large amounts of absorbed memories are not dumped quickly, the consequences can be fatal, and there's always the concern about personal memories not being restored. Stefano Casini's art is functional rather than decorative, and his bleak thriller is horribly coloured, but has a proper plot that engages quickly.

The Four Killers features Tex Willer, a Texas Ranger who's been appearing in Italian comics since 1948. When a family of his friends is wiped out by outlaws, Tex trails the killers. It's very much a standard Western plot from Claudio Nizzi, but the treat here is ninety pages of gorgeous art from Joe Kubert, obviously relishing the subject matter. It's unfortunate that an artist of Kubert's stature has to look abroad to draw the material he wants, but at least there's an opportunity to see it in the USA now. Let's hope his later *Tex Willer* stories are also translated.

The wealth of top class material available to Venture makes the imprint an exciting proposition, but a seeming lack of editorial vision pervades. Without that the chances of building a vibrant list with desirable back stock are very slim indeed.~WJ

Recommended: *The Big Hoax*, *Blood Ties*, *Otto Porfiri* 'Red Moon', *Video Noire*

VENUS

Timely/Atlas: *19 issues 1948-1952*

Well, here's one of the strangest series ever published. *Venus* told stories of the Goddess of Love, bored with her immortal existence, coming down to Earth to seek adventure. Intended as a 'funny career girl' title, Venus meets Whitney Hammond, publisher of *Beauty* magazine, who assumes Venus' claim to goddesshood is a publicity stunt, and awards her the editorship of the magazine, falling in love with her almost as a by-product. Venus' editorship and her romance are looked on askance by Della, Hammond's secretary, who had eyes on both the job and the man for herself. That was the setup in 1-5, which followed the basic template of heroine, boyfriend, heroine's rival – with only the twist that Venus had vast supernatural powers and a pantheon of celestial chums to help her out, really stacking the odds against poor old Della.

In 6 Loki (the writer cheerfully cross-pollinated pantheons) wanted Venus for himself, and he became a recurring character, usually helping Venus out despite her do-gooder nature. 6-9 were less comedy and more adventure, but with appallingly overwritten slushy dialogue, and titles like 'The Love Trap!' Presumably the aim was to retain female readers while appealing to a wider audience, but the title switched to science fiction with 10. A romantic component was still prominent, as "The Son of Satan!" threatened to destroy the world (and demonstrated how it would happen) if Venus spurned his advances.

From 13, Bill Everett wrote and drew most stories, introducing a dreamlike, hallucinatory quality, immense atmosphere and appeal, but providing only the barest nod to logic or cause and effect. Hammond, Venus and Della were played more as investigative reporters turning up at the scene of bizarre occurrences, probably because whenever you have an invasion of giant stone men, of course the first people you call are beauty magazine writers. The stories developed a breathtaking range, but not much depth; Venus thwarted a plan to conquer the world with an army of zombie chorus girls, the depredations of Adonis, the Queen of the Gargoyles, the rampaging daughter of Neptune, Satan himself (who seems to forget that Venus was once almost his daughter-in-law...) and giant marauding pansies. No, the flowers. The all-Everett issues (16-19) are outstanding pieces of work. The best sample would be 17's tale of cartoonist Jimmy Rogers, who finds himself plagued by his own villainous creations, sprung alive from his inkwell, until Venus delivers an innovative solution. Still fantastical, it has a more linear plot than most of the stories, and Everett's always-innovative art is superb.

18 and 19 switched gears again to pure horror, with Venus now having forgotten, seemingly, her supernatural abilities and becoming just another tough-talking broad on the trail of a story. Despite her remarkable willingness to adapt to whatever genre was in vogue, after cancellation Venus languished in limbo until Everett himself revived her in *Sub-Mariner* 57. Since then, she has retained a vague presence, most prominently in issues of *Champions*, *Avengers*, and the *Marvel Valentine Special*.~HS

Recommended: 16-19

VENUS WARS

Dark Horse: *14 issue limited series 1991-1992*, 15 issue limited series (Venus Wars II) 1992-1993*

In stories set towards the end of the twenty-first century, Venus is an Earth colony where two large countries co-exist uneasily. When Ishtar attacks Aphrodia, dirt-bike rider Ken Sano joins the élite bike corps that appears the only hope against superior forces. That's about the story for around 400 pages of the first series. Creator Yoshikazu Yasuhiko nods towards political and ecological allegory, but long, silent action sequences, no matter how spectacular, are no substitute for a plot.

The second series is immeasurably better. It switches from battle action to political intrigue, from Aphrodia to Ishtar, and without sacrificing the action contains more story in the first two issues than in the entire first series. Soldier Matthew Radom is a pawn in a power struggle, but his manipulators have reckoned without his depth of resolve, and the series is his quest for revenge and justice. Having set up an action thriller, Yasuhiko diverts into astonishing farce with a cartoon scientist, in 9 and 10, but the final chapter is extremely powerful (owing more than a little to *All Quiet on the Western Front*).~FP

Recommended: Series two 1-7, 15

VERBATIM

Fantagraphics: *2 issues 1993-1994*

The dullest kind of autobiographical commentary imaginable, where even the potentially interesting aspects of Carl Belfast's confessions are buried in so much introspective verbiage they cease to engage. The irony is that the cartooning is great, with jagged distortions and imaginative use of black and white providing a memorable disturbing quality.~WJ

The VERDICT

Eternity: *4 issue miniseries 1988*

The idea of an urban vigilante was being worked to death when *The Verdict* was published, yet despite inconsistent and sometimes poor art it succeeds. The primary reason is the work put in by writer Martin Powell in evolving a background and a history for his feature. For twenty years a serial killer has been operating in Thermo City, and for twenty years the Verdict has attempted to put an end to his killing. Along the way he's prevented many crimes, but has only recently approached his aim. The verdict? Okay.~WJ

VERMILLION

DC/Helix: *12 issues 1996-1997*

Science-fiction writer Lucius Shepard brings his talents to the comic field with an epic concerning the city of Vermillion, which is a living entity so large it occupies the entire universe. How it became that way is explained in the story of Jonathan Cave, the only man with the memory of how things were previously. There's also a mysterious religious sect with a strange agenda. The story centres on a spaceship called the Marcus Garvey (nice touch), and is a complex plot still unfolding from the early issues: anyone wanting to sample should start at the beginning. It's certainly well conceived, and Al Davison's intricate art brings out the weirdness that is *Vermillion*.~HY

Recommended: 1

VERONICA

Archie: *132 issues + 1989 to date*

As the rich, but selfish rival to Betty for Archie's love, Veronica Lodge's life is very different from that of Betty, though there are some obvious similarities. The series begins with single-issue tales of Veronica's travels around the world (1-18), a theme that reappears later for 50 (Tonga) and 100 (the Moon). Apart from travelling, Veronica is often concerned with the latest fad or fashion, and her selfishness, attention-seeking and tempestuous nature are often at the heart of episodes, but the most common plot revolves around some aspect of her (or her family's) conspicuous consumption. Her father, Hiram, always finds, to his cost, that it's cheaper to let Veronica spend money freely, than try to make her find another way to achieve the same thing. Veronica can be good at sports (basketball, bowling), but only if properly motivated (an idea so good it's been repeated for each of these activities), and tennis seems to be the only sport at which she consistently excels. One recurring plotline has Veronica dressing as superhero,

Powerteen, and accidentally managing to stop criminals (111, 118) or finding an unwanted sidekick (127). A magical pendant appears in 109 and 122, and a cursed idol is at the centre of Veronica's trip to Adventure Island (129-130). Generally, Veronica seems more prone to be involved in a supernatural or science fiction event than Betty (though neither are common). Veronica always has her eyes open for a good-looking boy to date, but will stop at nothing to prevent Betty winning a date with Archie. This rivalry with Betty extends to everything they do, and yet throughout, it's clear that Betty and Veronica are incredibly close, spending far more time with each other than with anyone else, and Veronica frequently falls back on this defining friendship when beset by troubles.

Dan Parent has been associated with the title from the start, first with just artwork, then as a writer (from 44), and finally as both (from 79, and with almost every issue from 107). Other writers include Kathleen Webb, Hal Smith, Michael Gallagher, Frank Doyle (from 26), Bob Bolling, Mike Pellowski, Bill Golliher and George Gladir. Tim Kennedy and Stan Goldberg have been the most regular other artists, but Dan DeCarlo appeared irregularly between 26 and 103, and Jeff Schultz has worked on the title regularly since 60. There is inevitably a sameness to the issues, and none of the artists or writers are especially distinctive here (DeCarlo being a possible exception), but Veronica's personality and the strength of the background characters are enough to make this worth at least an occasional indulgence.~NF

VEROTIK ILLUSTRATED

Verotik: *3 issues 1997-1998*

A showcase for Verotik's assorted characters, drawn badly by the likes of Martin Emond, Duke Mighten and Alex Horley along with some of Simon Bisley's sloppiest ever art. Breasts, monsters and gore abound, while plots are unaccountably absent. 2 has a Dave Stevens cover, and Richard Corben contributes five pages to 3's jam story.~WJ

VERSION

Dark Horse: *15 issues (1.1-1.8 and 2.1-2.7) 1993-1994*

Version consists of two parts. Firstly, a search for Dr Higure, the inventor of a living biochip named EGOS. On the trail are his daughter Eiko, Hap Happo, a private detective, and Black Echo, the head of a secret organisation with a hidden interest in the chip's development. By the end they've realised that EGOS is a new 'version' of life which might supersede humanity. In part two Black Echo kidnaps the others and takes them to an undersea lab, Black Tokyo, where he is transformed into a monster by communicating with EGOS. Hisashi Sakaguchi has created a somewhat worthy strip examining artificial intelligence and the threats posed to our current ecosystem by man. Despite lots of explanations that bog the plot down, the visual storytelling is excellent, and there's enough adventure to make you wish the planned third part had been published.~NF

VERTIGO Graphic Novels and one-shots

Established to differentiate titles with greater appeal to an older audience from the standard DC superhero line, the Vertigo imprint was initially dependent on horror, fantasy and more offbeat treatments of superheroes, but has evolved into a broad church, although remains very much a writing-led list.

Vertigo's greatest success was Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, and it's been relentlessly strip-mined with even minor supporting characters processed into their own miniseries or one-shot under a 'Sandman Presents' banner. Janitor Merv Pumpkinhead arrived via *The Dreaming*, dispatched to Earth to retrieve a potent stolen item. Mark Buckingham and John Stokes can't be faulted for the art, but Bill Willingham's strained plot basically places a toned-down Mask in a *James Bond* scenario, and it rapidly outlives any small welcome. Willingham is on far better form for *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Dreams... but Were Afraid to Ask*, possibly the longest comic title ever. Using Gaiman's throwaway characters, it offers whimsical answers to questions about dreams by taking as its premise that they're staged in the manner of theatre plays. Well drawn by the likes of Mark Buckingham, Duncan Fegredo and Jason Little it's a pleasant removal from the po-faced nature of most *Sandman* spin-offs. A far more substantial effort is *Furies*, as yet only available in hardback. John Bolton's art will be a surprise, combining what appear to be computer manipulated photographs with painted artwork. Writer Mike Carey draws from the same sources as Gaiman, marching through Greek myths, and he approximates the naturalistic and portentous quirks of Gaiman's writing style. *Furies* stars deeply troubled former superheroine Fury attempting to purge her demons by joining a theatre troupe performing Greek tragedy in Athens. Cronos, among the eldest of the Greek Gods stirs the pot, and in the best traditions of classical literature Sandman makes a deus ex-machina appearance. It's a little too glib in places, and in others Carey has trouble connecting the dots. Wait for the paperback.

Totems was published to coincide with the millennium. A conspiracy theorist crashes a party attended by Vertigo characters, most of whom no longer host their own title, so if the idea of *Vertigo Team-Up* appeals take a look. Duncan Fegredo art is always welcome, but it's otherwise very ordinary. In *I Die at Midnight* Larry pops pills that will kill him at midnight because Muriel has dumped him. When he's offered another chance, he needs to survive, but can't reveal what he's done. Add the necessity to cross a Manhattan celebrating the millennium, a jealous, violent ex-boyfriend and Muriel intent on visiting her grandmother and you've got Kyle Baker's updated version of a classic 1940s studio comedy. The cartooning and writing are great, but one can't escape the feeling it comes all too easily to Baker, and wish he'd stretch himself. Perhaps he's so good it just seems that way. A similar headlong rush through Manhattan features in the book sized *You Are Here*. Baker again supplies a varied cast and screwball comedy scenario, this time Noel Coleman's past coming home to roost and his desire to conceal it from his innocent nature-loving girlfriend. Again, it's top-notch and superbly drawn. *King David* is problematical. It's a sardonic interpretation of what the bible tells of the ancient Israelite king. The anachronisms jar, as do the vivid colours, the sometimes strange page layouts and the dips into computer-generated backgrounds. This is all a shame as Baker's art throughout is superb, recalling Mort Drucker and the better Disney animation.

A persistent Vertigo problem is emperor's new clothes syndrome, whereby favoured creators produce incomprehensible or self-indulgent rubbish. Caveat emptor prospective purchasers of *The Mystery Play* by Grant Morrison and Jon J. Muth, and the J. M. DeMatteis written *Mercy*, although Paul Johnson holds his artistic end up. Special mention in this category must be made of *Doctor Occult* written by Dave Louapre with wretched art from Dan Sweetman. He must have been having a laugh. The Peter Milligan written *Rogan Josh* may elicit a similar reaction, but possesses a kinetic energy, and fine art from Brendan McCarthy, influenced by Indian comics he'd seen. In its dealings with magic and reincarnation it encroaches into areas where mood supplants narrative, but is ultimately rewarding, if not exceptionally so. The same applies to *Menz Insana*, set up to enable John Bolton to indulge himself by painting an attractive woman in any pose and clothes he wants, but also to broaden his range into exaggerated comedy. It's a collection of whimsical pieces about a pair of minds on the mental plane, having departed the sanity of their bodies. Christopher Fowler provides plenty of music hall-style verbal gags in a discursive script with one excellent mood changing switch to reality. He's a horror novelist by trade, as is Nancy Collins, whose Vertigo effort is a gruesome trawl through teenage angst and vampire psyche. Humourless, unimaginative and resolutely unpleasant, *Dhampire: Stillborn* is a contrived button pushing exercise aimed at intelligent disaffected teens and retarded affected adults. Post-Columbine *Dhampire* probably wouldn't have seen publication, and thankfully the proposed series was also stillborn.

Another puzzling obsession of the Vertigo editors is the use of Stephen John Phillips' digitally enhanced photographs for *In The Shadow of Edgar Allen Poe*, *Veils* and *I, Paparazzi*, all first released in expensive hardcover formats. Far from being the technological breakthrough they're presented as, they're very much a limiting factor. *Veils* is the best of them. Pat McGreal's story has a 19th century western woman trapped in a marriage of convenience gradually coming to terms with what she wants from life as she is inducted into the mysteries of the harem. The stiff art of Rebecca Guay on illustrated pages is no respite from the mannered poses adopted by some models. The incorrectly titled *I, Paparazzi* (it should be 'Paparazzo') is dull, with an odious celebrity photographer stumbling into trouble, and the demons that beset Edgar Allen Poe are explained in a literal and obvious sense in the volume bearing his name as it explores his private life. In *The House on the Borderland* Richard Corben adapts an old gothic horror story, adding a framing sequence. There's rarely bad Corben art, although he's not to all tastes, but as long it remains exclusively an expensive hardback it's only the converted who should sample.

Tim Truman illustrates *Dog Moon* written by Grateful Dead lyricist Robert Hunter with every word a monosyllable, folks. There's a well-rendered mood and sparse quality to this story of a man who ferries the souls of the dead in a giant truck, but it bears the inbuilt deficiency of all dream recollection: if you're not tuning in it'll never work for you, particularly the duality of the ending. A dream-like quality also infuses *Toxic Gumbo*, a thin, moody stitching of assorted revenge fantasies written by Lydia Lunch. It's immensely lifted by Ted McKeever's jagged and disturbing art, which can be the only reason for purchase. Hallucinatory moments also occur in *Seven Miles A Second*, Vertigo's single step into autobiography. It's snapshots from the disturbing life of David Wojnarowicz from teenage prostitute to artist dying of aids. The exercise isn't intended to elicit sympathy, but does so nonetheless, and would have been a far stronger piece without the pretentious articles attempting to attribute meaning to Wojnarowicz's art. His rage and frustration adequately accomplishes this within the comic.

The Vertigo Voices and Verité sub-imprints were attempts to propel the perception of Vertigo beyond stock in trade fantasy material into reality based drama. Voices was an artistic success, with all four issues very readable, although the weakest of them was also the most successful, *Kill Your Boyfriend* running to a reprint. It's neither Phil Bond nor Grant Morrison at their best, with Morrison reprising his isolated teenager narrative as a modern day Bonnie and Clyde scenario, splicing it with a bizarre middle section pointing towards his later Invisibles. *Tainted* is a view into the claustrophobic world of a middle-aged voyeur and his past. Al Davison brilliantly portrays the seediness of Jamie Delano's script, which follows the template of how to make a cheap movie: compress a varied cast into a confined space and kill most of them. Delano's triumph is the gradual unpeeling of his cast en route to what becomes an inevitable conclusion. Excellently illustrated by Duncan Fegredo, *Face* concerns David Scholem, an arrogant plastic surgeon summoned to the island home of a reclusive artist to ply his trade. Peter Milligan ruminates on art and the universal fixation with beauty, as Scholem comes to understand the nature of what he's expected to carry out. It's horrifying and compelling, with excellently characterised leads, and may be the peak of Milligan's career. What comedy there is to be found in *Face* is of a cruel and bleak kind, whereas Milligan writes *The Eaters* as broad black farce casting a group of cannibals as a 1950s American TV family. Were that all, it would be a funny comic, but Milligan takes the opportunity to make observations about America's heartland. While not necessarily trenchant, neither are they as forced as his previous steps into that territory in *Shade the Changing Man*, so serve as gravy. Dean Ormston's fine jagged art, a blend of Sean Phillips and Ted McKeever, adds to the recipe. For the Verité one-shot *Hell Eternal* Jamie Delano and Sean Phillips present an intwined trio of outsiders. Sarah is seduced by imagery, David by Nazism, and Annie, the strongest of them, is single-minded and adaptable, although eventually also seduced. British by birth, they find themselves on the run in the USA having lived a fantasy that sours. By no means bad, it is very dependent on believing the cast, established as intelligent, would act like naïve idiots at every turn.

Serialised in the British comic *Crisis* (29-38), *True Faith* provoked outrage when collected in the UK, was rapidly withdrawn from sale and unseen until the Vertigo reissue. It's Garth Ennis' second published work, concerning a teenager embroiled in events beyond his control as two parties determine to kill God, a plan executed by burning churches. Artist Warren Pleece holds his end up, but even pitched as black comedy, it's hardly subtle, and Ennis would later address the issues raised far more adroitly elsewhere. Some of them in *Heartland*, a superior tale of domestic fracture, proving Ennis can write a good soap opera. The focus is Kathy, one time partner of *Hellblazer*'s John Constantine, although that's not required knowledge. Ennis divests himself of some thoughts regarding the troubles in Northern Ireland, and delivers some good anecdotes, and characters so well drawn that the story would survive without the background or the diversions. Steve Dillon, with an under-rated talent for facial expression, is ideal for drawing this type of material.

Sleepy Hollow was released to coincide with the recent film version of Washington Irving's story of a demonic headless horseman. Kelley Jones does his best Berni Wrightson, but comics adaptations are seldom successful, editing text to a page count and thus devaluing it, and this is no exception. *Bigg Time* was Vertigo's first monochrome project, and has Ty Templeton taking a scattershot poke at fame and the obsessions of early 21st century society. The cartooning is excellent, but with no real point to make over a dozen vignettes, and an unappealing lead in the fame-obsessed Lester Bigg, it's an overlong gag-vehicle.~FP

Recommended: *The Eaters, Face, Heartland, I Die At Midnight, Tainted, You Are Here*

A VERY MU CHRISTMAS

Mu: *One-shot 1992*

An otherwise competent but ordinary Christmas themed anthology is lifted by a glorious Donna Barr Desert Peach strip. Atypically pencilled in detail and set in occupied Germany just post World War II, it's a touching winter tale.~FP

VERY VICKY

Meet Danny Ocean: *10 issues 1994-1998*

An eclectic, engaging series about a circle of friends dedicated to Style. Vicky always dresses in black and wears a cute black Fedora (that's a hat, folks). The requisite cigarette and cocktail are ever at hand as she dispenses wisdom and judgement in equal measure. It began as a floating strip, appearing in numerous anthologies and magazines including Cerebus. Interested parties should find *The Very Vicky Junior Hepcats Funbook*, which collects most material published between 1991 and 1996 from sources other than the comic. Despite not being as clever as it thinks, it's actually a lot of fun, if a little easy to overdose on. Moderation is advised.~WW

VEXT

DC: *6 issues 1999*

Heaven clears out lesser deities no longer worshipped. Off they go scattering around the cosmos, with one, Vext, the God of mishap and misfortune, landing on Earth. The king of calamity has a hard time adapting to earthly ways, much to the frustration of his helpful next door neighbour who provides romantic interest. Then the sexy Paramour, the deity of relationships gone hellishly wrong, turns up and fireworks begin to fly. Elsewhere in subplot land, rogue archaeologist Aaron Caldwell and his two buxom cohorts search the globe for icons and fallen deities to help them in their evil deeds – hence, enter Rypta Gud'n (oh dear) the god of ill-timed flatulence! No subtlety here from Keith Giffen who's on top wacky-writing form ably abetted by artists Mike McKone and Mark McKenna. The black humour is especially dastardly, and if you're decent-minded you should feel ashamed at finding some evil scenes humorous – but hey, you're only human. A superb series, but only six issues? Now that's bad luck!~HY

Recommended: 1-6

VIC AND BLOOD

Mad Dog: *2 issues 1987*

Adaptation by Richard Corben of Harlan Ellison's famous story about a boy and his telepathic dog struggling to survive in a post-holocaust wasteland. It's a good story, which plays to Corben's strengths, and the artwork is more restrained than his usual pneumatic stuff.~NF

VICKI

Atlas: *4 issues 1975*

Desperate and peculiar attempt by short-lived publisher to muscle in on the Archie market by reprinting slightly changed stories from *Tippy Teen*, Tower's 1960s humour comic.~HS

VICTIMS

Eternity: *5 issues 1988-1989*

Two female college teens progress from being menaced in one B-movie horror scenario to being menaced in the next, all the time questioning what's going on in almost existentialist fashion. Created for the horror film magazine *Scream* in the 1970s, *Victims* hasn't aged well. Utter drivel.~FP

THE VICTORIAN

Penny Farthing: *13 issues 1998-2001**

A bizarre vigilante frozen during the 1890s stalks the streets of present day New Orleans in a frock coat and a stovepipe hat. In 1-5 we meet historical researcher Winston Fitzrandolph, in New Orleans because he's traced some historical anomalies there, and a British nuclear submarine, goes missing due to master intriguer Claude Ballaré. In 6-13 more characters are caught up including NOPD detective Leviticus "Doc" Shumpert, taxi driver Transclair "Trace" Babineaux and the mysterious photographer Eudora Kincaid. The attempts at Trace's Cajun patois result in some of the most ridiculous word balloons in comics. As it's all so difficult to comprehend, there's 'The Sourcebook', a story-so-far of 1-13. The proposed third story arc is due to deliver more cod surrealism, lumpen artwork and dubious references to Nietzsche shortly. This is, for the most part, improbable dross.~SW

VICTORY

Topps: 1 *issue 1994*

Stillborn attempt to unite the Jack Kirby characters published by Topps, with Kurt Busiek and Keith Giffen providing an intriguing opening chapter, but that's all there was.~WJ

VIDEO GIRL AI

Viz: *5 volumes 2000 to date*

High school student Yota thinks he's in love with his classmate Moemi, but she's attracted to his best friend, Takashi. When Yota plays a video featuring the cute Ai Amano, she promises to cheer him up, emerging physically from the screen, and though she isn't as sweet as her packaging suggests, she decides to help Yota with his love life, naturally becoming a focus for his heart herself. Originally (and still) serialised in *Animerica Extra*, Masakazu Katsura's attractively drawn strip is something of a cross between *Oh My Goddess!* and *Maison Ikkoku*, but with a darker and more serious tone. Yota's indecision can be annoying, and there are plenty of unfortunate coincidences to keep him unsure of his own and others' true feelings, but the threats to Ai and the challenges both she and Yota face help keep this interesting.~NF

VIDEO JACK

Marvel/Epic: *6 issue miniseries 1987-1988*

A very underrated writer, Cary Bates spent most of the 1970s turning in consistently imaginative short-story plots for *Superman* and *Flash*. Keith Giffen is given more credit for imagination, so the combination of the two, with art by Giffen, should be worthwhile. Well, yes and no. Jack's a bit of a sad case, obsessed with television to the extent of repelling reality. His fixation prevents a relationship and most social intercourse. Some old hocus-pocus transforms him, though, enabling him and his more outgoing pal Damon to interact with any currently broadcasting TV reality at the touch of a remote button. The wilful wackiness can be off-putting. Giffen enjoys drawing the snippets of assorted TV programmes, but this seems to be the total raison d'être of *Video Jack*. It's a novel trick, but it's a trick that wears as thin as the thread connecting it to a murder plot. 4 presents some contrasting scenarios if you'd prefer not to work your way through the first issue's extended set-up.~WJ

VIETNAM JOURNAL

Apple: *16 issues 1987-1989*, 6 issue miniseries ('Tet '68') 1991-1993, 4 issue miniseries ('Bloodbath At Khe Sanh') 1993, 2 issue microseries ('Valley of Death') 1994*

Picking up with the escalation of hostilities in 1967, these are well researched and detailed stories about the Vietnam war, written and drawn by Don Lomax. His focal point and narrator is a war correspondent cornily referred to as "Journal", whose occupation allows attachment to different combat units. Set against an admirably passionate depiction of the ordinary soldier's missions in hell, there's little questioning of the rights or wrongs of US involvement in Vietnam, and the portrayal of the Vietnamese is rarely more than silent gook killers. If this doesn't bother you, *Vietnam Journal* is recommended, although an abundance of expository dialogue sometimes bogs it down. Every issue is self-contained, and packs a lot of detail, with 3's story of a manipulative TV journalist, or 10's raid on a NVA outpost, good examples of the style and content. 1-8 were reissued in two collections. Other commitments prevented Lomax from maintaining a regular publication schedule, so succeeding stories were released as self-contained miniseries. 'Tet '68' effectively relates the story of the New Year offensive, but the highlight is the first issue, concerning a rogue CIA agent previously seen in 4 and 10. The historical-reportage narrative renders the remainder of 'Tet '68' and 'Bloodbath At Khe Sanh' far drier and wordier than the more anecdotal and personal-experience-based parent title, although matters marginally improve with 'Valley of Death'.~FP

Recommended: 3, 4, 10, 11, 14

VIGIL

Innovation: *2 issue microseries ('Fall from Grace') 1991-1992*, one-shot ('The Golden Parts') 1992*, one-shot ('Kukulkan') 1993*

Millennium: *2 issue microseries ('Rebirth') 1994-1995*, one-shot ('Vamporum Animaturi') 1993,*

Duality Press: *one-shot ('Road Trips') 1994, 2 issue microseries ('Desert Foxes') 1995, 2 issue microseries ('Eruption') 1995, 2 issue microseries ('Scattershots') 1996, 8 issue limited series ('Bloodline') 1997-1998*

Arvin Loudermilk and Mike Iverson craft an engaging tale that is an effective blend of police show, vampire shocker and conspiracy thriller. Greg Tonell is a Hollywood leading man, but when he appears on a late night talk show his life changes forever. When she was alive Grace Kimble was a cop's cop. Now that she's a vampire who can't always control her emotions she spends her time tracking the elite society of undead Glitterati that killed her. When she tears the head off a talk show host, all the world can see when the carnage is over is Greg with the head in his hands. For reasons she can't comprehend she abducts Tonell, telling herself that she's ruined his life and must make it right ('Fall from Grace').

He becomes her lover as they go on the run, he from the charges that he's a homicidal maniac and Grace from the influential foes who control the police of two countries. They flee to Mexico and he becomes an accomplice in her schemes to destroy the debauched cabal of bloodsuckers who secretly run the world. They're also seemingly intent on disrupting the balance of power between the living and the undead ('The Golden Parts'). As Greg is bitten by a Nazi vampire he loses his fears of the condition, and asks Grace to turn him. Whilst hiding out from the undead elite they seek out a legendary vampire, purportedly the oldest on Earth, who exerts an overwhelming influence over the country. He may also hold the secret of a cure for Grace's condition ('Kukulkan'). In 'Vamporum Animaturi' the cult La Rubia tries to co-opt a scientist's research on the causes and effects of the Vampire virus and offers Grace the chance to lead them.

The series survives the disruption of switching publishers twice as the saga unfolds with calculated precision. They return to America and become involved with various factions of the vampire underworld ('Road Trips', 'Desert Foxes') before all the various conspiracy strands converge, building to a climax in 'Bloodline' The story material is not fresh but the calculated patience with which it unfolds puts it into a class few horror comics, or any other media can touch. A class act well worth catching.~WW

Recommended: 'Fall From Grace' 1-2, 'The Golden Parts', 'Desert Foxes '1-2, 'Bloodline' 1-8

VIGILANTE

DC: *50 issues, 2 Annuals 1983-1988*

Introduced in *New Teen Titans Annual* 2, Vigilante begins as DC's answer to the Punisher. Former District Attorney Adrian Chase feels that the system enables too many criminals escape punishment, so he costumes himself to dispense a little extra-curricular justice. To his credit, creator Marv Wolfman doesn't sidestep the complex issues raised by the character, and 2 partially explores his justifications. Oddly enough, considering the character was his creation, the series doesn't really go anywhere until Wolfman's departure. The Alan Moore-written story in 17-18 is only a little better than average, after which Paul Kupperberg and Tod Smith develop Wolfman's plots rather better than he had. Chase becomes a judge, but a psychopath adopts his costumed identity. When this plot concludes in 27 there's immediately a third Vigilante, also taking his cue from Chase, but with a more reasoned approach. 28, despite little costumed action, offers a good feel of this period. With 37 Chase is back in costume, now officially sanctioned, but by this time he's a man balanced precariously on the edge of sanity. This leads to a surprising and brave conclusion in 50. By and large the second half of the run is better than the first.~WJ

VIGILANTE City Lights, Prairie Justice

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1995-1996*

This is the original Vigilante, introduced fifty years previously in *Action* 42. When crimefighting the Vigilante disguises his identity as Greg Saunders, country singer, by wrapping a red scarf over the lower portion of his face. Writer James Robinson wisely sets the story in the 1940s, having the Vigilante confront both his traditional nemesis, the Dummy, and powerful gangster Bugsy Siegel, attempting to set the foundations for what would become Las Vegas. Robinson's pacing is very jumpy: he often chooses to depict the prelude to violence, and then leaps to the consequences, with the action occurring off-panel. This leaves plenty of talking heads for Tony Salmons to draw, and he's already having to produce too many abstract montages and illustrate captions updating events rather than a story. Too detached to engage any emotion, this is one of Robinson's lesser works.~FP

VIGILANTE 8: 2nd Offense

Chaos!: *One-shot 1999*

Incoherent mess, based on a video game, that pits civilians against the professional terrorists trying to destroy America's oil supply.~NF

Phil Elliott's VIGNETTE COMICS

Harrier: *1 issue 1988*

A hotchpotch collection, with Phil Elliott in largely wistful or whimsical mode, and lacking his 1980s crowd-pleaser Gimbley. While all contents are all drawn in Elliott's appealing ligne claire style (apart from those by guest artists Ed Pinsent and Paul Grist), there's little bite, and ultimately the time spent reading *Vignette* could have been better occupied doing something else.~FP

The Last of the VIKING HEROES

Genesis West: *12 issues*, 3 Specials 1987-1992*

Any pretence at historical accuracy disappeared long ago during this strip's début as a back-up in Silver Star 1, 5, 6. Four friends – a barbarian, a swordsman, a prince and a bumbling sorcerer's apprentice – indulge in light-hearted romps through wine, women, song and brawl, not to mention a few monsters, wizards and demons thrown in to flesh out the pot. The medieval setting is clearly located in some tropical Nordic land, judging by the number of scantily clad lovelies frolicking about. Michael Thibodeaux composes most of the creative aspects and delivers some dynamic fight sequences; on rare occasions the gentle touches of humour actually work. 4-12 form a continued story. Improbably, those Mutant Turtles show up in Summer Special 3 and sort of muscle-in on Special 2 as well. Overall verdict: undemanding.~APS

VILLA OF THE MYSTERIES

Fantagraphics: *2 issues 1996-1997*

In years to come, historians will look back and marvel that there was ever a time when a comic like *Villa of the Mysteries* was presented to an unsuspecting audience. Created by Mack White, the comic mixes Greek mythology, conspiracy theories, old-time religion, the Waco shooting, and surrealism, yet somehow makes it all seem possible. Titles such as 'Stigmata Sunrise', 'Cindy the Tattooed Sunday School Teacher' and 'The Nudist Nuns of Goat Island' probably tell you all you need to know. If any sound tempting, then, boy, this really is the comic for you. *Villa of the Mysteries* brings together several of White's strips from comics such as *Zero Zero* along with lengthier new features, and is undoubtedly the cartoonist's definitive collection. Of course, it is also his only collection!~DAR

Recommended: 1-2

VIOLATOR

Image: *3 issue miniseries 1994*

In this *Spawn* spin-off, Violator, a demon from Hell, has been banished for his failure to kill Spawn. Not only is his own family after his head, a Mafia boss he's annoyed along the way has set hitmen on his trail too. Violator is fast, wicked, violent and, as written by Alan Moore, as black a comedy as you'll find in comics.~NF

VIOLATOR VS BADROCK

Image: *4 issue miniseries 1995**

Alan Moore returns to take Violator back to Hell in the company of Youngblood team-member Badrock, a scientist intent on tapping the power of Hell, and the angel Celestine. Again, a fast, furious and funny read, if not exactly taxing. Moore certainly shows how to craft a good book out of unpromising material.~NF

VIOLENT MESSIAHS

Image: *8 issue limited series 2000-2002*, one-shot ('Genesis') 2002, 2 issues + ('Lamenting Pain') 2002 to date*

Cheri Major and Earnest Houston head separate serial killer investigations. They discover a possible connection between the killers and start to suspect that they may be the same man, as both sets of crimes have a vigilante dimension. Citizen Pain targets criminals and the Family Man pursues abusive parents. Are these the two sides of one man? After an interesting premise and introduction this is a comic that very quickly starts to make the wrong turns. Which is a shame. It becomes less crime thriller and more conspiracy nonsense, including a secret organisation with world domination as its aim. There are enough nice touches in the dialogue and staging of events to keep the pages turning, and Citizen Pain has a stylish outfit, but on the whole, the interior art is average, particularly compared to the covers, which have a wonderful eerie feel. 1-8 conclude a first story arc, so make a great jumping-off point. 'Genesis' reprints a promotional comic, set just before the series started and also includes previous self-published versions of 1 and an unpublished 2. It's an appealing package for those who love the series. The second series extrapolates on the consequences of the conclusion to the first, but so far seems to be retreading old ground.~DB

VIRTEX

Oktomica Entertainment: *4 issues (0-3) 1998-1999*

Virtex is a cybernetic lawman on the trail of the Ripnun, who's killing prostitutes throughout the Madlands. Also on the trail are bounty hunter, Gunmorra and Makina, who's worried for the safety of her working sister. This is a slick, kinetic, violent fantasy adventure from Casey Lau and Kano, scripted by Mike Baron, though an attempt at a darker background explanation misfires with the gimmick of three separate versions of 3, each with three different endings and different survivors.~NF

VIRTUAL BANG

Studio Ironcat: *5 issue miniseries 1998*

This translates Japanese girls' comics by Ippongi Bang. Her first in 1-2 makes you long for the old British equivalents where one-legged girls overcame their disablities to become world-famous ballerinas. Here, in what's presumably considered cute, fourteen year old Maria divides her time between attending school and taking contracts from the Mafia. There are no further continuing stories, but the frenetic pace and jumps in plot often give the impression something is missing. Although later an improved artist, her college diary strips from the early 1980s reprinted in 2-4 will be more engaging for many.~FP

VIRUS

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1993**

A rescue barge comes across a deserted Chinese research ship, but once it's been boarded the machinery begins to operate independently and strange robotic creatures attack crew members. Even more disturbingly, Chinese jets attempt to bomb the ship, despite having seen that it's inhabited. *Virus* is *Alien* at sea: classic horror material, predictable all the way, but fun with it.~FP

The VISION

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1994-1995, 4 issue miniseries 2002-2003*

In the first miniseries writer Bob Harras starts well with an intriguing plot concerning a few of Marvel's sentient machines displaying odd personality traits. The robotic Ultron as good ol' Texas boy is a laugh, as is the Vision as Sam Spade, given his distinctive red appearance. There is, naturally, an explanation in the final issue, by which point it's been dragged on too long. Artist Manny Clark favours design over technique, and he's an exponent of the everyone-speaking-through-gritted-teeth-or-pouting lips style. Miss out the pointless 3 and pick up the rest for a quick, fun read. The more recent series is a dull story concerning a menace activated at the Vision's creation, the retelling of which contradicts the established past. It's well drawn by Ivan Reis and Joe Pimental, but won't go down as Geoff Johns' finest hour. It also involves Reis redesigning the look of the translucent android, with a complicated mesh of gears and cogs now showing through as he dematerialises. Aren't those the features of a robot, not an android? How long will it be before lazier artists revert to the original look?~WJ

VISION and the SCARLET WITCH

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1982-1983, 12 issue limited series 1985-1986*

Controversial married superheroes take a leave of absence from the Avengers and go domestic in the suburbs. Naturally, supervillains follow, and normal service is quickly resumed, with Avengers and other guest stars galore. The four issues are only loosely related, improve as the series progresses and feature revelations about the stars' origins. The final issue confirms the identity of Wanda and Pietro's father.

Back to the suburbs for take two at the domesticity routine. Although Steve Englehart expends plenty of effort at turning in a fully-fledged soap opera, the end-product is cloying and twee, and Richard Howell's pencils are monstrously pedestrian. The second series centres around Wanda's pregnancy and the eventual birth of her and Vision's twins in the final issue. All their kinsmen drop in throughout the series to reasonable effect, but the new supporting characters are duff and the choice of villains lamentable (are three issues of the Toad really necessary?). The series starts with a crossover to *West Coast Avengers* 1 and 2 and has its epilogue in *West Coast Avengers Annual* 1. By a short head, issue 6 is the pick of the bunch, featuring Wanda, Pietro and their father's first steps down the rocky road to reconciliation.~APS

The VISITOR

Valiant: *2 issue miniseries (vs The Valiant Universe) 1995, 13 issues 1995-1996*

This introduces the Visitor, who is allegedly a non-human alien would-be superhero, in what boils down to a slugfest against all the Valiant heroes. The Visitor span off into his own series thereafter.The hook for the second series was that the Visitor was a character who had previously appeared in the Valiant Universe, but operating under another identity. The secret was kept until the final issue, by which time this lacklustre story had long since run out of steam.~HS

Dracula:VLAD THE IMPALER

Topps: *3 issue miniseries 1993*

Once again, the secret origin of the vampires, but handled with unexpected flair and panache by Roy Thomas and Esteban Maroto. For some strange reason it was reprinted two years later as *Dracula Chronicles*.~HS

VÖGELEIN

Fiery Studios: *5 issue miniseries 2002*

Vögelein is the product of master watchmaker, Heinrich, who intended her to be a dancing automaton, but she turned out to be so much more. Since her making in the Seventeenth Century, she's always needed someone to wind her, daily. Now her latest guardian, Jakob, has died and Vögelein must find someone to take his place, meeting a real fairy, the bitter Duskie, who's opposed to the use of machines, and street cleaner, Ezrael, as she searches. Painted over four years by creator, Jane Irwin, there is a visible improvement in the fluidity of the artwork as the series progresses. This is an unusual story (a variation of sorts on *Pinocchio*), concerned primarily with the nature of life and friendship, and utterly charming too.~NF

VOGUE

Image/Extreme: *3 issue miniseries 1995*

Another multi-creator title from Extreme Studios, as Brian Witten and Cy Voris (writers), Marat Mychaels (layouts) and Andy Park (penciller) tell the tale of Nicola Voganova, model by day, superheroine by night. Vogue's a member of Youngblood, on a mission that takes her back to Russia to fight Stroika and his superterrorist team, Redblood. Lots of shots of scantily-clad women in action poses ensue.~NF

VOID INDIGO

Marvel/Epic: *Graphic Novel, 2 issues 1984-1985*

Marvel pulled the plug on this prematurely, apparently in a dispute over the strong nature of the material, but Vertigo now publish far 'harder' comics without much fuss. It's certainly an unremittingly bleak view of late 20th century life – as one character puts it, "Nobody makes anybody happy anymore. Why should they? What's to be gained?" The series is full of gruesome torture scenes, ritual murders and polymorphous perversity, but this isn't some chic attempt to be shocking, this is Steve Gerber's fully rounded vision of millennial collapse. He's as downright loopy, cosmic and funny as his best 1970s work, and like much of that *Void Indigo* suffers from inadequate artwork. Val Mayerik's decision to paint the graphic novel reveals his limitations, and he appears to have coloured the comics with old felt-tip pens.

Gerber packs these three instalments with enough ideas and plot threads to sustain a hundred lesser comics. The graphic novel begins with the cruel murder of barbarian Ath'agaar by evil sorcerers The Dark Lords of Kur. This routine barbarian opening segues into a long psychedelic sequence, where Ath'agaar enters the void indigo ("blue emptiness") and merges with an alien called Jhagur, from the planet Gebura. Got all that? Jhagur lands in LA, where he assumes the human identity of Michael Jagger (!) and shacks up with a tart with a heart. By 2 Jhagar is seeking his reincarnated enemies to avenge his terrible demise, and to prevent humanity descending into "barbarism and cataclysm".

The abrupt cancellation makes it impossible to tell if the initial intensity could be sustained, but what remains still deserves rescuing from the blue emptiness of critical neglect. Sadly, but understandably, Gerber hasn't written anything half as stimulating since.~AL

Recommended: Graphic Novel, 1, 2

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* Available in a collected edition

VOLCANIC REVOLVER

Oni Press: *3 issue miniseries 1999**

Stylish crime thriller from Scott Morse set in New York City in 1929. Easy going artist Vincenzo runs a little bakery, but his real job is making counterfeit bills for the mob. When a woman comes to collect some funny money he discovers a bomb in her bag and kills her with an antique gun called a Volcanic Repeater. This slowly leads to a confrontation between Italian and Irish gangs, experienced through the eyes of a number of ordinary people. A prologue appeared in *Oni Double Feature* 7. Excellent and enthralling.~WW

Recommended: 1-3

Magic Carpet I VOLTAR

Comics & Comix: *1 issue 1977*

Originally published in the Philippines, Alfredo Alcala's Voltar was much like Conan, whose comics he predated. Voltar was an all-conquering warrior, and the scripting, by Manuel Avad, is typical sword-and-sorcery, but merely an excuse for Alcala to show off his incredible art, and the intricately etched linework here is absolutely bewitching. The wash-delineated 'Buccaneers of the Skull Planet' rounds out a lovely showcase of top-quality artwork.~DAR

Recommended

VOODOO

Image/WildStorm: *4 issue miniseries 1997-1998**

Late of *WildC.A.T.S*, Voodoo takes a job as a dancer in New Orleans, and becomes involved in the club owner's attempt to resurrect his dead father. Along the way she learns something about her namesake. Alan Moore's script is educational and enjoyable, but this is slight, with only the playfulness of the villain Rada evoking any freshness. 1and three pages of 2 are drawn by Mike Lopez with lush detailed textures, but the remaining issues are by Al Rio and Trevor Scott who are serviceable only. As a whole, disappointing.~NF

VOODOOM

Oni Press: *One-shot 2000*

Crossover uniting Jim Mahfood's Zombie Kid and Scott Morse's Little Grey Man. Mahfood and Morse share creative duties, enjoying themselves producing hip cartoony figurework and lots of solid blacks. The Little Grey Man is relocated to Freak City, home of Zombie Kid, where they meet and fight a voodoo doll. It's style over substance and not very funny.~DB

VORTEX

Vortex: *15 issues 1982-1988*

Despite a broad range of material, *Vortex* never delivers anything of real note. Occasional work by Ty Templeton, Dan Day and Ken Steacy raised individual issues to an acceptable level, but the lack editorial vision hampers the series. Some early work by the Hernandez Brothers is of note, Gilbert in 7 and Jaime in 11, and they stand head and shoulders above anything else. Steacy's contributions to 3-5 are reprinted in a one shot titled *Ken Steacy's Summer Rerun*.~NF

VORTEX

Comico: *4 issue miniseries 1991-1993*

A member of the Elementals, Vortex has flying powers. This begins on the environmental moral high ground – greedy corporation threaten to destroy sacred Native American reservation – before quickly descending into bog-standard superhero clichés, ineptly served up by writer Roland Mann and artist Steven Butler.~AL

VOX

Apple: *6 issues 1989-1990*

This begins deceptively as a good-natured buddy science-fiction comic before opening into a tense story of intergalactic espionage and possible war. The heart of the plot concerns a matter transporter tested by transporting living beings to remote worlds, invented by humans, but coveted other races. Escalating tensions provide unpredictable situations, and the whole is very nicely conceived.~FP

VOYAGE TO THE DEEP

Dell: *4 issues 1962-1964*

The Proteus is an experimental "telescopic" submarine that can change its length by a factor of eight (I can hear your gasps of wonder from here). The Enemy keeps trying to use the Earth's natural forces to destroy the US and the Proteus keeps coming to the rescue, pausing midway through the issue to escape the clutches of a giant sea creature, with the lobster in 4 a gem. The stories are technobabble taken to genius level: in 1 The Enemy has injected helium into the Earth's core and this has tilted the planet out of orbit, tipping the Atlantic so it's flooding the US; Proteus draws out the helium using "a gas possessing a molecular structure exactly opposite that of helium", to which the helium is, of course, irresistibly attracted, and the world is saved. Inspired! You will laugh yourself sick.~FC

Recommended: 1-4

Children of the VOYAGER

Marvel UK/Frontier: *4 issue miniseries 1993*

Novelist Sam Wantling is plagued by terrifying nightmares of being consumed by an all-powerful being. His work suffers and his relationship collapses as he becomes convinced these dreams have a basis in reality. They do, but editorial page teasers give the entire game away when Nick Abadzis constructed a slow-release plot. The full implications aren't revealed until 3, by which time Sam has found help. Paul Johnson's scratchy art effectively conveys Wantling's uncertainty and terror, and while both creators would progress to better things, this is a worthwhile read.~FP

VOYAGES

Nautilus Dreams: *1 volume 1983*

The cover contributor listing promises much, but too many artists provide pin-ups, studio discards and stilted set-pieces, although Trina Robbins and Rick Geary are innocent. The jewel is twenty-one Alex Toth pages, reprinted in *Toth Black & White*. The hallucinogenic dreams of unconscious pilot Jesse Bravo form an astounding sequence, with every panel a gem, but almost always wildly different from its predecessor. Some are nothing but a single squiggled line, others skywriting, a starkly contrasted Masai warrior or a lightning effect. Playful experimentation rather than structured narrative, it's stunning, and one hopes Howard Chaykin was thoroughly ashamed when his contributor copy arrived.~FP

VOYEURS INC

Pulp: *1 volume (Voyeur) 1999, 3 volumes + 2000 to date*

Originally serialised in *Pulp*, *Voyeur* has teenage Ko forced to confront his voyeuristic tendencies by a soulmate. After monitoring Ko's girlfriend, they form *Voyeurs Inc* ostensibly as a service. Hideo Yamamoto's return to the subject five years later was more lighthearted with the company is under new management. Their inaugural case is watching a teenage girl believed to be engaged in casual prostitution, and the sordidometer rises from there. Yamamoto presents some potentially distasteful topics, but handles most with a subtlety not often found in Japanese comics dealing with sex explicitly. Sadly, though, in the generally superior *Voyeur* he has no qualms about offering rape as just retribution for infidelity. The art has the big-eyed look common to manga, but incorporates many Western techniques, particularly the fast-paced storytelling. If you won't blanche at the subject matter, these are well-crafted adventure stories.~WJ

WACKY SQUIRREL

Dark Horse: *4 issues, 2 Specials 1987-1988*

Cartoon comedy transferred to comics is hindered by animation's manic action being slowed by the printed page, and without the speed the gags fall flat. The best here is 4, in which Wacky and Kal-El's spaceships each arrive at the wrong planet. Wacky ends up pushing cream pies in Lois Lane's face, and Superman can't understand why every time he feels angry an oversized mallet appears. Some readers caught similarities between this and Tex Avery's *Screwball Squirrel*, and ironically Dark Horse eventually published the original.~WJ

WAHOO MORRIS

Too Hip Gotta Go Graphics: *3 issues 1998-1999*
Image: *1 issue 2000*

The title is the name of the band featuring the central cast, and from this dynamic Craig Taillefer conjures an endearing jumble of human life, largely concentrating on shy singer Alicia and confident guitarist Sebastien. A distracting occult subplot tantalises, but isn't brought to fruition. Taillefer's dialogue is sharp, his observation fine, his characters the type of people you fancy and want to hang out with, and his artwork an expressive fine-lined joy, making *Wahoo Morris* ideal for people who love *Strangers in Paradise*, a title it betters. Bizarrely, Image reprinted the first issue at a higher price on poorer paper, but included a strip from the Blip sampler.~FP

Recommended: 1-3

THE WAITING PLACE

Slave Labor: *Series one 6 issues 1997, series two 12 issues 1999-2002*

A high school soap opera set in chilly Northern Plains. A broad cast is well characterised by Sean McKeever, who nails variations on a small town mentality, and problems both sexes face in late teens and just beyond. The first series art by Brendan and Brian Fraim is not quite the finished article, but doesn't hinder the nuances of the plot. The improved second series has David Yurkovich layouts for Mike Norton's pencils until 6, from which Norton draws everything. This entire run is heavier on detail with more fluidity and subtlety, and McKeever has become a better writer, thinning the cast to concentrate plots, and not telegraphing his surprises. The best issue, 5, has two men united by love and tragedy play out a drama to an unpredictable conclusion. The series ends as the year turns, and McKeever defies everyone's expectations. 9-12 also feature a back-up strip 'Tower', a confusing metaphorical affair drawn in claustrophobic style by Jason Alexander and later a Sirius one-shot.~WJ

Recommended: Series two 4, 5

WAKE

NBM: *3 volumes + 2000 to date*

Thousands of spaceships housing a multitude of races travelling in convoy is a setting enabling many stories amid a vague mission for the central character, Navee, to discover others of her kind: humans. She's one of the few inhabitants of a green planet earmarked for terraforming and colonisation by a race whose transport is failing in the first volume. Once amid the convoy, she's unique in being able to resist telepathic probing. The second volume is set among the communities of Wake, and in the third Navee investigates a steampunk society that's evolved far more rapidly than is natural. Jean David Morvan's scripts raise philosophical points, one of which should be why clumsily applied black strips defacing Phillipe Buchet's art are considered necessary for the more prudish American audience. It's equally a shame that the nudity, along with a few adult references, appears a forced way of elevating what would otherwise be good adventure comics for teenagers into something for adults. Adults who've grown beyond rejecting everything aimed at children should find much to enjoy in *Wake*.~FP

WALDO WORLD

Fantagraphics: *3 issue miniseries 1994*

Another of Kim Deitch's intricately intertwined fantasies of old cartoons and vaudeville. This time Deitch explores the mythical cartoons starring his most famous creation, Waldo, and how his early days led to the creation of Disneyworld (sort of). As always with Deitch, there's a rich collection of supporting characters, reflecting the glory days of old, and palpable sense of longing for the past. And again as always Deitch's art is a joy to behold.~DAR

Recommended: 1-3

WALK THROUGH OCTOBER

Caliber: *1 issue 1995*

There was once a boy, a storyteller and Mr Balloon, who is Evil. That's pretty much all Matthew Smith manages to convey in this first issue of an intended three. More an illustrated story than comics, especially as the minimalistic artwork is mostly single images and whole pages of prose shortcut the narrative to avoid (seemingly) the need to draw any of it.~NF

WALKING DEAD

Aircel: *4 issue miniseries 1989-1990, one-shot (Zombie special) 1990*

Night of the Living Dead meets *I am Legend* in this knock off as tough cop and living person, Joe Barker fights a losing battle against a world turned into flesh eating zombies. The special contains two unconnected tales of the rotting dead. Gratuitous and poorly executed.~WW

Dave Hodson's WALKING WOUNDED

Fox/Fantagraphics: *1 issue 1990*

Dave Hodson was one of several *Fox Comics* artists whose pages incorporated bottom of panel text beneath often almost disassociated illustrations to tell tales of little consequence. His art possesses a fine cartoon charm, but his chosen form of narrative rapidly distances without the whimsical qualities of Rick Geary, purveyor of sometimes similar work. The title refers to strips about Hodson's band, a free single from whom, is bound in, and there are other autobiographical strips along with some fiction. None of it makes a compelling read.~FP

WALL OF FLESH

AC: *One-shot 1992*

Bill Black has always had a mission to re-present the best of the past to new readers, and this contains the titular tale by Bob Powell, The 'Curse of Khar' by Joe Kubert, 'The Repulsive Dwarf' by Wally Wood and 'The Bloody Fangs of Fear' by Gardner Fox and Dick Ayers. Of their genre, these are all fine stories but to modern readers, there is a sense of déjà vu about the horrors presented.~NF

WALT DISNEY'S COMICS AND STORIES

Dell: *263 issues 1940-1962*
Gold Key: *210 issues (264-473) 1962-1980*
Whitman: *37 issues (474-510) 1980-1984*
Gladstone: *37 issues (511-547) 1986-1990*
Disney: 38 issues (548-585) 1990-1993
Gladstone: *48 issues (586-633) 1993-1999*

An overwhelmingly popular and influential series that from its inception promoted the Disney philosophy of wholesome entertainment, whilst producing some of the finest ever children's comics tales. Viewed in the right light it also holds a few records for longevity. The first Disney strip publications actually predate the acknowledged birth of American comics. After the success of the *Mickey Mouse Book* in 1930, a Mouse magazine was created as a giveaway. Their popularity led to *Mickey Mouse Magazine* (1933), followed by another series of giveaways, before a regular *Mickey Mouse Magazine* débuted in Summer 1935. Contributors included Otto Messmer and John Stanley, and new cinema features were previewed, with Snow White serialised a month before cinema release in 1937. In 1938 the success of Action Comics and its landmark all-new strip Superman prompted a gradual change from magazine to comic. Puzzles and features were replaced by more strip reprints, particularly the Mickey Mouse newspaper dailies produced by Floyd Gottfredson for over twenty years. The transition to comic was completed with Volume 5 issue 12 (September 1940) and the next month it became *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* 1, with Gottfredson's 'Mickey Mouse Meets Robinson Crusoe' serial, begun in the magazine, continuing sequentially.

The format of reprinting newspaper strips continued until 31 (April 1943) when the first story created specifically for the comic appeared. It was ten pages of Donald Duck by a young man named Carl Barks. He'd substantially improved the script he'd been given, and was asked to write the next one himself. For the next twenty-three years Barks was the principal Duck creator (alternating mostly with comics veteran Jack Hannah, whose first Donald strip appeared in 37). Donald, and later Uncle Scrooge and a wealth of other characters flowed from Barks' pen into the hearts of the world's children. When he retired in 1966, he'd written over five hundred stories, (just over half of them starring Donald) which would be reprinted continuously until the comic's cancellation in 1999. The stories he wrote for survive in fifty-one paperback volumes published by Gladstone collecting five to a book.

Barks originally joined Disney as an animator, and his feel for sight gags and great narrative drawing skill made his work instantly recognisable in an era when credits were not given. Every kid knew the work of "the good duck artist", even if they didn't know his name. He produced a new ten page story for most issues between 31 and 297, then 308 and 312, and many are landmarks. Barks created Gladstone Gander (88), and Uncle Scrooge originally appeared as a minor character in his story for 1947's *Donald Duck Christmas Special* , with his first feature appearance in 98. The Junior Woodchucks (125) were followed by the Beagle Boys (134) and Gyro Gearloose (141), but Barks wasn't the only star of the comic. Walt Kelly produced many strips, starting with 'The Gremlins' (34-41, based on a wartime propaganda animated short), and was the leading cover artist from 40. He contributed most until 118, when the pressures of producing his own newspaper strip, Pogo, forced him to quit. Barks' first cover was 95, and he was the regular cover artists from 129. Floyd Gottfredson's reprints were phased out during the late 1940s, as the characters screen appearance had gradually altered and no longer matched his original strips. Classic tales were redrawn by a new crop of artists, many of whom had worked on Disney newspaper strips. Dick Moores would later draw Gasoline Alley, and had been producing the 'Uncle Remus' Sunday page since 1946. His redrawn 'The Phantom Blot' began serialisation in 107, while Gottfredson's assistant Bill Wright redrew 'Monarch of Medioca' which began in 112, and he was replaced by Paul Murry and latterly Tony Strobl and Jack Manning. In the comic's last years, despite much resistance from the Disney licensing division, many classics shelved due to the characters developing beyond their original depictions were reprinted. Gottfredson serials were featured in 562-563, 568-572, 581-583, 586-599, and another Taliaferro production in 584.

New tales of regulars Mickey, Donald and Goofy were supplemented with further adventures of Disney's latest film and latterly television productions. Within months of theatrical release, *The Three Little Pigs, Pinocchio, Brer Rabbit, Dumbo, Chip'n'Dale,* and Mad Madam Mim (the wacky witch from The Sword in the Stone) would appear in the comic. Al Taliaferro was a prolific mainstay, another newspaper strip artist who made the move to comics. His Silly Symphonies newspaper strip, which featured Disney's non-Duck or Mouse cartoon creations, was reprinted in 5, starring the Three Little Pigs, with a sequel in 16. There were also adaptations of 'Birds of a Feather' (13), 'The Boarding School Mystery' (14), 'Cookieland' and 'Three Little Kittens' in 15, 'The Ugly Duckling' and 'Ambrose, The Robber Kitten' in 17 and 'Penguin Isle' in 19. His first regular – if unorthodox – series, again reprinted from the 'Silly Symphonies' strip was Bucky Bug in 20-28 (excluding 24 and 27), reprinting a serial from 1932-1934. It returned in 1944 and continued uninterrupted until the end of the decade as one of a number of strips experimenting with narrative style. Bucky's adventures were all delivered in rhyming quatrains and couplets, a literary device adapted for 'Little Hiawatha' (143-151, 159) scripted in the same rhythmic cadence as Longfellow's 'The Song of Hiawatha' and, more pertinently, in the manner of the narration of the popular Disney Cartoon it was adapted from. Bucky Bug was revived in Disney-friendly Europe, and Dutch originated material was printed in 623-625, 627, 629-630, and a Taliaferro reprint 'The Wise Little Hen' appeared in 580.

A number of secondary features achieved great quality and impressive longevity during what are considered the golden years, 1945-1956. In 52 Li'l Bad Wolf began, and barring 55, ran until 204 when it moved to *Mickey Mouse* to be replaced by Scamp, the son of title characters in *The Lady and the Tramp,* usually drawn by the greatly underrated Jack Bradbury. Initially written by Chase Craig and drawn by Carl Beuttner, Li'l Bad Wolf was the son of the Big Bad Wolf, who despaired of ever teaching his goody-two-shoes offspring the family business of roguery and the general eating of everyone. Buettner also wrote from 54, when the strip absorbed the Three Little Pigs, to establish a format wherein the adult wolf tried to catch his boy's best friends only to be thwarted by the noble cub. Buettner's last story was 67, and the most notable artist on the feature from that point was Gil Turner from 85, who often wrote the strips and frequently featured other Disney guest stars. The strip returned between 248 and 288, and in very occasional new stories in the late 1970s, before a new William Van Horn tale in 581. Grandma Duck began in 121 and ran until 168 (except for 135, 142, 146 and 155) either in her own strip or with Donald and Daisy. 'Daisy's Diary' was another occasional strip, later replaced by the mischievous chipmunks Chip 'n' Dale (who had first appeared in 89).

In 1952, *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* was selling in excess of 4,000,000 copies a month. As the Disney Company marketed the stories globally, Marxist governments considered the stories subversive attempts to seduce their young into US Capitalist/Imperialism, and the take-charge heroics of Donald and Mickey as symbolising interventionist politics. Uncle Scrooge was seen as a mask for Uncle Sam. Maybe so, but they wouldn't have been so worried if they weren't so readable. As the 1960s progressed, greater emphasis was placed on properties from Disney's burgeoning TV output such as the awful 'Adventures of Annette (Funicello) and Merlin Jones' (Vol. 25, #1) or 'Walt Disney Theatre Presents'. With Barks' retirement, things changed. From 313, a policy of reprinting of early stories was instituted, and the title devoted itself to tales from the cartoon favourites. It muddled along until Whitman's demise, hastened by their policy of largely only distributing the comic bagged with two other Disney comics. Their last issue is a sad indictment of how far the title had fallen, being nothing more than an extended ad for the Disney Studios latest property, the saccharine and derivative *Wuzzles*.

Two years later Gladstone was formed, to revive Disney comics, and naturally Carl Barks' timeless stories played a large part. The company took its name from the preternaturally lucky Gander, cousin of Donald Duck. They immediately reinstated the tradition of a serialised Mickey Mouse strip, dropped with 394, and along with Barks and other American reprints, they ran the best strips from Disney's overseas studios. European audiences had never lost their taste for the characters, and Barks and his contemporaries were revered, with new luminaries such as Daan Jippes, Fred

Milton or the numerous members of the Gutenburghus studio a second tier. Jippes and Milton's duck stories, either collaborating or apart, were featured in most issues to 530, and Gladstone also commissioned new material. Most notably this was from William Van Horn and the excellent Don Rosa (523, 524, 526, 528, 531, 547), who comes closest to recapturing the style, verve and charm of Barks.

With 548 Disney launched their first ever comics imprint, but the company's priorities were geared towards the promotion of newer properties such as Roger Rabbit or the TV tie-ins like *Chip'n Dale Rescue Rangers.* New Duck material was reserved for their own titles, and Mickey Mouse was temporarily dropped. An early Disney issue worth finding is 550, with the first printing in comics of a Carl Barks Donald Duck story rejected in the 1950s as too violent! It also reprints the first appearance of Chip'n'Dale and the second of Li'l Bad Wolf. As Disney continued publication editors became more careful about selecting the reprints from the goldmine available, and concerns about trademark appearance gave way to historical verity. For example 580 reprinted Donald Duck's first appearance in Ted Osbourne and Al Taliaferro's adaptation of the animated short *The Little Red Hen,* originally a 'Silly Symphony' newspaper strip from Sept. 16 to Dec 16, 1934. There was also Mickey Mouse's 'The Brave Little Tailor' by Gottfredson and Manuel Gonzalez, a 'Silly Symphony' strip from Aug 28 – Nov 20 1938, as well as numerous other shorts.

Gladstone resumed publishing with 586 and William Van Horn began a run of new Donald Duck yarns in the next issue. He'd found his style by this point, and his strips are distinguished and amusing, drawing on the Barks template, but with more frenetic art. With 601 the comic went giant-sized and presented some of the best issues in the entire run. Not only were the reprints very carefully selected, featuring much historically significant material, there were memorable new tales in almost every issue. Don Rosa duck stories, now commissioned directly from Europe were serialised in 601-616, with further new work of his in 618, 619 and 622. Issues in the 620s are a step down, with the reprinted European material, although new to America, not as good as the now missing Rosa and not compensating for sometimes very short Van Horn contributions. The quality of the reprints remained choice, though, providing great comics reading for the young and invaluable – and oft-longed for – reading experiences for the legion of older Disney fans who finally saw material they'd waited most of their lives to read.

632 reprints for the first time a Barks story drawn by Bob Gregory, but particular mention must be made of the final issue. By this point Gladstone publisher Bruce Hamilton had tired of the administrative problems of dealing with Disney, and the restrictions placed on what he could print. Knowing he was ceasing publication he published a long Don Rosa story Disney had long put the block on. The pointed environmental concerns were apparently considered too political for their American readers, and the rendition of pygmy native Americans, although taken from a Barks story, were now politically incorrect. It's a gem with a message, and among Rosa's best stories. This issue also has a fine new Van Horn story returning classic Barks characters, a rarely seen Barks reprint and an excellent Uncle Scrooge story by Vicar.

Throughout its long history, the provision of quality comics that stay with the readers all their lives ought to be considered as the book's greatest strength and most valuable achievement. An irresistible comics landmark.~WW

Recommended: 31, 38 -40, 51-60, 88, 98, 111, 114, 117,130-312, 494, 511-534, 550, 561, 580, 600-603, 611-618, 633

WALT KELLY'S...

Eclipse: *One-shot (Christmas Classics) 1987, one-shot (Springtime Tales) 1988*

These reprint 1940s seasonal Walt Kelly strips. The ultra cute 'Christmas Comes to Woodland' is from *Four Color's Santa Claus Funnies* 91, and is followed by a Peter Wheat fairytale. He's also the lead in the *Springtime* issue, reprinting a comic given away by bakeries in 1948. The remainder of that issue, 'Goblin Glen', is from the 1946 *Four Color* 114, 'Fairy Tale Parade'. The Santa and Goblin stories are fluid and charming as Kelly an early peak in his illustrative career. That doesn't mean these Peter Wheat pages are anything more than some commercial art; equivalent to some 1970s *Hostess Twinkies* strips.~SW

WALTER Campaign of Terror

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1996*

Walter is big. Walter is silent. Walter is strong. Walter was once possessed by The Mask. Walter is brutal and Walter is up for mayor. This doesn't sit well with the incumbent, who hires a hitman, but Walter's not easily killed and also has powerful friends, so events escalate from there. John Arcudi and Doug Mahnke's series starts slowly, but comes to incorporate several eccentric characters and their individual foibles. Particularly memorable is the midget millionaire who's constructed a scaled-down city where he's a giant. By 3 *Walter* has developed into a fine satire of political expedience, with all the apparently anomalous elements gradually locking into place. A sadly undervalued series.~FP

Recommended: 3, 4

THE WANDERERS

DC: *13 issues 1988-1989*

Created by Jim Shooter in the 1960s for *The Legion of Super-Heroes*, twenty years later DC killed them, cloned them and gave them new appearances and powers. You wonder why they bothered. Doug Moench dashed off scripts on his tea break, and there was no saving grace of polished art. After thirteen issues it was cancelled, unlucky for it, lucky for us.~HY

WANDERING STAR

Pen & Ink: *11 issues 1993-1996*

Sirius: *10 issues (12-21) 1996-1997*

Casandra Andrews, daughter of the President of Earth she escapes an alien invasion on the spaceship, Wandering Star. The plot thereafter takes in a period of capture before another escape and a daring plan to appeal for help. All the while, they're pursued by the deadly warship, Kekakopolous and it's captain, Narz. Lacking action, this is a thoughtful and appealing exploration of the lives of its main characters and their relationships with each other and the world around them. That it's set during a war in some far-flung future, allows for some very dramatic situations, but creator Teri Sue Wood always comes back to motivation – there's a lot of dialogue and exposition. Wood's artwork owes something in the inking to Matt Howarth, but it's her own style that stands out and makes this worthwhile.~NF

WANDERING STARS

Fantagraphics: *1 issue 1987*

Projected science-fiction series that never had the chance to reach the audience it deserved. A strange woman, Magen, is injured in battle with government forces and is aided by the wealthy Amelia. An assassin is dispatched to kill Magen, while Amelia tries to understand what drives her to rebel. Written by Stuart Hooper and drawn by Sam Kieth, it's a promising début but unfinished and in isolation it's just a curiosity.~NF

WANDERLUST

Antarctic: *1 issue 1999*

Chiseled Comics: *4 issues 2000-2001*

After an abortive start in black and white, Bryant Shiu opted for full colour self-publishing with a seemingly different story. Set when humanity has colonised many planets, then split into two opposing factions, they're about to get a jolt when an alien species enters the mix. The focus of is hotshot pilot Jacob Sumner, whose past is revealed in 3. Shiu is prone to the odd expository infodump, but had an ambitious plot in mind, of which this is only the start, and expressive action artist Brett Weldele far removed from the dull stylist he developed into. Fans of character-driven space adventure should find plenty to enjoy here despite the premature cancellation.~WJ

WANTED

DC: *9 issues 1972-1973*

Issues of *DC Special* (8, 14) used the Wanted cover design to obviously good response, hence this series. Old-style Wanted posters covered largely standard superhero reprints, but it was a cheap way of obtaining very old stories. 2, for example, contained the first teaming of the Joker and the Penguin from Batman 25 along with an early 1960s Flash story. It's the 1940s material that pressed the right buttons with the readership, and from 3 there's only a Gil Kane Green Lantern strip dates from later than 1949. There's an undeniable spirit to the material, but most is crudely drawn, with even the more renowned artists like Jack Burnley on Starman (6) not wearing well. The most interestingly plotted stories originate from companies DC later took over, with Kid Eternity in 4 and Doll Man in 5. The Sandman, by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, in 9 tops the 1940s DC material.~FP

WAR

Charlton: *49 issues 1975-1976 (1-9), 1979-1984 (10-49)*

One of the last and probably the least of the war anthologies from Charlton featuring the usual blend of gung-ho imperialism and down-home idealism, although occasionally a piece of quality work does find its way in. Most issues have Sam Glanzman, many have Pat Boyette and 43 has a rare Steve Ditko war story.~WW

Recommended: 17, 37, 43

THE WAR

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1989*

The conclusion to Marvel's well-considered but unsuccessful 'New Universe' titles, set on an Earth with only a restrained selection of superheroes. Or that, at least, was the original concept. With sales never high, more superpowered characters were introduced, to the point of revealing even Ronald Reagan had been affected. Following *The Draft*, most remaining New Universe characters are involved in a plot about one superhuman doing his best to engineer World War III. Does he succeed? Do you really care? It's a perfunctory series dragged on too long and cynically published in an unnecessarily expensive format for any remaining New Universe fans.~WJ

WAR AGAINST CRIME

EC: *11 issues 1948-1950*
Gemstone: *11 issues 2000-2001**

Before changing its name to *The Vault of Horror*, *War Against Crime* told "real stories from police records", cashing in on a very popular genre at the time. The stories are normally of modern gangsters and criminals with occasional western tales, but from 10, a story from 'The Vault of Horror' is included, marking the development of the series and its writers towards the psychological suspense strips that characterised EC's New Trend. Johnny Craig and Al Feldstein provided visual consistency, with Craig supplying all covers from 3 and strips in 1, 5-7, 9-11, Feldstein having stories in 3-11. Other artists include Lee Ames, Ed Moore, Stan Asch, John Alton and George Roussos. The main writers were original editor, Ivan Klapper, Gardner Fox and Bill Gaines, with Craig and Feldstein who mostly illustrating their own scripts. Whilst not as gripping as the 'classic' EC titles, there's much to enjoy in watching artists (and companies) develop.~NF

WAR DANCER

Defiant: *7 issues 1994*

Co-created by the erratic Alan Weiss and Jim Shooter, *War Dancer* is a baffling mixture of standard superhero antics, pseudo-Eastern mysticism and tongue-in-cheek humour. Our time-travelling hero defeats his many enemies by dancing on them, or as he puts it in issue 1, in a typically flowery monologue, "I dance to the rhythms of the universe, one with the energy." Pompous and overblown, there are only two redeeming features: the constant use of the phrase "Org's Phlegm", and a scene in 3 where a villain grows and grows until he literally bursts!~AL

WAR IS HELL

Marvel: *15 issues 1973-1975*

The first eight issues reprint 1950s war stories and a couple of tales from *Sgt Fury and his Howling Commandos*. With 9, Chris Claremont was handed the scripting chores for his first regular series. John Kowalski, the cursed spirit of a dead soldier, was forced by Death to temporarily animate the bodies of the recently dead. Destined to repeatedly relive the horrors of World War II, he served as a perfect focus to depict the grisly nature of war. One of the better war comics, the strip avoids the glorifications and clichés that are usually so prominent.~APS

WAR MACHINE

Marvel: *25 issues 1994-1996*

A tiff with his former employer left James Rhodes, former substitute Iron Man, at a loose end, but with a powerful armoured flying suit. In spurious justification of his name, he decides his mission is to steam in where political angels fear to tread, sometimes manipulated into acting as in 1-4. As a civilian Rhodes heads WorldWatch, an organisation exposing injustice and abuse of power. It's a competent set up, but only the final issues address a major problem. Once in armour there's little differentiates War Machine from Iron Man, and even out of armour both run companies with far-reaching, enormous influence. Dan Abnett's plotting from 11 is more imaginative, and he solves the Iron Man clone problem by having Rhodes bond with a more organic armoured suit from 18. By that time the art has degenerated beyond all redemption. Don't bother.~FP

WAR MAN

Marvel/Epic: *2 issue microseries 1993*

An arms dealer has to lead a politician through the Amazon after a plane crash and fight off mercenary troops while doing so. Could be any two issues of *The Punisher*.~FP

WAR OF THE GODS

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1991-1992*

1991 was the fiftieth anniversary of Wonder Woman's début, and all we got was this sprawling, incoherent series crossing over into other titles, with chapters misnumbered, unidentified or appearing in the wrong order. The Greek and Roman pantheons declare war on each other, and Earth's superheroes, led by Wonder Woman, are caught in the crossfire. Good luck following the chapter order.~HS

WAR OF THE WORLDS

Eternity: *6 issues 1988-1990*

1-3 tell the story of Rebecca, her husband, John, and Stanley Boyd, who comes to her rescue when her highland village is destroyed by Martians. In 4-6 Boyd is sought by Meat, son of Rebecca and an Aarach (Martian), whose brother hybrids are determined to conquer the world. Scott Finley's take on the H. G. Wells classic is initially confusing, but in providing a different person's view of the well known story becomes interesting and is well supported by Brooks Hagan's scratchy artwork, which is suitably dark and atmospheric. Unfortunately, 4-6 seem tagged on and, in departing from the original, less believable.~NF

THE WAR OF THE WORLDS

Caliber: *4 issue miniseries 1996-1997*

So the events related in the H.G. Wells novel actually happened, and having overcome their susceptibility to germs, the Martians are back for another try a century later. It's enjoyable hokum with German artist Horus showing great promise.~WJ

WAR STORY

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 2001-2002, 4 issue miniseries 2002-2003*

Garth Ennis and a different artist every issue (Chris Weston and Gary Erskine, John Higgins, Dave Gibbons, and David Lloyd, on the first series, Erskine, Lloyd, Carlos Ezquerra and Cam Kennedy on the second) explore the horrors and reality

* Available in a collected edition

of war on a series of self-contained, stand alone tales. The style and the sentiment are heavily influenced by the British comics of Ennis' childhood. The stories are competent, but fall rather too much into stereotypes of honest Germans becoming disgusted at what they're doing, and innocent working class lads sent to their deaths by bumbling chinless officers. War wasn't all *Boys Own* games, but it wasn't as grey as it's sometimes painted here, either. In the safety of the 21st century, it's all too easy to look back and ignore that World War II was a war that had to be fought, and that the men who fought it did the best they could in circumstances we cannot possibly imagine. In attempting to show a 'different' side, *War Story* sometimes cheapens that in a way that an adventure comic trying less desperately to be relevant might have avoided.~JC

WARBLADE: Endangered Species

Image/WildStorm: *4 issue miniseries 1995*

Warblade (WildC.A.T.S) and Ripclaw (Cyberforce) team up to thwart a Daemonite scheme to rule the world. In the meantime, an old friend now possessed by a Daemonite, provides the "is he on our side or not?" twists. Writer Steven Seagle lays his character-driven piece over a slim plot while Scott Clark draws lots of full-page panels for that 'dynamic' affect. It's not bad, but there's nothing to distinguish it.~NF

WARFRONT

Harvey: *39 issues 1951-1958 (1-35), 1965-1967 (36-39)*

War stories all pretty much identical: much rushing around and shooting and standing up to interrogation and cursing of Commies. Towards the end regular characters appeared in more far-fetched stories: Dynamite Joe ("the blast-crazy marine"), and Half Mask, a disfigured Nazi with "death ray lenses". The bulk is unreadable, but there are occasional treasures, such as the following speech from 36: "Thank you for saving me from losing my confidence in us Americans! If a dope like me can bamboozle a Commie officer, our scientists can out-think their eggheads!" There's notable artwork from Bob Powell in most 1950s issues, and 36-39 have Wally Wood. And, of course, there are the adverts: the 3-Way Hurricane Lantern, the Electronic Computer Brain, the Automatic Firing Tripod Machine Gun, the Glamorous Dress for your Barbie Doll, and Rupture-Easer Hernia Belt. It makes you wonder what picture Harvey had of their typical reader.~FC

WARHAMMER

Black Library: *64 issues (0-63) + 1998 to date*

Impressive, if single minded anthology series set in the various universes of the Games Workshop role playing games. The Tolkeinesque fantasy worlds of Warhammer and Mordheim and the grandiose if derivative science fiction universe of Warhammer 40,000 and Necromunda provide familiar backdrops for action adventures in the manner of *2000AD*, often by veterans and alumni of *2000AD*. It all kicks off with the Elric-like elf-warrior Darkblade* from Dan Abnett and Kev Hopgood, Hive City bounty hunter Kal Jerico* by Gordon Rennie and Karl Kopinski, Rennie and Colin MacNeil's space-opera Bloodquest, topped off with a horror short from Rennie and David Pugh. It pretty much cements the format for all future issues.

18, 20 and 22 starred Redeemer* by Pat Mills, Debbie Gallagher and Wayne Reynolds, and were cover promoted as a *Warhammer* miniseries, telling the tale of a warrior-cleric. He took his own brand of bloody-handed missionary ministration to the mutant and devil haunted wastes of the Hive planet Necromunda. Despite Mills' trademark black humour and surreal violence, unfavourable comparisons to Nemesis are unavoidable and the character has only reappeared infrequently since.

Better series include the barbaric Mordheim by Rennie and Paul Peacock, the manic but excellent Giant Robot Titan* from Abnett, Anthony Williams and Andy Lanning, space war epic Inquisitor by Abnett and Simon Colby, and the moody psychic thriller Daemonifuge* (various including Kev Walker, Jim Campbell, Rennie and Karl Richardson). Many others all alternate as short run serials (swiftly repackaged as graphic novels), with complete shorts and little features. Again like *2000AD*, *Warhammer* proves a valuable training ground for many newcomers, and as the requisite quality of the work is high it may well be the first published work of tomorrow's superstars. The target audience is well supplied with exactly what it wants, but despite the aforementioned consistently high quality, the lack of narrative variety may deter casual readers.~WW

WARHAWKS

TSR: *9 issues 1990-1991*

Ambitious, but second-rate series from games publisher TSR in which each comic also contains the rules and makings of a board game. The lead story boasts the writing skills of Roy and Dann Thomas (1-6), but their tales is plodding and unattractive despite settings that include Gallipoli, Troy and the Battle of Britain. In the back, 'Bad Boys' (1-6) begins as a crime series with American Special Forces agents pursuing the outlaw president of Bananama (sic) before veering wildly into insanity when the characters are transformed into super powered plants by a mad scientist. The best that can be said is that Dan Spiegle delivers his usual professional artwork. Another over-informative, time travelling do-gooder, The Mystorian, fills out the last three issues.~NF

WARHEADS

Marvel UK: *14 issues 1992-1993, 2 issue microseries ('Black Dawn') 1993*

The tagline "Mercenaries across time and space" had potential largely unexplored as the time-travelling protagonists mainly get lost in limbo and fight Marvel US guest stars rather than doing much in the way of time-travelling. Listlessly written, formlessly illustrated, it seems no one involved could be bothered to fake it. The microseries had a new creative team, but the same old ennui.~HS

WARLANDS

Image: *12 issue limited series 1999-2001, one-shot ('Three Stories') 2001, 7 issues ('Age of Ice' 0, ½,1-5) 2001-2002*
Dreamwave: *4 issues + (The Age of Ice 6-9) 2002*

It has been centuries since Malagen the Black withdrew his vampire armies from the lands of the East due to a prophecy involving legendary DarkLyte Armour bringing about Malagen's defeat. The story commences the night of the vampire forces new invasion. A knight named Jerell is sent to inform the king, accompanied by feisty elfgirl Elessa, Delezar the wizard and a young seer called Zeph. Various stock fantasy trials culminate in battle between the East's General Atrilegis and Malagen in 12. The one-shot provides biographical accounts of Malagen, Jerell and Elessa, and 'The Age of Ice' is set almost two centuries later. It's narrated by now Archmage Zeph, who is reunited with an old friend named Marisana who has come to take him back to his people. Along the way they run into Aragon, a former comrade in arms, and the winged ruler Aeteua. 'Age of Ice' 0 is set in a Ryotian prison cell and consists of an interrogation of an unnamed rebel – it leads into the raid on a rebel arsenal in Age of Ice ½. The first series is pencilled and plotted by the prolific Pat Lee with Adrian Tsang scripting, with Tsang taking over the writing completely during 'Age of Ice', and Lee surrendering the pencilling later as well. The colour in these comics is a key part of the rendering, and it gets darker and more indistinct as the series progresses. The whole concept is sub-Tolkein dross, but was instantly popular resulting in 1-6 being reprinted in two issues of *Warlands Chronicles* before the entire first story was collected.~SW

WARLOCK

Marvel: *15 issues 1972-1973 (1-8), 1975-1976 (9-15), 6 issue miniseries 1982-1983, 6 issue miniseries 1992, 8 issue limited series (The Warlock Chronicles) 1993-1994, 4 issue miniseries 1998-1999*

Warlock's history can be found in Thor 134-135, *Fantastic Four* 66-67, *Thor* 165-166 and *Marvel Premiere* 1-2. In the last of these, the High Evolutionary creates Counter Earth, a perfect world hidden from our view by the simple expedient of being on the other side of the sun. The Man-Beast subverts his plan by precipitating war, and Him offers to rid Counter Earth of the Man-Beast. The High Evolutionary gives him a powerful gem and Him, now calling himself Adam Warlock, sets off to fulfil his promise. The first run starts from this point, introducing various characters with counterparts in the regular Marvel Universe (Reed Richards, Doctor Doom). Despite several changes of writer, parallels with the story of Jesus remained apparent, although they became more subtle as the series progressed until the storyline was concluded in *The Incredible Hulk* 176-178, with Warlock being crucified and resurrected! Originally drawn by Gil Kane (1-5), Warlock looked good until Bob Brown took over.

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*Available in a collected edition

Warlock then appeared in *Strange Tales* (178-181) as part of Jim Starlin's Thanos saga, which continued into the revived *Warlock* series. Warlock faced his evil future self, The Magus, in 9-11. Thereafter a story concentrating on Pip the Troll, is followed by Warlock fighting the Star-Thief. In the final issue, Warlock struggles to retain his power over the gem he's been using, which contains the souls of all those he's killed with it. Starlin concludes the story in *Marvel Team-Up* 55, *Avengers Annual* 7 and then *Marvel Two-In-One Annual* 2, with Warlock's third death and the end of Thanos. Starlin's early version of Warlock is powerful and mysterious, with intelligent scripts and dynamic, detailed artwork, tightly inked. Much of his work since has been over-indulgent, but don't let that put you off seeking this out. All the Starlin issues were reprinted in both the 1982 and 1992 miniseries.

The Warlock Chronicles 1-5 are an extension of the *Infinity Crusade* series whilst 6-8 are 'Blood and Thunder' crossovers. Tedious and very poorly drawn, none are worth reading. The second miniseries, by Tom Lyle (with Robert Jones inks), begins with the death of Captain Marvel III's mother, Elysius, and then reunites Warlock with Gamora, Pip the Troll and Drax before pitting them all against Syphonn in the Negative Zone. After the Infinity 'epics' from Starlin, this is a much more palatable portrayal of Warlock, but still too much of a simplistic superhero combat.~NF

Recommended: 9-15

WARLOCK

Marvel: *9 issues 1999-2000*

This Warlock was an alien form of artificial life memorably introduced in New Mutants 18, and revived as part of a line of titles starring robotic life-forms. Louise Simonson plots are unwisely dependent on X-Men related back history, but using Warlock as a sort of techno-Plastic Man, at least gives artist Pascual Ferry the opportunity for amusing visuals. He rescues a girl in 1, and they spend the remainder of the series attempting to evade capture, as that would lead to a techno-virus enabling control of the world to fall into evil hands. The word count is enormous, and Warlock fails to engage on any level.~FP

WARLOCK and the Infinity Watch

Marvel: *42 issues 1992-1995*

Carrying on from *Infinity Gauntlet*, Warlock and friends (Pip the Troll, Gamora, Moondragon, The Destroyer) are made guardians of the six Infinity gems. To ensure no-one can use them again the team relocates to Mole Man's Monster Island. You just know that that's not the end of it, and the series is dominated by tie-ins to *Infinity War* (8-10), *Infinity Crusade* (19-22), 'Blood and Thunder' (23-25) and 'Atlantis Rising' (41-42). The whole thing's written by Jim Starlin, but he's lost the inspiration that made his original *Warlock* worth reading.~NF

WARLOCK 5

Aircel: *Series one 22 issues 1986-1989, series two 7 issues 1989-1990*

Sirius: *4 issue miniseries 1998*

Five warlocks guard the gates of the Grid, a nexus of alternate realities, each striving to either maintain a balance or usurp the power of the Grid for themselves. 1-13 are by Gordon Derry and Denis Beauvais, whose airbrush and watercolour effects make this visually impressive. It's violent and sexy, but as science fiction fantasy goes, this is a reasonable attempt at something different. 1-10 were reprinted in two collections.

Barry Blair's *Warlock* 5, begun after a creative dispute. It retains some of the basic premise, but has to use completely different characters. Blair's simpler cartooning is a shock after the sophistication of Beauvais, although replacement Dale Keown on 16 and 17 was already showing promise. The second series continues the story from the first. Blair's more straightforward scripts aren't a patch on Derry's, but he does tie up the loose ends for the final issue. The Sirius miniseries appears to offer a completely fresh (and downbeat) start as dancers, Chispa and Heather are possessed by magic talismans and start a ritual designed to bring a demon into the world. Blair's storytelling takes a dramatic stride forward with the help of Colin Chan, but he's still too fond of elfin features and hard-nippled women to entirely cast off the faults of the past.~NF

WARLORD

DC: *133 issues, 6 Annuals 1976-1988, 6 issue miniseries 1992*

This continues from Warlord's début in *First Issue Special* 8, written and illustrated by Mike Grell. Adventurer Travis Morgan finds himself in a strange world beneath the Earth called Skartaris, populated by various beasts, and where sorcery still exists. Grell's artwork suited sword-and-sorcery far better than superheroes, and he was able to come up with, if not original, certainly entertaining ideas. Skartaris is well conceived, and eventually revealed to be in another dimension accessed through Earth. There's permanent daylight, and time passes at a considerably slower rate, as Morgan discovers whenever he returns home. Grell also merges Earth science with the fantasy elements, an example being chief villain Deimos, whose mystical scrolls of power are actually computer manuals.

Morgan adapts well to Skataris and a skimpy furry jock-strap, and Grell provides an interesting cast. Companion Machiste, dates from 2 when he and Morgan were sold as gladiators, Morgan leading a subsequent revolt that earned him the title Warlord. Partner Tara is rescued from a voracious dinosaur in true sword-and-sorcery fashion in the debut, but her frailty disguised her being quite a dab hand with the sword. Shakira, introduced in 32, is a warrior woman who can transform herself into a cat, yet retain her human intellect.

Warlord rapidly makes his way back home, but he chooses to return to free Skartaris from occupation by Deimos and his forces. He's accompanied by a former lover, Mariah, conveniently also a former fencing champion. Deimos is a hardy old mystic though, and returns from the dead. Several times. Each time he's nastier, culminating in a plot where he makes Warlord believe he's killed someone very dear to him. Morgan is actually knocking on a bit, old enough to have served in Vietnam, and has an adult daughter, Jennifer, who comes looking for her father in 38. Intending a once-only visit, through circumstances beyond her control Jennifer stays, eventually becoming Skataris' premier sorceress. Fantasy fans should find most Grell issues enjoyable. A decent sample is 28, in which Warlord has to defeat an alluring cobra woman.

Grell stops drawing *Warlord* after 52, and Mark Texeira is an acceptable artist between 53 and 58. Dan Jurgens pencils from 63, but once Grell stops writing with 71, it's downhill. Cary Burkett doesn't have the necessary imagination for the long run, and while Michael Fleisher, from 100, certainly has the imagination, he's on autopilot. Attempts to boost sales by having assorted DC heroes pop in and out (from 116) destroys the unique aspects of *Warlord*. It all ends in tears, with DeSaad and the forces of Apokolips attempting to take control of Skartaris, the Atlanteans having had a good try in the issues leading up to 100. After Jurgens the most notable artists are Andy Kubert (100) and Adam Kubert (95, 99). Father Joe obviously took a hand as well, since many graduates from his School of Cartoon Art work on back-up features.

The most successful of these was Arion, Lord of Atlantis in 55- 62, drawn by Jan Duursema, before moving into his own title, and Ron Randall's Conquerors of the Barren Earth has a lengthy run from 63. 'Saga of Dragonsword' in 51-54 by Paul Levitz and Tom Yeates, is a nice series with a talking ape, long a DC tradition, and 48 has an insert previewing *Arak*, and the first of two Claw the Unconquered stories. The light-hearted 'Wizardworld' can be found in 28, 29, 40 and 41, and Omac is the back-up in 37-39 and 42-47, the first and best run by Jim Starlin.

Grell returned to write the miniseries, illustrated by Damon Willich and Rick Hoberg. A wandering minstrel tries to discover the legend that was Warlord, and in doing so seeks out various people who've shared Travis Morgan's adventures, eventually meeting Morgan himself. Warlord is disillusioned with the myth that's grown around him, but with old enemy Deimos resurrected once again he's forced into action. The story is almost a tribute, and those who enjoy Grell's previous *Warlord* will find much to their liking here.~HY

WARP

First: *19 issues, 3 Specials 1983-1985*

Warp began life as a 1971 stage play parodying fantasy and superhero clichés. First's version, by Peter B. Gillis and Frank Brunner, eradicated all trace of satire, making this another third-rate cosmic dust-up. It begins when mild-mannered bank clerk David Carson discovers he's the host body for potential universe saviour Lord Cumulus. Cumulus' mortal enemy Lord Chaos intends to steal a magical crystal that will allow him to rule the galaxy. By 2 it's revealed that Chaos and Cumulus are brothers, and by 6 they've put aside their differences to fight side by side in a series of interminable battles. Brunner's sub-Neal Adams artwork on 1-9 is at least vaguely appropriate, as Adams designed the costumes for the stage production, but the poor finishing of Bob Smith, Bruce Patterson and Mike Gustovich (who also slaughtered Jerry Bingham's pencils on 10-18) makes this a chore to look at as well as to read. The specials are no better, featuring Lord Chaos in 1 and 3, and the daft Sargon, Mistress of War in 2, drawn early in his career by Marc Silvestri.~AL

WaRP GRAPHICS ANNUAL

WaRP: *One-shot 1986*

In 1986 WaRP was beginning to expand beyond publishing just their immensely successful *Elfquest* material, and this acts as a showcase for their newer titles. There's inevitably an *Elfquest* chapter, and *Myth Adventures* and *A Distant Soil* fans might consider it worth sampling, otherwise it's a selection of competently produced but long-forgotten fantasy strips.~WJ

WARPWALKING

Caliber: *2 Issues 1991*

In the dimension of Cornucopia, civil unrest between Humans and Daemonites results in open warfare, and half-breed Dzhon Do, a TV God (a faith healer who gets results), flees through a space warp to Earth, treating us to a few overlong, maudlin flashbacks from his poverty-stricken past. Competent, but unsatisfactory.~WW

WARRIOR

Quality Communications: *26 issues 1982-1985*

This represented a renaissance in English comics, chiefly offering the young Alan Moore to an audience unprepared for anything so intelligent but effortlessly entertaining in a mainstream comic. Editor Dez Skinn pulled in old friends and found strong new talent, and was therefore able to give Moore's scripts to the likes of Garry Leach, Alan Davis, Steve Parkhouse and, most significantly, David Lloyd. Moore and Lloyd's 'V For Vendetta', the only strip that ran in every issue, was a unique, harrowing and creatively successful attempt at a political story. The politics were not token ornamentations for the superheroics, they were intrinsic and dealt with in a balanced manner. Lloyd's moody, shadowed art suited the story of a near-future Fascist Britain to a 't'. Moore's other great contribution was a revamping of the 1950s Marvelman. In Moore's hands Marvelman behaved just like you imagined someone who'd just realised they had almost unlimited power, increased sensitivity and the ability to fly would: buzz a few planes until the novelty wore off and go home for some fabulous sex. Garry Leach's ultra-detailed art helped convince until episode 6, where Alan Davis took over with his cleaner, elegant pencils. Marvelman appeared in every issue except 12, which had a Young Marvelman story, 19, 20, and 22 onwards, and the episodes in 9 and 10 have never been reprinted. Moore also contributed the perplexing Warpsmiths, indescribably alien aliens doing peculiar things to keep the universe in check (illustrated with great verve by Garry Leach in 9-10) and 'The Bojeffries Saga', a nutty English take on The Addams Family, with Steve Parkhouse (11-12, 19-20). A collection gathering Bojeffries tales from here and elsewhere was published by Tundra.

The diverting Laser Eraser and Pressbutton, far future assassins, by Steve Moore and a variety of artists, most notably Steve Dillon, appeared in the majority of issues. So did 'Father Shandor', by Steve Moore with art by John Bolton or John Ridgway, an interminable old-fashioned fantasy about a monk fighting demons. Magical fantasy 'The Spiral Path', written and drawn by Parkhouse, appeared in 1-12. Very good art, very dull story.

Without Marvelman *Warrior* went downhill as Skinn introduced reprint material and filled out the magazine with features and self-penned strips such as Big Ben. This 'Man With No Time For Crime' notionally existed in the Marvelman universe, but badly drawn by Will Simpson, he was no substitute. Nor was Bogey, the old hard-boiled detective in a far future routine. The last couple of issues were truly dismal, including such forgettable nonsense as 'Cyril Tompkins, Chartered Accountant' by Trillo and Altuna (who should have known better) and 'The Black Currant', a barbarian parody so limp Julian Clary would ask for a refund. Most of the good material (and quite a lot of the bad) was reprinted in America, including 'V For Vendetta' (coloured but thankfully concluded), Marvelman (as Miracleman, but also continued), 'The Spiral Path', 'Laser Eraser and Pressbutton' (leading into a series of new stories) and 'The Bojeffries Saga' (reprinted in *Flesh & Bones* and continued in *A1* series 2).~FJ

Recommended: 9, 10

WARRIOR NUN BLACK & WHITE

Antarctic: *21 issues 1997-1999*

The potential of the Warrior Nun Earth, where church, state and military are intertwined and clergy combat demons, is such that there's plenty of out of continuity stories to be told. And here's a venue. The changing creative teams ensure varying quality, with the best sequence being 4-6, encompassing Japanese gangsters and a ninja nun, written by Derek Kirk. Artist Michel Lacombe follows up this tale in the Onigami miniseries. It's the art that's notable here, and while Lacombe is the only fully developed artist, pencillers Patrick Blaine (9-11, 14), Lee Duhig (3, 8) and Langdon Foss (12, 13, 15, 17) all display great potential, the latter imitating Frank Quitely.~WJ

THE WARRIOR OF WAVERLY STREET

Dark Horse: *2 issue microseries 1996*

Children's science fiction film *Star Kid* adapted in perfunctory fashion prior to release, hence the different title. The Geof Darrow covers are the best portions of the package.~FP

WARRIORS OF PLASM

Defiant: *14 issues (0-13), 1 Special 1993-1994*

Every now and again a comic comes along that's so appallingly bad you have to see it to believe it. *Warriors of Plasm* is one. What ruins any chance of redemption is the hackneyed dialogue. Meant to emphasise the other-worldliness of the title, it instead just sounds ridiculous. On a world composed mostly of what looks like snot, the Holy Inquisitor Lorca decides the best way to man a rebellion against the High Gore Lord Sueraceen is to kidnap some dweebs from Earth and give them snot-powers. Dweebs escape, get back to Earth, get chased by more aliens, go back to snot-world, fight rebellion... but the dialogue doesn't improve any. Incredibly, there were later spin-off series, *Prudence and Caution*, which was almost as bad, and *Dogs of War*. Jim Shooter, what were you thinking?~JC

WARSTRIKE

Malibu: *7 issues, 1 Giant-Size 1994*

Brandon Tark is a successful businessman and a private detective with superhealing powers. This is fortunate, since he's beaten up a lot. In fact, in 6 he's murdered by a killer after all superpowered beings. Fortunately for him it doesn't take. Dan Danko tries hard to make this more than "big man, big gun, lots of mayhem" and manages some creditable characterisation, but, apart from 1-3, the series lacks enough plot to go round. The giant-size returns villain Blind Faith, previously seen in 4, in a prelude to the *Godwheel* crossover.~NF

WARWORLD

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1989*

Slim science fiction from Gary Davis, a man who would be Moebius. He wasn't there yet, and this is an empty imitation.~FP

WASHOUTS

Renaissance Press: *One-shot 2002*

Chasing Stargate Sally, Squinch and Freeda of the Washouts are forced to crash-land on a planetoid. Unfortunately, their ship lands on a temple, annoying the locals, who decide that one of them must be sacrificed at their upcoming festival. Michael Cohen's comedy spin-off of sorts from *Strange Attractors* (the girls are dropouts from that series' Rangerettes), is an offbeat little misadventure, but the payoff isn't as satisfying as it needs to be.~NF

WASTELAND

DC: *18 issues 1987-1989*

DC's last, pre-Vertigo attempt at a horror title that was both adult and genuinely scary. The latter was never likely but, written by Del Close and John Ostrander, *Wasteland* does approach the downright twisted. With the sound idea that readers would prefer to have a known, if rotating, group of artists, Don Simpson, William Messner-Loebs, David Lloyd and George Freeman were hired. One would do the cover and then one of the three stories in each issue. Although comparatively unknown at the time, this eclectic collection of styles proved very effective in providing a consistency, variety and, given the quality of the contributors involved, a diversity of effective storytelling techniques.

Del Close's pseudo-autobiographical stories and Ostrander's more traditional, but still thoughtful and rarely obvious takes on the genre are always entertaining and often funny. They were both spotted the horrific in the mundane, so you won't find many real monsters, aliens or supernatural beings. Of particular note is Close's parody of *American Splendor* in 3, drawn in the style of Robert Crumb by Simpson, and Ostrander's 'Dead Detective' (8, 12, 17), in which a detective proves more successful dead than alive. From 10 George Freeman dropped out and guest artists Tim Truman (10), Ty Templeton (11), Joe Orlando (12, 13, 15) and Rick Magyar (16 on) replaced him. Bill Wray replaced Lloyd from 13. The final issue is a retrospective of sorts, featuring elements from most previous issues. Playful and well worth reading, *Wasteland* was perhaps a little ahead of its time.~NF

Recommended: 8, 12, 16, 17

The WATCH

Phosphorescent Media: *4 issue miniseries 2000, 5 issue miniseries 2001-2002*

Ambitious, post-*Watchmen* take on global superheroes, from writer Christian Read. Thousands randomly develop superpowers, which leads to the creation of the United Nations Special Association for post-humans (UNSAP). A mysterious telepath called Jack gathers the Watch to oppose UNSAP, recruiting Sera and Xenia, who are both amongst its targets, leading to a confrontation between the Watch and the Damned over information incriminating UNSAP in the deaths of several super beings. The second miniseries continues from this point as the Watch lay low and try to make the evidence public, but Jack's own secrets cause problems (1-3), after which a more legitimate Watch become heroes for hire. A further miniseries is expected in 2003. This is very much plot-driven and occasionally overly convoluted. Artists Andrew Phillips and Stewart McKenny, display some manga influences, with McKenny being more polished and yet less fluid. Both are occasionally jarring, but are good storytellers.~NF

WATCH OUT COMIX

Last Gasp: *1 issue 1986*

One page strips commenting on San Francisco gay culture are combined with longer episodes featuring Stan Stone, the repressed gay character Carl Vaughn Frick used in *Gay Comics*. As an observer Frick doesn't move beyond the obvious, and while his cartooning improves over the course of time (most of the strips date from 1983 and 1984) the satire is very gentle and very much of the period. There must be better and funnier gay comics than this.~FP

WATCHMEN

DC: *12 issue limited series 1986-1987**

It's several years since costumed adventurers had their heyday. An Act of Congress outlawing vigilantes has put a stop to their role as enforcers and moral avengers. Some, like the shy, retiring Nightowl, and Ozymandias, the smartest man in the world, have mothballed their cowls and gone quietly. Some, like the Comedian, a wisecracking warmonger, and Dr Manhattan, a scientist irradiated in a freak accident, have returned to the warren of counter-intelligence agencies and government projects whence they came. Others, like the sociopathic Rorschach, have carried on a one-man crusade against crime. When the Comedian is killed Rorschach is the only one who senses that time is running out for his old team-mates; in fact, time is running out for everyone.

Watchmen looks long and hard into the dark corners of the superhero psyche. It asks what kind of people want to dress up in funny costumes and beat the shit out of villains. It examines the practical ramifications of a traditional superhero story dynamic, where a character like Dr Manhattan, who can control matter and exists in serial time, where past, present and future are laid out in front of him like frames in a film, brush up against cheerful boy-scout vigilantes who just want to help people and guys who get a kick out of dressing up and doing violence. And it looks at why society might condone and support this behaviour, and how the presence of such people, from ordinary thrill-seekers to god-like beings, affects that society. Writer Alan Moore examines each character one by one, peeling back the layers slowly, turning over the familiar elements of the superhero team until all their glitter has rubbed off. Each one becomes a real person (or a real demi-god) as they slowly reveal their deepest anxieties. At the same time he writes an intriguing murder mystery that works on multiple levels and leads into a massive conspiracy, as the Comedian's old comrades (many of whom hated his guts) begin to wonder if there's something going on behind the scenes. There's also a counter-plot in which a young boy is reading a strange pirate comic whose psychological story points up the horrors being faced by the 'heroes', and additional information in the form of memoranda, features and newspaper reports at the back of each issue.

The telling of much of the story is left to the pictures. Not only does Dave Gibbons create a cohesive world, subtly different from our own, he also builds up a web of symbols and icons around which the story is built. His clean, detailed style is perfectly suited to a story that shakes up how we look at superheroes forever, because it's exactly what we expect a good superhero comic to look like. Nothing is taken for granted in *Watchmen*. The view down a street behind a character's head is there for a reason, and is consistent with a view from the other end of the street shown eight issues previously. If only all comics were crafted and polished like this.

Originally supposed to be a reworking of old Charlton characters whose rights had just been bought by DC, *Watchmen* had a huge impact when it was published. It didn't generate many direct imitations (too much like hard work, one suspects, more's the pity), but it altered the whole approach to superhero comics taken by many writers, encouraging them to deconstruct the myth of superbeings. It remains a superb read that will keep you on the edge of your seat, while enriching your understanding of humanity.~FJ

Recommended: 1-12

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* Available in a collected edition

WATERWORLD Children of Leviathan

Acclaim: *4 issue miniseries 1997*

It would seem an odd decision to publish a *Waterworld* comic well over a year after the most expensive movie ever made had run its course, particularly when Kevin Costner likenesses weren't on the agenda. Having long believed himself alone, the Mariner comes across two civilisations, each leaving something to be desired. By the end he's discovered his origin, but it's a throwaway after four issues of battling. What might have served an action movie is tedious on the page.~WJ

WAVEMAKERS

Blind Bat: *2 issues 1990-1991*

Inconsistent anthology that combines some of the best creators in comics such as Evan Dorkin, Gary Davis, Matt Howarth, Doug Potter and Harvey Pekar with some of the most amateurish and juvenile attempts you'll have ever seen. Buy it for the good bits.~WW

THE WAY OF THE RAT

CrossGen: *7 issues + 2002 to date*

A departure for CrossGen, as this appears to be medieval oriental adventure rather than other-worldly fantasy. It bears the hallmark of The Quest, though, as thief Boon Sai Hong comes to terms with artefacts he's stolen and their worth to him, while his previously formidable city comes under assault from a mighty warlord with a massive cannon. Chuck Dixon, not previously known for comic touches, provides plenty here, not least Boon's talking monkey companion, and Jeff Johnson's art provides humanity, spectacle, scale and grandeur.~FP

WAY OUT STRIPS

Tragedy Strikes: *4 issues 1992*
Fantagraphics: *4 issues 1994*

Carol Swain's artwork is very simple, and her characters all look like pit-bull terriers. The stories are anything but simplistic, though. There's a crooked antique dealer who says she sold her soul to the devil, but the devil's name is Brian and he lives in a bedsit, and he's disconcertingly tentative when he asks if he can see her again. There's a woman who returns to her home town and makes some disturbing discoveries about her friend Sam. There are days, and gigs, in the life of a stand-up comic. Driving narrative, no, but she records states of mind that most writers seem unaware of, and brings a haunting clarity to every scene. Possibly an acquired taste, but worth the effort.~FC

Recommended: Fantagraphics 1-4

WCW World Championship Wrestling

Marvel: *12 issues 1992-1993*

It would be a reasonable assumption that having prodded costumed superheroes from battle to battle so successfully Marvel would have no trouble with costumed wrestlers. This was 1990s Marvel, though, where dull and uninspired was a way of life.~WJ

WEAPON X

Marvel: *3 issues + 2002 to date*

The Director is a man disfigured in a mutant attack, and a shadow type who may or may not have government connections. He gathers a number of B-List mutants (Aurora, Marrow, Mesmero, Sauron and Wild Child) and spies to re-institute the Weapon X program, whose mandate is the training and use of super-beings as military resources. However, from the start things go wrong as Sabretooth, their star weapon goes AWOL, stealing all their files and sabotaging all their missions. Frank Tieri and Georges Jeanty choose quality and style over originality for a commendable action-packed thriller series on the fringes of the *X-Men* universe.~WW

WEAPON ZERO

Image: *5 issue miniseries (T4-T0) 1995, 15 issues 1996-1997*

Colonel Tyson Stone is infected by T'srri biotechnology and learns the evil T'srri leader N'Golth has taken people from different time periods to create an army of T'srri/human hybrids. The human side of three of these hybrids has retained control, and together with Stone they confront the T'srri in their Moon-base (T4-T0). The ongoing series sees the team adjusting to a new world as well as coming to the attention of a secret US agency that believes they're aliens (1-3). They visit Japan, battle armoured insects and journey into space to begin the war against the T'srri. Walt Simonson and Joe Benitez's cross between science fiction and superheroes owes much to Japanese robot comics. Simonson keeps the whole reasonably light-hearted (bowing out with 13), establishing the relationships between the team members that are the focus as they conclude the battle to save Earth.~NF

WEAPONS OF THE GODS

Comics One: *1 volume + 2002 to date*

Another Tony Wong kung-fu comic, bearing all his inventive trademarks. For the casual reader, it's the one to sample as someone pulls out all the stops for the art. Graceful action sequences are combined with beautiful and detailed designs and they don't shirk from stunning panoramas with dozens of figures. Ying Hsiang Lin is credited as "production artist", so perhaps it's down to him, but with credits other than Wong rare in the comics he markets abroad it's difficult to know for sure. The story is populated by Wong's usual larger than life cast of kung-fu superheroes, this time the main plot concerning hero Tian's search for Heaven's Crystal, a magical sword, although he hardly starts in this volume. If it follows other Wong comics it'll meander forever, but every comics fan should sample at least one Tony Wong comic, try this.~FP

WEASEL

Fantagraphics: *6 issues + 1999 to date*

Talented writer/artist Dave Cooper largely abandons his smoothly rendered, deeply surreal cartooning style for a more realistic, scratchy pen line, at times reminiscent of underground legend R. Crumb's gnarly crosshatchings. The Crumb comparison extends to the lead strip, 'Ripple, a Predilection for Tina', with its sexually explicit dialogue and voluptuously uninhibited pictures. A tale of reckless obsession and mutual cruelty, 'Ripple' is brought to a satisfyingly bleak conclusion in 5. Every issue also contains a 'Television Program X-32b' back-up story, a bizarre science fiction comedy that finds Cooper back on more familiar, but no-less entertaining ground, plus an assortment of doodles, flights-of-fancy and other visually impressive ephemera. With lush painted covers and high production standards, Weasel is one of the most aesthetically pleasing 'alternative' comics to appear in recent years, and one can only hope that Cooper's announced hiatus doesn't last too long.~AL

Recommended: 1-6

WEASEL GUY

Image: *2 issues 1999*

Superhero soap in which Weasel Guy decides to move to Hollywood to be with his girlfriend – the bizarrely-named Ferret Female – and carve out a career in television. Unfortunately, the comic is not as amusing as the title, with leaden script and unengaging characterisation.~DB

The WEASEL PATROL

Eclipse: *One-shot 1989*

Easy to read, slightly sharp-edged funny animal strip by Ken Macklin and Lela Dowling, which will probably leave no trace of its existence on your brain, despite at least one really good joke.~GK

WEATHER WOMAN

CPM: *8 issues 2000-2001**

When Keiko becomes a popular weather woman by flashing her underwear on air, there follows a series of attempts to undermine her success and the sexual humiliation of would-be boyfriend, Minoru and her predecessor, Yaori. Creator, Tetsu Adachi's mannered approach does contain some humour and digs at Japanese culture, but, billed as a satire on Japanese media, this is more likely to be seen as soft-core exploitation.~NF

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* Available in a collected edition

WEAVEWORLD

Marvel/Epic: *3 issue miniseries 1991-1992*

Despite a generous 192-page allocation this adaptation of Clive Barker's doorstop suffers from contraction. Threats that may terrify as prose are reduced to comedy by the soundbites required for comics, and the pace is very forced, particularly in the first issue. A Barker completist might enjoy this; otherwise the original novel is probably better and cheaper.~FP

The WEB

!mpact: *14 issues, 1 Annual 1991-1992*

One of the !mpact imprints' relaunches of the old Archie/MLJ concept, this Web, unlike previous versions, is an organisation rather than a person, an U.N.C.L.E.-like network of agents and operatives, several of whom wear armour and have weapons giving them virtual superpowers. In the 1960s, the Web agents used one identity, deceiving the public into thinking there was only one hero called the Web. Covert for twenty years, the organisation responds to a new flood of superhuman activity by surveying a new group of agents in training to determine who will now assume the public persona of the Web. Len Strazeswski handles the set-up engagingly, but Tom Artis' artwork looks skimpy and inattentive, and a rapid succession of 'guest artists' and fill-in writers blurs the appeal that the rather clever concept had.~HS

WEBSPINNERS: Tales of Spider-Man

Marvel: *18 issues 1999-2000*

Hit and miss series recounted by a variety of creators, doing much the same for Spider-Man as *Legends of the Dark Knight* does for Batman. 1-3 is written by J.M. DeMatteis and set immediately after *Amazing Spider-Man* (first series) 38, involving special effects trickster Mysterio trying to find out where his life took that wrong turn. It's lavishly illustrated by Michael Zulli in his best Barry Windsor-Smith style but the writing is DeMatteis at his worst, maudlin and preachy with none of his strong characterization or plotting. Next up (4-6) has Keith Giffen and Andy Smith doing their best Kirby impression to tell a long unfinished story as scripter Eric Stephenson explains why the Silver Surfer didn't destroy humanity after his series was cancelled in 1968. After that Joe Kelly and Bart Sears reveal the secrets of Peter Parker's Prom night before Paul Jenkins and Sean Phillips try to tell a chilling tale as the Chameleon attempts to drive Peter Parker insane (10-12). That was the halfway decent material. Beyond 12 it's a long slide down to cancellation.~WW

WEBWITCH

Avatar: *3 issue miniseries (0-2) 1997, 3 issue miniseries (Prelude, 1-2), one-shot ('War') 1998, one-shot ('Preview') 2002, one-shot ('Companion') 2002, 3 issue miniseries 2002*

Creator, Raff Ienco, tells the first stories about Nina Hoffman, part of an arctic expedition, and infected by the Spider Nation to repopulate their race. The 'War' Prelude is by Ienco, but 1-2 are drawn by Bill Maus. Thereafter Tim Vigil adjusts the concept so that the Spider Nation's Queen is now an alien, unable to produce a King, who would be able to create further Queens. Nina now has a sister, Lattice, and a Special Forces team now targets her. Vigil produces realistic artwork, with little actual horror, though the strip is certainly violent, gory and high in nudity.~NF

THE WEIRD

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1988*

In a neighbouring dimension, Macrolats, sentient energy balls, have enslaved the Zarrolats, another energy race. Having almost exterminated them, the tyrants are preparing to invade our universe when a fugitive Zarrolat crosses over. Reanimating a fresh corpse, it accidentally turns into an unstable superbomb, and falls foul of the Justice League as it tries to save our world and its own. A tedious and poorly executed waste of time from Jim Starlin and Bernie Wrightson that seems to be nothing more than a cynical cash-cow.~WW

WEIRD FANTASY

EC: *22 issues (13-17, then 6-22) 1950-1953**

Gemstone: *22 issues 1992-1997**

Continuing its numbering from *A Girl, A Moon, Romance*, the first story in *Weird Fantasy*, 'Am I Man or Machine', stiffly illustrated by Al Feldstein, was a romance, sort of. A seemingly normal man looks up his old girlfriend, two years after he's been declared dead in a car crash. His brain has been preserved in a robot body. The script extrapolates what it's like to be isolated in a glass jar for months, and how various receptors can replace senses. When the man realises his sweetheart has married another he pretends it was a joke, and leaves. This story sets the agenda of weird science more than fantasy. Later there's more of a "don't meddle with nature" message, but early issues are packed with time-travel conundrums. None really bettered Harry Harrison's 'Only Time Will Tell' from the first 13 (1), with art assists from Wally Wood.

A regular line-up of artists was soon established, with editor Feldstein producing the lead story and slick, rather mechanical covers on the early issues, often concentrating on hardware rather than people. Wally Wood was in his element, Jack Kamen's fine-lined, reliable artwork appeared in most issues, and Harvey Kurtzman wrote and drew a handful of wry, twist-in-the-tale stories that concentrated on character during the first year. They stand out a mile from the rest of the comic's largely Feldstein-plotted efforts, not just because they only have half as many words and panels. 'Atom Bomb Thief', from 14 (2), is a typical Kurtzman tale of a janitor who smuggles plans for an atom bomb, is double-crossed, murders his buyer and ends up, after a plane crash, being shipwrecked on Bikini Atoll. It's not particularly clever, but it's economically done, emphasising human emotion rather than scientific discovery, drawn in a style halfway between his humour work and the tighter line he used for his war stories. More inventive is 'The Dimension Translator' from 6.

Apart from slight shifts in tone, one issue of *Weird Fantasy* doesn't really differ from another in story content. There's usually something about a matter transmitter, time machine or duplicator going terribly wrong, something about aliens (either they walk among us or "I've discovered they're about to attack and no one will believe me") and something about space exploration (they're our lost comrades we've come to this planet to rescue and, oops, we just shot 'em because they looked like dangerous aliens). One of the funniest alien tales is 'The Thing in the Jar', from 11. Illustrated by Joe Orlando, who was a semi-regular from 9 onwards, it starts ingeniously with a strange pond that turns out to be a living creature. A sample from the pond starts talking to some researchers, suggesting it's part of a group mind and that it has come to help mankind. Naturally mistrusting it (this is the Cold War, after all), the researchers hit upon the novel idea of pouring a bottle of gin into the sample, so that, in a pissed state, it will reveal its hidden agenda, which is indeed the invasion and domination of the world. After a while this persistent paranoia can get boring for the modern reader.

14 featured the first Al Williamson art on the title and he fitted right in alongside Wally Wood. Together Wood, Williamson and Frazetta created the busty space-babe-in-a-bubble-helmet image that came to typify the comic, but was in fact entirely untypical of the first half of its run. Later issues featured one or two more menacing space monsters and sexy girls, as the popularity of the horror titles encouraged it to become more gruesome. There remained a feeling, however, that *Weird Fantasy* didn't quite know where it fitted in the EC line. The 1990s reprint issues more sensibly start the numbering from 1, and collect issues five to a special. Connoisseurs will prefer the hardbound and slipcased black and white volumes.~FJ

Recommended: 1, 2, 6, 11, 20, 21

WEIRD MYSTERY Tales

DC: *24 issues 1972-1975*

Oh good, another average mystery title offering a few stories with nice art (Mike Kaluta in 24) among the mundane majority. The first three issues do, however, stand out as they contain Jack Kirby stories originally planned for his cancelled black and white magazine, *Spirit World*. *Sandman* completists might also want to know that Destiny hosted the title in enigmatic fashion.~HY

Recommended: 1-3

WEIRD ROMANCE

Eclipse: *1 issue 1988*

Oddball collection of 1950s horror stories dealing with boy/girl relationships in which one or another partner is a vampire, ghost, merperson, etc. Sadly, the execrable standard of story and art makes it much less fun than it sounds.~HS

WEIRD SCIENCE

EC: *4 issues (12-15) 1950, 18 issues (5-22) 1951-1953**

Gladstone: *4 issues 1990-1991*

Gemstone: *22 issues 1992-1997**

For reasons concerning postal regulations applying to subscription copies, the first four issues of *Weird Science* are numbered 12-15, continuing the numbering of the defunct *Saddle Romances*. They're easily distinguished from the later 12-15, which all open with a Wally Wood-drawn story. There's one issue with no cover number, and the succeeding issue is numbered 6, the total number of issues to that point.

Long recalled as the classic science-fiction comic, time hasn't been kind to *Weird Science*. The art is still impressive, even outstanding in places, but the majority of stories are distinctly of their period. Typical early plots have a nutty scientist making a great breakthrough, but not living to pass on the knowledge, using it for petty revenge, or, for some reason, the world never knows what they've discovered. Another wrinkle has the human cast revealed aliens or other-dimensional beings, often invading Earth. William Gaines and Al Feldstein wrote most stories, and other favourite plots concern the then topical effects of the atom and hydrogen bombs, flogged to death in early issues. Feldstein was prescient in relating the alleged events of Roswell wholesale in the first 13, and he adapted Orson Welles' famous War of the Worlds broadcast in 15 (which also has the only EC science-fiction story drawn by horror maestro Graham 'Ghastly' Ingels). Harvey Kurtzman wrote and drew the early highlights, either eschewing the shock ending altogether or being far more imaginative in getting there with stories that stand the test of time. 'Man or Superman' in 6 is an amusing tale of a bodybuilder and his scientist brother-in-law, while 7's charming 'Gregory had a Model T' predates *Herbie* by over a decade with its tale of a sentient car.

The artist most associated with EC science-fiction is Wally Wood, and while some argue his war stories were slightly superior, there's no doubt of a master at work. Wood himself would later (misguidedly) cite *T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents* as his personal best, claiming his EC work was "compulsively and neurotically overdetailed". Maybe so, but in the 1950s no one was more convincing with the nuts and bolts of spacecraft, or capable of depicting more alluring humans. 'Gray Cloud of Death' in 9 features spacesuits that inspired a generation, and there's a second Wood-drawn story, 'Invaders', sadly a rather dated script. Wood's best known science-fiction strip was 'My World' in 22, an absorbing narrative detailing the vistas and possibilities of science-fiction. It's become so personally associated with Wood (and was parodied by him in *Big Apple Comix*), so it's ironic to note that the story was written by Feldstein, and the narrative voice is his. Wood also illustrated some of the more audacious material to appear in 1950s comics with a trans-gender special in 10, and a tale of hermaphrodites in 14. 20's stunning tearjerker 'The Loathsome', distressingly based on a true story of an ugly young girl tormented and rejected by everyone, should raise a lump in all but the most cynical of throats, and 'He Walks Among Us' in 13 (an issue also containing Ray Bradbury's astonishingly downbeat 'A Weighty Decision') is blatantly "the story of Christ transposed to another planet", according to Feldstein. It received surprisingly little critical attention at a time when the entire EC line was under fire for its content. 20's 'The Reformers' takes an obvious sideswipe at their critics, with crusading zealots attempting to reform heaven.

Having been pulled up for swiping, EC began cover-crediting adaptations of stories by known science-fiction writers, most notably Bradbury (although future science-fiction favourite Harry Harrison drew stories in the first two issues). Al Williamson débuted in 16, and quickly became an artist only surpassed by Wood, his peak being 19's ambiguous and ethereal 'One Who Waits'. *Weird Science* hits its stride with the second issue 12, by which time the content is less predictable. With 23 the title is merged with EC's other science-fiction comic to become *Weird Science-Fantasy*. The Gladstone reprints are random (containing 9, 16 and 22), while the Gemstone series reprints every issue sequentially in the original format, sensibly instituting a new numbering system that begins with 1. The rich may prefer the boxed set of hardbound monochrome reprints.~WJ

Recommended: 13, 19, 20, 22

WEIRD SCIENCE FANTASY

EC: *7 issues (23-29) 1954-1955**

Gemstone: *7 issues 1992-1994**

Behind fantastic covers by Wally Wood (23, 27), Al Feldstein (24, 26, 28) and Frank Frazetta (29), the stories concentrate on ideas about what makes society work and the relationship of man to his environment, rather than the grotesque endings for which EC is best known. Wood is in every issue, all good examples of his style, as is Joe Orlando, who, strangely for EC, draws a continuing character. Otto Binder's Adam Link, a robot with human feelings who survives a trial to establish his right to citizenship, features in three strips (27-29). Orlando would later redraw the series for Warren.

26, written by Feldstein and drawing on notes from Major Donald E. Keyhoe, a leading popular writer on the subject, is given over to the "actual facts" about flying saucers. It's drawn alternately by Wood and Orlando, but is the least interesting issue, simply because the "facts" leave no room to tell stories. Al Williamson's exotic artwork (backgrounds reputedly by such diverse hands as Angelo Torres and Roy Krenkel) graces 'Fish Story' (23), the famous 'A Sound of Thunder' (25), adapted from Ray Bradbury's tale of dinosaur hunters tampering with time, 'Upheaval!' (24), written by a young Harlan Ellison, 'Lost in Space' (28) and 'Vicious Circle' (29). The latter is one of several stories in which mankind has degenerated and some evidence of past technology provides the focus for the plot – see also Orlando's 'Fair Trade' about aliens buying Manhattan Island in 23.

Jack Kamen (27, 28) and Reed Crandall (27, 29) both produce some fine work but the other major artist is Bernie Krigstein. 'The Flying Machine' (23) is another Bradbury story, illustrated in a highly stylised manner, drawing on Chinese art for inspiration. 'The Pioneer' (24) grimly contrasts a space trip with a man's journey to the electric chair. His final story here is 'Bellyful' in 25. 27 emerged during the controversy over Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* and, even more than the other issues, contains stories that plead the cause of tolerance and fair-mindedness. Far from corrupting the youth of America, EC strove for enlightenment; if one were cynical that would be enough to explain why they had to be stopped. With 30 the title changed to *Incredible Science-Fiction*, and the 1990s run is reprints numbered 1-7. As with other EC titles, a hardbound black and white collection was published in the 1980s.~NF

Recommended: 23-25, 27-29

WEIRD SEX

Eros: *One-shot 1999*

Using the alias 'DeMentia', Tom Sutton tosses off a trio of EC-style stories with a high sex content. Parodying a science fiction comic, he's forced to use his imagination a little, but imagination isn't what the comic's for. Rest assured all women's breasts are larger than their heads and all space creatures are capable of multiple ejaculation, sometimes simultaneously!~FP

WEIRD WAR Tales

DC: *124 issues 1971-1983*

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 1997, one-shot 2000*

Largely featuring stories about World War II, reprints by editor Joe Kubert and Mort Drucker were framed by new sequences from Kubert (1-4, 7) and Alex Toth (5 and 6). Additional new strips from Reed Crandall (2), Russ Heath (3 and 5) and Frank Thorne (6) made a really nice package. Joe Orlando became editor with 8 and the title became a more typical horror comic, with all-new material. Scripts from veterans Robert Kanigher, Sheldon Mayer and Arnold Drake were always competent, but never exceptional. Artistically, though Weird War featured fine material, almost exclusively from Filipino artists like Tony DeZuniga and Alfredo Alcala, with brief appearances from Nestor Redondo (13) and Noly Panaligan (45) for good measure. Notable other artists included Neal Adams (8), Alex Toth (10), Walt Simonson (10) and an inspired Frank Robbins (21, 27, 35, 36). The comic's artistic highspots, however, were provided by Alex Niño, whose unfettered imagination was at its peak here, with mostly science-fiction-themed stories in 11, 13, 16, 23-25, 31, 36, 55, 61, 69 and 70. José Luis Garcia-Lopez made an early DC appearance in 41 and 44, as did Marshall Rogers and Terry Austin on Jack C. Harris' 'Canterbury Tail', originally intended for *Kamandi* and somewhat incongruous here.

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* Available in a collected edition

After 50 *Weird War* is extremely patchy, though a Russ Heath strip in 59 is worth looking out for. Howard Chaykin (61, 62, 76) and Frank Miller (64, 68) both crop up, neither in the least bit inspired. In an attempt to stem the title's malaise J.M. DeMatteis' Creature Commandos débuted in 93, pitting Frankenstein, Wolfman, Medusa et al. against the Third Reich. The series never lived up to its (unintentional?) comic potential, and the Pat Broderick artwork was no help. Robert Kanigher's G.I. Robot was introduced in 101 to little acclaim, though Kanigher's other series, 'The War That Time Forgot' (revived from *Star Spangled War Stories* in 94, 99, 100 and 103), at least boasted fine artwork from Dave Cockrum and Jerry Ordway. More interesting was Mike Barr's Jasper Pepperdyne (108), notable for some lovely Garcia-Lopez art and for being a breathtakingly blatant *Dr Who* swipe. For those wanting an introduction to *Weird War Tales*, 36 was a sixty-eight-page giant that reprinted a lot of the best early material.

The miniseries is more a Vertigo title than the *Weird War* of old, but is a credible updating with much soul searching and agonising over the iniquities of war. Each issue has at least one stand-out story from the likes of Ian Edginton and Eric Shanower (1), Sam Glanzman (2), and Paul Jenkins and George Pratt (3). 4 is the pick of the bunch with Pete Milligan and Duncan Fegredo's 'War and Peas' a telling story of an old soldier's war memories, and Phil Winslade's staggeringly detailed art on 'Bad Day on the Sajo' about a lonely Mongol warrior. The giant-sized one-shot was a quality collection of the best contemporary talent, including Paul Pope, Jim Lee, Bob Rodi, Bruce Jones, Alcatena and the great Edvin Biukovic's last strip. The emphasis is on the horrors of war rather than the supernatural, but nevertheless this excellent issue showed that the title still had a lot to offer.~DAR

Recommended: 1-10, 13, 16, 23-25, 36, 51, 52, 55, 59, 61, 69, 70, 108, miniseries 4

WEIRD WESTERN Tales

DC: *59 issues (12-70) 1972-1980*

DC/Vertigo: *4 issue miniseries 2001*

Inheriting the numbering of *All-Star Western* with 12, there was initially little difference. Bounty-hunter Jonah Hex retained lead feature, backed up by El Diablo, reprints, and occasional extra new strips (Alex Toth's in 16 is a beauty), but by 21 Hex occupied the full page count. Writer John Albano cast him as an enigmatic stranger, universally feared unless a gunfighter was required, vindictive and mean, although with a noble sense of justice. Artist Tony DeZuniga rendered grubby realistic locales and well-worn people. Their run was standard Western plots with a propensity for crooks to be dealt poetic justice in the form of their own iniquities. For their best story see 'The Hanging Woman' in 17. Michael Fleisher from 22, though, honed Hex, transforming him into a fully rounded character. His largely single-issue plots were inventive and he fleshed out Jonah's past, revealing life-long enemies made during the Civil War (plot temporarily resolved in 29-30). De Zuniga left with 24, with Noly Panaligan and George Moliterni handling most remaining Hex stories here in equally suitable fashion. The entire Fleisher oeuvre is good, but for the best try the Doug Wildey-drawn 26, which shows the depth of resentment against the incursive railroad, an early take on feminism (27) or Jonah in a town where hanging is a public festival (35).

Jonah Hex moved to his own title after 38 and *Weird Western* was inherited by Brian Savage, Scalphunter, a white man raised by Indians. Strong social concerns permeate the stories, but he's dull, and the only weird thing is how he lasted thirty-one issues. If you're desperate to see them again, El Diablo turned up in *Jonah Hex* 32, 48, 56-60 and 73-75 and Scalphunter was in 41,42 and 45-47.

Following the Joe Lansdale instigated vogue for Westerns with anomalous elements, Vertigo's miniseries was truer to the title, although pleasingly found space for more traditional material, with Lansdale tossing off a piece for Sam Glanzman in 3. The best issue is 4, with Duncan Fegredo and Dave Taylor respectively illustrating a piece of whimsy by Peter Milligan and Jen Van Meter's tragi-comedy, and old hand Bruce Jones teaming with Cully Hamner. The best story overall, though, is Greg Rucka's engaging piece in 1, aptly drawn by Rick Burchett. Those who like their westerns weird will find even more to admire.~FP

Recommended: 17, 19, 24, 25-27, 29-31, 34, 35, 37, 38, miniseries 4

WEIRD WONDER TALES

Marvel: *22 issues 1973-1977*

Another round of 1950s reprints. 7 featured the individual stories of the characters who were to comprise the Headmen in Steve Gerber's *Defenders* stories, Bill Everett's Venus occupies 16-18 and Doctor Druid 19-22. Be warned, though, it's mundane stuff. This outlived the other Marvel horror reprint titles, and perhaps the occasional diversity provided by maverick artists helped. There are Doug Wildey (2), Angelo Torres (7), Bernie Krigstein (19) and Joe Kubert (22), in addition to the usual suspects.~FP

WEIRD WORLDS

DC: *10 issues 1972-1974*

An artistic treasure trove, 1-7 had skilful adaptations of Edgar Rice Burroughs' *John Carter* and *Pellucidar* stories (previously seen in DC's *Tarzan* and *Korak* comics) with art from the great Murphy Anderson, Mike Kaluta, Sal Amendola and Al Weiss, to name a few. 8-10 featured Ironwulf, a Howard Chaykin creation (scripted by Denny O'Neil). It was a wonderful sword-and-sorcery saga with all the ingredients of great space opera: an empire headed by a beautiful evil empress, vampire warriors, family feuding, a wooden spaceship and lots of marvellously designed characters. A shame we had to wait twenty years for the continuation of in the *Ironwulf* graphic novel.~HY

Recommended: 1-10

WEIRDFALL

Antarctic: *2 issues 1995*

This is set in a divergent present where the Earth has been beset by unpredictable phenomena known as the Weirdfall for several decades. Our heroine is a saboteur working against the various alien races who seek to dominate Earth. Creator Matt Howarth doesn't spend much time on exposition and this leads to vast chunks being incomprehensible. The artwork is functional with very little page-turning impetus. A waste of time to all but the Howarth devotee.~SW

WEIRDO

Last Gasp: *28 issues 1981-1993*

Weirdo kept the spirit of the underground alive through lean years until it was absorbed by a new generation. As such its importance is both vast and unquantifiable. Editorially, though, it's a mixture of the inspired and downright unreadable, but tipping the scales in its favour is the vast quantity of Robert Crumb work.

1 is almost entirely untempered Crumb – not a pretty sight. His editorial stamp dominates that and succeeding issues. They're populated by dull illustrated articles, weak one-panel

cartoons and bizarre photostrips acting out Crumb's sexual obsessions. They're nonetheless saved by one good (often great) Crumb strip every time (except 2). A particularly poor issue, 4, is redeemed by five pages of Crumb waxing nostalgic about the 1960s (and two Drew Friedman one-pagers). Crumb's *Weirdo* strips have a broad sweep. Underground whimsy is set off by startling adaptations of Boswell (3) and the arcane psychological imperatives of Krafft-Ebbing (13, possibly an ironic response to reactions about his own predilections). He turns in engaging and passionate diatribes, plain silliness and one lapse into bizarre racist conspiracy theory in 28, inexcusable even if intended as ridicule. If his tirades on the superficial nature of fashion and society in Mode O'Day (9, 10, 12, 18 and 26) became overworked and repetitive, they're balanced by his outstanding autobiographical strips. 'Uncle Bob's Mid-Life Crisis' in 7 and the complementary 'I'm Grateful, I'm Grateful' in 25 are the work of a major talent on top form, as Crumb analyses his circumstances in typically introspective fashion. Also surprisingly effective are strips about domestic bliss drawn by Crumb and his wife Aline Kominsky-Crumb (16, 23), with the material ensuring that the wildly contrasting artistic abilities don't jar.

Crumb quickly published new cartoonists, and, although he wasn't faultless in his selection, the fact that Drew Friedman, Kaz, J.D. King, Dori Seda, Dennis Worden and Peter Bagge all débuted here is sufficient to overlook poorer judgements. Also in the Crumb-edited issues are Terry Boyce's forgotten (which is apparently how she now wants it) but oddly charming 'Peter the Penis' strips, satirising the male attitude to life. They were dropped when Peter Bagge became editor with 10. He also discontinues the puerile photostrips, uses more Kaz and King, and publishes J.R. Williams, Mark Zingarelli and classic underground artists like S. Clay Wilson and Bill Griffith. Bagge's own strips introduce the Bradleys (14) and Ken Weiner (13), but his best is 'The Reject ' (10), alienation and childhood torment presented without apologies. It's a theme also explored in the truly bizarre 'Fishlips' stories in 15 and 16.

Outside the editors, Kim Deitch and Spain are the most frequently published creators. Deitch mainly submits his strange strips of the Ledecker Carnival (15, 16, 19, 23). Despite an open, if static, clear style, his art disturbs on an almost primal level, prompting unknown fears lying within us all. Spain is an acquired taste. While capable of brilliance, his Weirdo strips generally feature the tiresome Big Bitch. Begun as a joke (one hopes), it's a one-note joke worked to death after a single appearance yet returns again and again, with plots that would seem slim to an anorexic.

Aline Kominsky-Crumb becomes editor with 18, and again broadens the contributor base, returning Spain and operating a positive-discrimination policy with regard to women. Carol Lay, Julie Doucet, Mary Fleener, Phoebe Gloeckner, Penny Moran, Leslie Sternbergh and Carol Tyler all contribute top-notch material to what is the best editorial selection of the run. The amazing Lindsay Arnold and Michael Dougan hold up the male end. Kominsky-Crumb's own autobiographical strips, appearing from 2, work well, presenting a generally positive and coping attitude towards a strange childhood, and always raising a laugh. Three years after 27, the final issue was titled *Verre D'Eau* to reflect the large contingent of French contributions.~WJ

Recommended: 3, 4, 7, 10, 12-14, 18-20, 22-28

WELCOME BACK KOTTER

DC: *10 issues 1976-1978*

A nice humorous title based on the TV series about a teacher, Kotter, and his misfit pupils. Not as good as 'The Bash Street Kids' in the UK's *The Beano*, but then what is?~HY

WENDY WHITBREAD, UNDERCOVER SLUT

Eros: *2 issues 1990-1992*

"Get that cock back in your trousers, fella! There won't be any pussy where you're headed!" As Anton Drek, Undercover Cartoonist, Don Simpson created the most notorious Eros comic, about a policewoman posing as a prostitute, her badge fastened to a g-string. It's very silly indeed as Wendy and her Untouchables – "As gorgeous a group of carnal courtesans as you'll find on this side of law and order" – go into battle against the forces of evil. Or they would, if they could stop having orgies with each other and their fellow police officers. It certainly doesn't short change you on spunk action, but that's about all that can be said for it. *The Collected Drekbook* collects both issues along with other Simpson sex material.~FJ

WEREWOLF

Dell: *3 issues 1966-1967*

Of the trio of Dell heroes named after screen monsters this is the most pathetic. Major Wiley Wolf of Secret Defence Unit One's adventures are the worst-drawn comics of the 1960s. Tony Tallarico, take a bow.~SW

WEREWOLF

Blackthorne: *4 issues 1988-1989, one-shot ('in 3-D') 1988*

Adapted from TV scripts, these are unassuming tales of modern werewolves drawn competently, but not in any exciting fashion. In 2, a wounded werewolf, given aid by a small boy, who loves monsters, returns the favour by helping the boy against an abusive stepfather. In 3-4, published also as the 3-D issue, Ted is accused of murder when his best friend asks for help after becoming a werewolf, and must then seek his own cure.~NF

WEREWOLF AT LARGE

Eternity: *3 issues 1989*

Mild mannered rent detective Martin Cross becomes, by night, the lycanthrope of the title. Essentially a superhero comic in which the protagonist, rather than slipping into Spandex, must get naked and hairy in order to fight crime, assisted only by his precognitive grandmother. Tolerably entertaining, might have become a great deal better given a chance to run. Those who miss him should check.~HS

WEREWOLF by NIGHT

Marvel: *Series one 43 issues, 5 Giant-Size 1972-1977, Series two 6 issues 1998*

The first series' greatest achievement was to survive for forty-three issues. Owing to an ancient, hereditary curse, Jack Russell (yes, really) turned into a werewolf during the three nights closest to the full moon every month after attaining his eighteenth birthday. Marvel decided that the strip was most suited to the supernatural/fantasy vein. It wasn't actually suited to anything. As the entire series is related by the hirsute star, a cynical American teenager, his narration produces a grating contrast to the mood of the stories. Gerry Conway was the only scripter to display any feel for the strip. He wrote the first three appearances in *Marvel Spotlight* (first series) 2-4 and the first four issues of this series, but all his successors contrived utterly ridiculous plot coincidences and a sense of pacing that would shame a legless corpse. The first Giant-Size issue, titled *Giant-Size Creatures*, guest-stars Tigra and scrapes a pass. Mike Ploog contributes acceptable pencils in some of the first sixteen issues, and 31-33 (the latter two introducing Moon Knight) by Doug Moench achieve mediocrity. Further compliments are impossible.

In the second series, Paul Jenkins and Leonardo Manco deliver a noire interpretation of Jack's struggles to control his time of the month. The story gushes swiftly through a horror vein and Jenkins serves up the obligatory dream sequence (3) and journey through Hell (4). The best issue is 5, Lump's Story, which teeters between touching and sentimental. Manco's art is dark and scratchy but does have appealing moments. Cancelled mid-flow, the story continues in *Strange Tales* (third series).~APS

Recommended: Series one 1

WEST COAST AVENGERS

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1984, 102 issues, 8 Annuals 1985-1994*

Hawkeye sets up a West Coast franchise of the Avengers, and the initial miniseries is an entertaining piece of superhero soap opera, with some decent ideas in the plotting, from Roger Stern, and perfunctory art from Bob Hall and Brett Breeding.

The main series had 1-41 written almost entirely by Steve Englehart, with uninspired layouts from Al Milgrom, usually finished by Joe Sinnott. Although responsible for a golden era on *The Avengers*, Englehart's plotting here starts out silly and gets sillier – and the dialogue is no better (e.g. from 14: "It's the one thing that's made the loss of his robotic son bearable"). 1-10 still work as soap opera, but after that the characterisations collapse under the weight of the daft storylines. The most preposterous has the team time-travelling in 17-23, which at its peak (if 'peak' is the word) splits the action across seven timelines, and involves love potions and a spectacular string of coincidences to deliver a message from those stranded in the past. Read it, and recalibrate your definition of chutzpah. From 42-57, John Byrne is writer and penciller, bringing some discipline and imagination to the plotting, and producing some striking images and changes, not least of the title, which became *Avengers West Coast* from 47. It's an enormous improvement, but it still only brings the comic up to the level of forgettable superhero yarn. After Byrne, the main writers were Roy and Dann Thomas, artwork mostly by Paul Ryan and Danny Bulanadi (63-69) and David Ross and Tim Dzon (76-100). The only glimmerings of interest centre around USAgent, foisted on the team by the government and whose failure to fit in comes to a peak in 69. It's a huge relief at 102 when all those giant robots can go back to the lab for an overhaul.

The annuals are both frustrating and surprisingly rewarding. In most, at least half the pages are occupied by chapters of a story continued from other Marvel annuals. However, the remainder was occupied by three or four short stories, some quite strong. The 1989 annual has an interesting stream-of-consciousness treatment of USAgent, the 1991 annual has Wasp discussing her *Avengers* screenplay with a Hollywood producer (amusing) and Living Lightning paying a visit to his old gangland neighbourhood, and the 1992 annual has a similar encounter with the past for Spiderwoman and a humorous piece ranking supervillains.~FC

WESTERN GUNFIGHTERS

Marvel: *33 issues 1970-1975*

The giant-sized 1-7 each ran a lead story featuring the original Western Ghost Rider by the inevitable and very ordinary combination of Gary Friedrich and Dick Ayers. The back-up strips and the last twenty-six issues reprinted a variety of 1950s Western stories, including Apache Kid, Wyatt Earp, Tex Dawson and Kid Colt. Some notable artists feature: Angelo Torres (26), Joe Kubert (4), Jack Kirby (1, 10, 11), Doug Wildey (8, 9) and Al Williamson (18), but only Kirby and Williamson are anywhere near on form. 4 also has a curiosity in the form of the first story which Barry Windsor-Smith, or plain Barry Smith as he was then, drew for Marvel. Don't waste time looking for it.~APS

THE WESTERN KID

Marvel: *5 issues 1971-1972*

The Western Kid was Tex Dawson, and these 1950s reprints are illustrated with no particular distinction by the likes of John Romita and Al Williamson. Someone must have liked them, though, because Tex was promoted into his own title.~WJ

WESTERN TEAM-UP

Marvel: *1 issue 1973*

Seemingly pointless reprint title, with only Jack Davis' Gunsmoke Kid of any interest.~FP

WESTSIDE

Antarctic: *3 issue miniseries 2000*

As an artist there's a lot of Paul Pope about creator Dean Hsieh's work, and this story draws its inspiration from the 1970s *Kung-Fu* TV series as blind oriental vigilante Ash sets about righting wrongs in the old West. It's a fun read and promises better.~WJ

WET SATIN

Kitchen Sink: *1 issue 1976*

Published in the wake of *My Secret Garden*, the standard text on the topic, and subtitled "Women's erotic fantasies", this is a strangely subdued and unarousing collection of stories from assorted underground cartoonists. The whole affair is rescued, though, by Joyce Farmer's absolutely delightful 'A Mature Relationship', showing that sex doesn't stop once you're collecting your pension.~FP

WETWORKS

Image: *43 issues 1994-1998, One-Shot ('Sourcebook') 1994*

Created by Whilce Portacio and Brandon Choi, scripted by Francis Takenaga with pencils by Portacio for 1-9, Wetworks is a superhero team led by Jackson Dane. Sent on a suicide mission by Miles Craven, in order to survive the team have to don symbiotic suits owned by Prince Drakken of the Vampire nation, form whom they're protection from the sun. Both the vampiric Blood Queen and Armand Waering of the Were-Nation have been plotting to create just such a team, subverting the plans of Craven and Drakken. Wetworks agree to help Waering in his fight against the Vampires in return for a chance to pay Craven back for his treachery.

The series initially concentrates on the introduction and internal power struggles of the Night Tribes, with the symbiotes causing changes in the bodies of team members. In later issues new members are introduced, while various others die, though not all for long. Distrusting Waering's motives, Wetworks sever ties in 24, leading to a wrap-up of the old plots by new writer Steven Grant (from 32) in time for a new direction. The final issues desperately pile on the guest stars, but too late to save the title.

After Portacio left, *Wetworks* suffered under numerous artists, few lasting many issues. Jason Johnson's manga-influenced art (20-27), although completely different from Portacio, was well suited to the comic, but subsequent artists were distinctly routine. Takenaga's storytelling kept the series going despite a frustratingly slow pace, which actually added a great deal to the atmosphere. The Night Tribes (also the title of a related one-shot) are an excellent device and the characterisation of the team members was subtly handled, at least initially, making Takenaga's issues worthy of investigation, if you like team comics.~NF

WHA..!?

Bruce Hershenson: *1 issue 1975*

One of Steve Ditko's mid-1970s solo comics, *Wha..!?* contained a number of short strips, all of them suffused with his philosophy of rampant individualism. It was a mixture of superheroes (The Void, Masquerade), science fiction ('Premise To Consequence') and crime stories (Sgt Kage), all drawn with great vigour and enthusiasm. None of the strips are exactly memorable, though, and Ditko's obsessed invective manages to get in the way of the stories without there being enough of it to make it interesting. Too much action, not enough ranting.~DAR

WHAM-O GIANT COMICS

Wham-O: *1 issue 1967*

Having flooded America with hula hoops, Wham-O tried their hands at comics in an attempt to reap some of those 1960s Bat-dollars. It's not the best, but it is one of the strangest comics ever, and at almost two foot high was undoubtedly the biggest. The contributing creators were drawn largely from Gold Key's West Coast talent pool, so include John Stanley and Warren Tufts, and Hot-Rod magazines, which provide Nelson Dewey and Dennis Ellefson among others.

There are all manner of styles and genres here. Many strips feature fathers and sons saving each other from flying saucers, gladiators or cavemen, while others, like 'Flabby and Gabby' or Stanley's charming 'Bridget' were clearly aimed at a younger female audience. None of the strips are classics, but they are generally well crafted, and while Wally Wood's 'Radian' and 'Goody Bumpkin' and Lou Fine's last comic work 'Tor' are curiously characterless, they are undeniably beautiful to look at. Touchingly, *Wham-O* seemed to have their hearts in the right place, since the fifty odd pages are largely free from ads (save for Virgil Partch's charming Wham-O factory feature) and each strip was full to bursting with panels. Melvin The Magician's single page includes a staggering ninety-four of them! Even the colouring, which rather overpowers some strips, is carefully painted, but let down by the printing. A curio certainly, but not without merit.~DAR

WHAT IF?

Marvel: *Series one 47 issues 1977-1985, one-shot 1988, series two 114 issues 1989-1998*

What If? had the potential to be an inventive and entertaining series providing new outcomes from generally known events in Marvel's already convoluted superhero universe. Unfortunately, writers Roy Thomas (who had a few moments), and particularly Don Glut, in the company of assorted hack artists, ensured that inspiration was minimal. The most off-the-wall concept of the entire run was series one's 11, in which Jack Kirby had a ball bestowing the Fantastic Four's abilities on the Marvel office staff. Even so, it typified the idea being far more enticing than the execution, a common flaw throughout. A less pertinent, but equally annoying aspect of most early stories was a predestined outcome ensuring an Earth left much the same as that in the regular version. The series found a home for the Watcher, perennial Marvel guest star, who, er, watched, acting as mine host opening the curtain on alternate universes.

The best of the first ten issues, oddly, was later accepted as part of Marvel's official canon. Thomas and Frank Robbins' 4 explained Captain America's appearance in post-1945 tales when his 1960s re-emergence established him frozen in a block of ice since the dying days of World War II. Thomas triumphed again in 13, with regular *Conan* collaborator John Buscema illustrating 'What If Conan the Barbarian Walked the Earth Today?' For once the actuality matched the concept, although a reprise in 43 stretched the idea too thin. Some stories later occurred in the 'real' Marvel universe, such as 2's 'What If The Hulk Had Bruce Banner's Brain?' (although Thomas and Herb Trimpe provided a less satisfactory sequence than Peter David would), and 30's 'What If Spider-Man's Clone Had Lived' (handled with considerably more economy in 1979).

Frank Miller reworked his Daredevil and Elektra concepts in 28 and 35, although both are slim in content, while there's a spirited alternative to *Uncanny X-Men* 137 in 27 and a humour special, 34, packed with still funny shorts. Beyond that John Byrne's glimpse of a universe where the Fantastic Four never gained superpowers in 36 has its moments, drawing heavily on *Fantastic Four* 1, with some fine extrapolation on how their lives and humanity progressed. Peter Gillis writes many later issues, and while never stunning, he provides a semblance of originality. His best concerns Spider-Man parlaying his abilities into a showbiz career in 19. Inevitably, alternatives worth covering decreased by the issue, and the idea had run out of steam by cancellation. The 1988 one-shot is a leftover, twisting Iron Man's origin.

Redundancy degrades the second series from the start, with alternative presentations of then recent events lacking the freshness a few years' distance may have provided, produced by largely second-rate talents. Additionally, some premises are so slim that there's little to distinguish them from a regular title. 7's 'What If Wolverine Were an Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.?' (by Jim Valentino, Rob Liefeld and Scott Williams) is a prime example, although far from the worst story. The malaise of complacency afflicting Marvel throughout the late 1980s and 1990s is woefully highlighted here. Much of the first run was poor, but this largely standard-comic-length series is woeful. There was seemingly little, if any, editing, resulting in bland stories – step forward, Danny Fingeroth, Roy Thomas and Jim Valentino – with poor characterisation. A further fault was the proliferation of tales merely reversing the result of a fight, then holding a re-run with different characters.

On the plus side, from the earliest issues the second series had one or two pages of humorous suggestions for What Ifs, and the all-humour issue (once again 34, with Galactus as Elvis) is a highlight, although doesn't match its predecessor. Amid the pile of mediocrity that comprised 1-86, there's little of note. Greg Capullo drew 2's Daredevil issue and the Iron Man story in 8; the two-part Captain America story in 28 and 29 at least shows some inspiration and twists although padded with too many fights. The loosely connected 'Timequake' stories ran through 35-39, as Roy Thomas returned to a few previously glimpsed realities, and Ann Nocenti, along with artists Steve Carr and Deryl Skeleton, turned in a decent Storm story in 40, which leads off a collection of X-Men What If's titled 'Alternative Visions'. Daredevil as ally of the Kingpin in 73 has its moments, and there's some fine Alcatena art in 78.

87 marked a change shifting away from lighter material that provided a desperately need stab of inspiration. Thereafter most issues to 100 are readable with 87 itself the best of the run. Again, it might easily have occurred in the regular titles (were the X-Men not such cash cows), as Sabretooth decimated the X-Men. Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning delivered a tense script illustrated by Frank Teran in disturbing fashion, although it's not for the squeamish. Also decent are 91 with a different transformation for Bruce Banner, and 92, investigating the possibility of a teenager in control of a Sentinel. The gloomier tone was occasionally leavened with lightness (Impossible Man in 104), and kudos are due for acknowledging that a decent story can be told without an obvious headliner each issue. This makes room for the likes of 97's story about the medieval Black Knight and Doctor Doom, another highlight, with distinguished Leonardo Manco artwork (and sympathetic colouring from Marie Javins). Even Manco can't save 98's X-Men related nonsense, though.

The introduction of Spider-Girl in 105 is decently handled by Tom DeFalco and artists Ron Frenz and Bill Sienkiewicz. The issue also introduces the A-Next and J2, both promoted to their own titles on the basis of cameos. The final issue is a spirited alternative future where many superheroes never returned from Secret Wars, but by that time the title had sunk below the quality line again.

Over twenty years it never seemed to have occurred that the best alternate reality stories might be produced by more imaginative creators who didn't regularly work for Marvel, an idea whose time had come by *Ultimate Marvel Team-Up*. Overall *What If?* almost always opted for the obvious when the possibilities were boundless.~WJ

Recommended: Series one 4, 13, 19, 34, 36, series two 87, 97

WHAT THE... ?!

Marvel: *24 issues 1988-1992*

A latter-day successor to *Not Brand Ecch*, parodying Marvel characters. John Byrne has Superbman battling the Fantastical Four in 2, the best issue, also containing Knick Furey, ex-agent of S.H.E.E.L.D., by Fred Hembeck and John Severin, with the Hydra Ladies Auxiliary. Also featured are Phil Foglio's Dr Deranged, and Mike Mignola and Al Williamson illustrating an Al Milgrom story lampooning Wolverine. Other choice items scattered throughout the run include Don McGregor's Black 'n' Blue Panther in 9, and, also in that issue, 'Hotel Galactus', featuring the Imperial Guard, by Scott Lobdell, and a special Goon Knight story illustrated by veteran Win Mortimer. Doc Samson and Homer Simpson merge to form Doc Simpson in 18, while 7 offered one of the most eagerly awaited battles of all time, the Revengers vs Just-a-League. This may not make you giggle throughout, but pick and choose for the occasional smile.~HY

Recommended: 2

Neil Gaiman's WHEEL of WORLDS

Tekno: *2 issues (0-1) 1995-1996*

Two disparate issues. 0 is a pivotal anthology in the Tekno Universe featuring all the Neil Gaiman characters – Lady Justice, Mr Hero, Teknophage – and passably chronicles the history of the latter. A year later, Bruce Jones' issue 1 is essentially a Lady Justice story of mad scientists creating the perfect woman by pick 'n' mixing body, mind and soul from three unwilling contenders. 'Nuff said.~APS

WHEELIE And The CHOPPER BUNCH

Charlton: *7 issues 1975-1976*

Earlier in his career John Byrne was known to have cited this as among his favourite work. The reason may have been that it's among the first he had published. Based on a Hanna Barbera cartoon show, Wheelie and his sentient car mates have the usual kiddie cartoon adventures.~SW

WHEN THE WIND BLOWS

Hamish Hamilton: *1 volume 1982*
Penguin: *1 volume 1982*

When first published, Raymond Briggs' gentle warning about nuclear war was described as chilling and terrifying, and received praise from a slew of prominent commentators in the UK. Previously known for his charming children's books, illustrated in soft pencil crayons, with chubby folk and singing snowmen, it was a bit of a jolt when Briggs changed focus, but kept his cosy visual style. *When the Wind Blows* presents a nuclear strike via the eyes of a hopelessly misinformed retired couple, who resolutely wait for the government to come and rescue them, and assume that even if the TV's gone off, milk will still get delivered. They bumble around, the bomb goes off, they develop radiation sickness, they die. Briggs tries to use his characteristic gentle humour to underpin their predicament and touching faith in the powers that be, but it's just too cute and repetitive. No doubt a middle-aged couple in middle England at the time would have been touched and shocked by the way war is presented so close to home. However, for modern readers it lacks bite, despite its contemporary impact.~FJ

WHERE CREATURES ROAM

Marvel: *8 issues 1970-1971*

Yet another title tapping into Marvel's seemingly endless reservoir of 1950s horror tales. There's plenty of Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, but little inspiration.~FP

WHERE MONSTERS DWELL

Marvel: *38 issues 1970-1975*

Admittedly reprinting 1950s horror material meant a comic with reduced overheads, but just who bought this lacklustre stuff? This was the longest running of Marvel's reprint horror titles, 12 is giant-sized, there's a Reed Crandall strip in 4 and the usual quota of Ditko is peppered throughout.~FP

WHERE'S IT AT SUGAR KAT?

Slave Labor: *3 issue miniseries 2000-2001**

As introduced in *Sugar Buzz*, Sugar Kat is universally adored and admired, while her smarter sister Rebecca is ignored. Here they stumble into a town where the population are either grossly overweight, or supernaturally thin. The influence of 1970s *Scooby-Doo* seeps from the pages, helped by Woodrow Phoenix's stylish art. As with *Scooby-Doo*, though, after a while the jokes wear thin and the pay-off fails to satisfy. Each issue also contains a strip conceived by writer Ian Carney's young son Jake and drawn by Jonathan Edwards, Andi Watson and Evan Dorkin (in 1, 2 and 3 respectively) that are the equal of many recognised properties.~WJ

WHISPER

Capital: *2 issues 1983*
First: *Special 1985, 37 issues 1986-1990*

Whisper begins in distinctly unpromising fashion. Rich Larson's ugly art makes it hard to find any merit in Steven Grant's story of Alexis Devlin, the reluctant ninja. On a visit to Japan she is thrown into the middle of a Yakuza power struggle, and takes to a masked costume for a plan of rescue and revenge. Nothing here makes her convincing as a character. Many of her heroic stunts break the laws of physics, and the background that we're given on her screams 'gimmick', the flatmate who's a model, the flatmate's senator lover, the childhood polio... You can skip these. The 1985 special completes the story with equally ugly artwork, and plot not improved by the introduction of the CIA. Again, feel free to avoid.

Whisper returned to her own title via the *First Adventures* anthology, and was transformed. Grant's plotting was tight, complex and demanding, but rewarding effort, and the characters are suddenly real people, reacting as real people would to the eruption of violence in their lives. Most impressive is the way that aspects of Alexis that at first seemed only gimmicks become more and more convincing, not just lines on a resumé, but burdens she still carries. The story still concentrates on organised crime, the CIA and international conspiracies, which can make for lazy and boring plotting, but Grant manages it all beautifully. He keeps the focus on the human level throughout, yet still faces up to the chilling implications of covert operations. The entire series is well above average, but the peak occurs around 23. Thereafter, there are signs of exhaustion in the writing, with more effort expended on reviving old characters than in introducing new ones, and with conspiracy subplots becoming ever more convoluted. The artwork was transformed as well, for a dramatic, inventive, and intelligent read through several changes of artist, with Norm Breyfogle (3-11) and "Spyder" (13-24) producing the most issues, although look for the debut of Steve Epting (29-31).~FC

Recommended: 1-23

WHITE DEATH

Les Cartoonistes Dangereuse: *Graphic Novel 1998*

You're not going to enjoy this, but you should read it anyway. It's a distressing, nihilistic story set in the trenches of the Great War, involving an Italian soldier returning to his childhood home, up in the Trentino mountain range, to find that it has become a place of death and desolation. The ferocious climate is as great a menace to the soldiers as the enemy is, and when a way is found to turn the elements into a deadly weapon, the situation only gets more bleak. Robbie Morrison's entire story is despairing, the only flashes of warmth and laughter occurring in the local bordello, but even they are bitter and transitory. Charlie Adlard's art is uniformly grey and disheartening, entirely appropriate to the subject matter and skilfully underplayed. Dramatic overstatements would have been easy to make, and both writer and artist must have been tempted, but they show commendable restraint and make the work all the more powerful. It's a depressing, austere story with no trace of pleasure in it, but it's bloody good.~HS

Recommended

WHITE DEVIL

Eternity: *6 issue miniseries 1991*

A manga style story set in a post-apocalypse Japan. Barbaric warlords hoarding the remnants of technology rule until the mysterious Temple O'Rourke is hired by the starving peasants to destroy the worst of the lot, the cannibalistic Kuroshi. Temple gathers a small band of like-minded warriors and sorts it all out. It bills itself as an "erotic thriller for adults" but it's just *The Seven Samurai* tricked up. The film did it better, and a long time ago.~WW

THE WHITE LAMA

Humanoids: *6 volumes 2000*

An aged Tibetan Lama sacrifices himself to be reincarnated and so better equipped to deal with forthcoming troubles he senses. The monastery is left to the corrupt Migmar, knowing he is tainted, with instructions to locate the Lama's new identity. Migmar fraudulently selects a moron he can control, while the Lama is reincarnated as Gabriel, born of occidental parents, but raised in the East. Writer Jodorowsky strives for a coming of age epic, but the story never comes alive, and Gabriel is just a peg on which to hang adventure clichés. Without the composed storytelling of Georges Bess, this would fall apart much sooner, but make it all the way to volume five and you're presented with tosh as mediocre as any superhero comic. The conclusion is predictable and far overdue after six books.~FP

WHITE LIKE SHE

Dark Horse: *4 issue miniseries 1994**

Luther Albert Joyce, janitor at a nuclear facility, is disfigured during one of those pesky leaks, and seeks help from one Dr Flounder, pioneer in brain transplants. Simultaneously, Louella Schwartz, belligerent twenty-something rebel, decides that she deplores Dr Flounder's work, and goes armed to end it. The two meet, and after the shootout, Dr

* Available in a collected edition

Flounder is killed, Luther is dying, and Louella is in a coma. Luckily, Dr Flounder's assistant is nearby, and so Luther's brain ends up in Louella's body. Black man into white woman, in the most intimate of bonds. Bob Fingerman uses the clichés to make intelligent and perceptive points about the nature of sexual and racial politics, as Luther comes to terms with his/her new body (his reaction to menstruation is hilarious, but disturbing!), and how it changes his and other people's perceptions. Meanwhile, Louella's brain is still hanging around in a jar in Dr Flounder's lab, when a young man meets with a fatal accident... Insightful, disquieting, amusing, and with some inventive covers.~HS

Recommended: 1-4

WHITE TRASH

Tundra: *4 issue miniseries 1992-1993**

Teenage metalhead Dean is picked up by a barely disguised Elvis Presley (pseudonymously named The King) in a pink Cadillac, and four issues of glorious cartoon violence follow. The King intends to make a Las Vegas comeback to show folk what being a real American is all about, but continuous mayhem means that an ever-growing band of assorted distressing examples of humanity are on his trail. There's no little irony that it's taken a Scottish writer and an artist from New Zealand to produce comics' first road movie, a distinctly American proposition. Martin Emond's grotesquely exaggerated painting and facility for throwaway visual gags propel Gordon Rennie's observational script, the pair taking their chance to lampoon American culture and stereotypes with rapier accuracy.~FP

Recommended: 1-4

WHITE WHORE FUNNIES

Last Gasp: *3 issues 1975 (1), 1987 (2-3)*

Larry Fuller (as Wiley Spade), provides, in these underground strips of sexual and racial politics, some heavy-handed satire in a crude cartoon style. If anybody likely to be offended by such things, did happen to pick these comics up, they certainly would be. The western, 'Kid Cunt' in 1, however, reads like a *Mad* parody and is all the better for it. The first 1987 issue is a reprint of the 1975 issue.~NF

WHITEOUT

Oni Press: *4 issue miniseries 1998*, 4 issue miniseries ('Melt') 1999-2000**

The first series introduces Carrie Stetko, a U.S. Marshall stationed in Antarctica where she's found a way to hide from her past. When a murder's committed, that seems to be of interest to British intelligence in the person of Lily Sharpe, Carrie must find the murderer whilst avoiding an international incident. 'Melt' sends Carrie on a race across the ice to catch a group of Russians, who have illegally brought nuclear weapons to the continent. Greg Rucka does a great job of characterising both Carrie and the hostile environment in which she works, seamlessly integrating them into the essentially hard-boiled mystery plotlines. This is made easier by Steve Lieber's gritty illustrations, scratchily inked with a telling use of white space.~NF

Recommended: 1-4, 'Melt' 1-4

WHIZ COMICS

Fawcett: *154 issues (2-155) 1940-1953*

One of the most popular and influential titles in the history of comics as the comic that introduced the original Captain Marvel to the world. Beginning as a straight blood and thunder anthology title, it soon evolved into an unbeatable blend of humour and thrills spearheaded by C.C. Beck and the team of writers and artists he gathered to craft the adventures of the "World's Mightiest Mortal". The quality of the work was matched by the innovations of the editors. Covers were eye-catching; even photographic images were used (107-109, 112), and clever gimmicks such as a four issue crossover wherein Spy Smasher is brainwashed and Captain Marvel must halt his destructive rampage (15-18) fired readers imaginations in an era where heroes hardly acknowledged each others existence. After this experiment crossovers and cameos were frequent, an idea used with great effect by Marvel Comics many years later.

As Captain Marvel mania overtook Fawcett's publications, many back-up strips were lost or reallocated. The other features, Spy Smasher (Crime Smasher after WWII seen in 76), Golden Arrow, Lance O'Casey, Ibis the Invincible, Dan Dare, Scoop Smith, and even Mac Raboy's Dr Voodoo (7-22) were lacklustre when compared to the "Big Red Cheese". Only the first five lasted into the post war years, and despite artists such as Bernard Krigstein (Golden Arrow 75, 78, 91, 95, 96, 98-100) and Basil Wolverton's ½ page "Culture Corner" (most issues from 65 to 146) the magazine remains a Marvel Family title to most readers and collectors.~WW

Recommended: 2, 7-22, 25, 33, 35, 41, 43, 72, 86, 91, 102, 106-116, 139, 154

WHOA, NELLIE!

Fantagraphics: *3 issue miniseries 1996*

Jaime Hernandez' first series since discontinuing *Love and Rockets* concentrates on lady wrestlers Xochitl Nava (Vicki Glori's niece) and Gina Bravo, who wants nothing more than to be Xochitl's tag-team partner. With lots of wrestling action there's not much by way of story or characterisation but it's entertaining enough.~NF

WHODUNNIT?

Eclipse: *3 issues 1986-1987*

Bail bondsman Jay Endicott investigates murder mysteries, each left unsolved until the following issue in order for readers to make their guesses and for one correct entry to win a cash prize. It's an engaging idea, smoothly assembled by Mark Evanier and Dan Spiegle. They also worked on *Crossfire* (Endicott's other identity), and 24 of that title is where you'll find the solution to the third issue's puzzler.~HS

WHOTNOT

Fantagraphics: *4 issues 1993-1994*

A collection of satirical, philosophical and scatological strips from the mind of Jeremy Eaton. Eaton works in a number of forms, from single-page gags like 'The Rose-Coloured Man' to a pseudo-documentary about the Giant Hitler TV series to Walt Whitman's superhero daydreams (censored!). Then there's the serial, 'Americaville', a tour of the darker side of America's landscape and the horrors it all too often contains. Not for the squeamish.~NF

The WICKED

Image: *7 issues 1999-2000, one-shot ('Medusa's Tale') 2000*

The Wicked have sold their souls, and are hunted by Nathan Ellstings, who has psionic powers, and Wendy McKinnes, ex-zombie, in order to save these souls from the demons that now possess them. Nathan's on the Demon Guild's wanted list, but makes himself useful by thwarting a plot to overthrow its leader Kaliveult (2-3). 5-7 concern the last of the Knights Templar, Cristof, who allies himself with Nathan and Wendy. In 'Medusa's Tale', the two are pawns in a battle between two demons, whilst the Medusa herself threatens them all. Writer, Francis Takenaga provides an interesting variation on the vampire hunter/exorcist theme perfectly complemented by artist, Roy Martinez' photo-realistic approach, although Cristof's origin in 6 is drawn by Lan Medina.~NF

THE WIGGLY READER

Fontanelle Press: *3 issues 1997-1999*

On the basis, one presumes, of some fine cartooning, John Kerschbaum was the recipient of a Xeric Foundation grant to publish these. At his best, as in 2's story of the decline of automated dancing partners, Kerschbaum captures a poignant sorrow coupled with the sad realities of life. Elsewhere, though, he takes three times as many pages as necessary to tell simple or seemingly pointless stories. There are laughs and treats within the covers, but inconsistency is the order of the day.~FP

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* Available in a collected edition

WIINDOWS

Cult Press: *21 issues 1992-1994*

Subtitled "The anthology of the bizarre", *Wiindows* is, in fact, largely only an anthology when considered en masse, since each issue is a complete story by different creators. The exceptions are 6's poetry special and 21's autobiographical strips. It's not particularly bizarre either, with only the shoddy and pretentious 20 earning the appellation, the remainder being reassuringly traditional in espousing solid stories and art. A broad selection of themes are employed on a welcome diversity of stories, most relying on strong plots and characters for emotional resonance. While sometimes obvious (12, 17), sometimes too abstruse (3, 5) and sometimes saying nothing (10), almost every issue is rewarding in some fashion. Uniquely in comics there are attempts to illustrate poetry, with many drawn to Tommy Berg's adaptation of Neil Gaiman's 'Luther's Villanelle' in 16, but it's weak, and the accompanying text and illustration piece about youthful pride and a desire to supplement the family income is far better. The art encompasses a variety of styles with the photo referenced realism of John Grigni (10, 17) likely to have the widest appeal. Wayne Reid's storytelling (3, 11) is pleasingly traditional, but the toned painting of Berg (6, 16) is more promising than his merely acceptable pen and ink work (1, 9, 18), although it improves throughout the run. For three very different stories try St Peter sitting in judgement of a life in 3, 9's examination of teenage nihilism, or 15's religious parable.~WJ

WILD ANIMALS

Pacific: *One-shot 1982*

Though this was meant to be a showcase for Scott Shaw's You-All-Gibbon (The Junk-Food Monkey), the funny-animal genre is better served here by Larry Gonick's Bronty, Sergio Aragones' prequel to King Kong and Jim Engel's Krazy Kat homage, Bungalow Bill Bunny. Worth a look.~NF

WILD CARDS

Marvel/Epic: *4 issue miniseries 1990*

This ties into the popular series of books where science-fiction and fantasy novelists handle superheroes. The stories are set in a world struck by a strange virus in 1946. Of those infected, 90% died, 9% were horribly deformed, and 1% (the Aces) gained a superpower. The main writer is Lewis Shiner, who contributed to the prose stories from the start, and the better artists include Barry Kitson (providing framing sequences), Gray Morrow, David Roach and Tom Yeates. The comic concentrates on a detective investigating bomb attacks related to the virus, which is a way of giving a history lesson and an introduction to the main Aces. It's entertaining while it lasts, but an hour later you'll struggle to remember the first thing about the characters or the plot.~FC

WILD DOG

DC: *4 issues 1987, 1 Special 1989*

Writer Max Collins and artist Terry Beatty tried their hands at real-life superheroics with this series, which went from the miniseries to a run in *Action Comics*, then to the special. The 'real life' tag stems from the fact that all of Wild Dog's crimefighting equipment is available over the counter, with no science-fiction technology or supernatural elements involved. The original series offered several candidates for the hockey-masked, taser-wielding vigilante's real identity. By the time of the special, Wild Dog's ID is known to the readers, but still a keen source of interest to investigative reporter Susan King, a hard-nosed manipulator who makes Lois Lane look like Tessie the Typist. This fast-moving series doesn't have the emotional involvement of Ms Tree, but it's readable, and worth picking up if you find it cheap.~HS

WILD LIFE

Antarctic: *12 issues 1993-1995*

Having cornered the furry animal adventure market with *Furrlough*, Antarctic branched out into anthropomorphic slice of life. It wasn't as successful, possibly because the animals are superfluous to the form. Regular features include John Nunnemacher's college soap 'Buffalo Wings', which also had its own title, and meanders in harmless fashion without ever grabbing here. Not as well drawn, but more appealing is 'Sarah and Ginnie', two flatmates having the problems that girls do. The standout strip, though, is 'The Sophistikats' from 7, ploughing a similar field to Green Acres, with a simple unemployed cat winning the lottery and mixing with the elite. It was later collected as a one-shot.~WJ

WILD LIFE

Fantagraphics: *2 issues 1994*

"My Life is an Open Comic Book!" says writer/artist Peter Kuper, in this more engaging than most entry in the overworked autobiographical genre. His desperate attempts to lose his virginity and score drugs may or may not push your buttons, depending on whether you shared those experiences, but his eccentric art style, reminiscent of old linocut prints, holds the attention.~HS

WILD STARS

Collectors Edition: *1 issue 1984, 1 issue ('First Marker') 1988*
Little Rocket Publications: *7 issues 2001-2002*

While Erlik gambles with Carthage for the deed of ownership to the Planet Earth, Daestar learns that a Brothan ship is on a suicidal path towards Vhan trying to destroy Erlik. In 'First Marker', Erlik vows revenge as another world is destroyed by the Brothan. What follows is a complex tale of time travel and alternative worlds, clones, aliens and drug-smugglers and the hunt for Hitler's body. Michael Tierney's storytelling style doesn't help any of this make sense with huge gaps in the narrative, but Dave Simons' pencils (on the Little Rocket issues) make the artwork more palatable than Tierney's own amateurish first efforts. All credit to Tierney for seeing it through, but the whole is just too fragmentary for caring.~NF

Nikki Doyle: WILD THING

Marvel UK: *9 issues 1993*

Able to infiltrate computer systems, Nikki Doyle encounters virtual-reality versions of Marvel's mainstream heroes and villains. It's a clever way of using popular characters while avoiding continuity problems, but the comic's average. Best issues are fill-ins 7 and 8.~WJ

WILD WEST SHOW

Mojo Press: *1 volume 1996*

Beginning with an editorial bemoaning the departed Western comic, this continues with an eclectic contributions, largely from people who've merely dabbled in comics. The alternate Wild West is a common theme, best represented by a train meeting between desk clerk James Hicock and Ambassador Bill Cody in a Joe Lansdale story adapted by John Garcia. There is also a fine silent Sam Glanzman strip, a poignant tale of the world not being ready for rock'n'roll, and some nice Marc Erickson art on a horror story. Almost a quarter of the ninety-six pages are occupied by a well drawn, but dull story commenting on western clichés. At only $5.95, it represents very good value overall and is worth hunting down if you enjoy a Western.~WJ

WILD WESTERN ACTION

Skywald: *3 issues 1971*

This fifty-two page comic mixed formulaic new material with formulaic old stuff. 'The Bravados' by Len Wein and Syd Shores, "five bitter misfits who bury their pasts in shallow graves" was *The Magnificent Seven* minus two (and with worse inking), but staggeringly proved popular enough to get its own title. The rest of the comic starred the likes of The Django Kid by Fred Guardineer, and Fred Meagher's bizarrely camp 'Swift Arrow' among others for publisher Israel Waldman's dusty archives.~DAR

WILDC.A.T.S. Covert Action Team

Image/WildStorm: *Series one 51 issues (0-50), 1 Annual, 1 Special 1992-1998*
WildStorm: *Series two 28 issues, 1 Special 1999-2001, 5 issue miniseries ('Version 3.0') 2002-2003*

WildC.A.T.S. was Jim Lee's pet project, so early issues are an art-led abundance of spreads and full page action shots as the superhero team move from one fight to the next. For Lee fans that's probably enough, but he and co-plotter Brandon Choi keep all else to a minimum, so the arrival of Chris Claremont to turn in a proper (although average) story in 10-13* is welcome. And that's it for Lee apart from brief returns in 19, 31, 32 and 50. An Erik Larsen guest slot in 14 is followed by the team of James Robinson and Travis Charest. Charest's cinematic style evolves engagingly over the course of his increasingly sporadic contributions (The Special, 14-18, 20, 21, 25, 26, and portions of 28-30), but Robinson is far from top form.

The best writing of the first series is by Alan Moore from 21*. He assumes the title with the main cast lost in space, constructs a new Earth-based team and juggles the stories of both over following issues. Moore adroitly sidelines the by now overplayed alien problem that initiated all plots and applies a previously absent logic and depth to the cast, best sampled with 29, as the team disintegrates amid the 'Fire From Heaven' crossover. Pencil artists Ryan Benjamin (23, 24, and portions of 29 and 30), the fine Kevin Maguire in 22, and Matt Broome (32-34, 38-42) are all adaptable, providing action-packed art while never permitting talking heads to become boring, and Ed Benes (44-50) is closer to the spirit of Jim Lee than any of them. Choi returns in the company of Jonathan Peterson from 38, dispersing a team of *WildC.A.T.S.* through time. This takes forever to arrive at an admittedly decent pay-off, then stretches that as well, grinding the title into the ground. 50 has Robinson producing his best work on the series, and Lee, Moore and Charest return for the wake.

Overall, the large amorphous cast and frequent references to other titles can deter the casual reader. Easy jumping on points are 21, 29, 38 and 41. Both the special and the annual are disappointing. For those who can't get enough WildC.A.T.S., there are two Sourcebooks, featuring pin-ups and background information on the cast before 20. The second is the better drawn, with the first notable for Jeffrey Scott's appalling distortions of the human figure.

The second series starts in spectacular fashion with lush art from Travis Charest and decent stories from Scott Lobdell, but the wheels rapidly come off. After only two complete issues Charest draws portions of 3, 4 and 6, and Lobdell is gone by 8. Thereafter Sean Phillips delivers his usual professional and under-rated artwork, but incoming writer Joe Casey repeats the mistake that killed the first series by providing stories lacking the plot to fill the many issues they extend over. Seemingly bent on suicide, appallingly designed covers are a feature from 22, while George Tuska's art is a real surprise in the 'Mosaic' special. "Version 3.0" also has good art, by Dustin Nguyen and Richard Friend, which doesn't disguise another dull Casey story. This time the abuse of corporate power is the theme, and only Grifter and Jack Marlowe remain from previous incarnations, with the active cast now consisting of assorted people duplicating Grifter's talents and attitude.~FP
Recommended: series one 22, 25, 29, 33, 34, series two 1

WILDC.A.T.S. ADVENTURES

Image/WildStorm: *10 issues 1994-1995*

A cartoon series was based on *WildC.A.T.S.*, and this is the comic version of the cartoon. It simplified the characters' backgrounds, keeping the team's raison d'être (namely to defend Earth from the alien Daemonites), but limited the stories to battles involving this purpose. The first issue sees Warblade join the team and during the series many of the other concepts (the Kherubim, noble enemies of the Daemonites, Coda, quasi-religious amazons and daemonite possession) introduced by the original comic are reintroduced. Written by Jeff Mariotte from the cartoon scripts, the stories work hard to create a sense of character rather than concentrate wholly on action, but the changing rota of artists undermines their appeal from issue to issue.~NF

WILDC.A.T.S./ALIENS

Image/Dark Horse: *One-shot 1998*

You'd be forgiven for expecting a pointless extended fight scene between Image's flagship superteam and Dark Horse's ultraviolent extra-terrestrials. In fact it's a genuinely shocking tie-up to the first *Stormwatch* series. WildC.A.T.S. desperately try to save StormWatch from their Aliens-infested orbiting HQ as regular writer Warren Ellis clears out the characters he's not transferring to *The Authority*. It's a truly surprising story, and one that you'll enjoy even more if armed with a good understanding of both teams' continuity. The unlikely art combination of Chris Sprouse and Kevin Nowlan works remarkably well, too. It's collected with the final issues of Stormwatch.~JC
Recommended

WILDC.A.T.S./X-MEN

Image/WildStorm: *One-shot ('The Golden Age') 1997, one-shot ('The Silver Age') 1997, one-shot ('The Modern Age') 1997*
Marvel: *One-shot ('The Dark Age') 1998*

'The Golden Age' set in the 1940s features Wolverine and Zealot behind enemy lines. Plotted by Scott Lobdell, it's of note for some of Travis Charest's finest illustration work to date, and only a hair from being monochrome. Lobdell also writes 'The Silver Age', set in the late 1960s and drawn by Jim Lee with plenty of tips-of-the-hat to Steranko and Neal Adams, and featuring Grifter and Marvel Girl. James Robinson writes 'The Modern Age', set in the present, pitting both teams against the Hellfire Club. Adam Hughes' very sexy pages are slickly inked by Mark Farmer. 'The Dark Age', is set in the future, perhaps the reason it only turned up almost a year later. It's a disappointment from Warren Ellis before he got the hang of turning out this kind of material. As the artwork by Mat Broome and Sean Parsons slavishly impersonates Jim Lee, it's strangely the most Image-like of all the issues.~SW

WILDC.O.R.E.

Image/WildStorm: *10 issues 1997-1998*

A second chance for WildStorm's Backlash, formerly star of his own title, here a team member, as his circle of 'super-friends' form an informal alliance. Our hero rapidly becomes lost in superheroes-by-the-numbers, but they're perfectly competent and entertaining adventures. If you like the original incarnations of *WildC.A.T.S.* or *Stormwatch*, then you'll find nothing to object to in the first half-dozen issues. Strangely, though, there's a sudden change in the creative team with 7, and the group go on an extended sojourn to a parallel world, which, since we hadn't really had time to become acquainted with them in their own environs, could only be regarded as ill-advised. Interest fell off correspondingly rapidly.~HS

WILDSTAR

Image: *4 issue miniseries ('Sky Zero') 1993*, 3 issue miniseries 1995-1996*

The first story is a self contained timeloop, excitingly mixing in-your-face Image action and Jerry Ordway's solid storytelling habits. Starting in a post-apocalyptic future Wildstar is on the run from mercenaries including the blousey Jumpstart. They all have starfish-like creatures clamped to different bits of their bodies, which impart super powers. When Wildstar manages to send himself back into his own past the mercenaries follow, leading to some dangerous temporal anomalies. Jerry Ordway co-plots with inker/scripter Al Gordon, who really needs an interpretative editor, and it remains entertaining despite Gordon's verbal diahorrea. Chris Marrinan pencils the sequel, written by a more experienced and concise Gordon. It follows a similar theme but starts in the present with Wildstar's younger self, Micky, becoming the new Wildstar and immediately having to duke it out with Erik Larsen's Mighty Man. An alternative version of Jumpstart appears in 2, but with a lack of real closure, the second series is a complete waste of time.~SW

WILDSTORM

Image/WildStorm: *4 issue miniseries 1995*

Short-lived inventory title containing six to eight-page short stories. The quality varies, but there's usually at least one goodie per issue. Some issues have unrelated stories, others focus on solo-stories featuring characters from the same team. The latter tend to be more worthwhile. The Union story in 3, by Mike Heisler and Randy Green, is the best of the bunch.~JC

WILDSTORM RISING

Image/WildStorm: *2 issues 1995**

The two issues top and tail a ten-part story running through the WildStorm titles cover-dated May and June 1995. When one of the keys to a spaceship believed to belong to the evil alien daemonites is discovered it's up to the good alien Kherubim and their friends to stop two other keys, needed to power the vessel, from falling into the wrong hands. Well-structured for a multi-part team-up, the story set up events for both Alan Moore's take-over of *WildC.A.T.S.* from issue 21 and the first Grifter solo-series.~JC

WILDSTORM SPOTLIGHT

Image/WildStorm: *4 issues 1997*

Solo stories of superheroes populating WildStorm's titles. Alan Moore writes a bleak look at the end of everything, featuring Majestic in 1, while 2-3 are occupied by Steven Grant and Roy Allen Martinez's 'Loner', as an old name is inherited by a new owner. Neither are poor, but they won't rank among their creators' highlights. 4's Stormwatch tale confuses a Scottish phonetic accent for an Irish one throughout in an overcrowded superhero outing. What was to have been issue 5 was eventually released as *Lynch*.~WJ

WILDSTORM SUMMER SPECIAL

WildStorm: *One-shot 2001*

This three-strip celebration of ten years of the Gaijin artists' studio is padded out with text history and pin-ups. Warren Ellis and Cully Hamner's interlude with The Authority's Jack Hawksmoor is unnecessary hand-wringing. Paul Jenkins and Georges Jeanty's tale of The Authority's Engineer, a sad metal space lady who fancies a bit of rough, is as tasteless as it sounds, and the silent about Zealot, and what seems to be a swordfight over an apple, is not worth trying to follow. Chris Sprouse's pin-up of the Gaijin artists doing convention sketches for the Gen^{13} girls is well suitable for framing, though.~GK

WILDSTORM THUNDERBOOK

WildStorm: *One-shot 2000*

Sixty-four shiny (wipe-clean?) pages of DV8, Cybernary, Gen 13, Jet and Backlash, and Grifter trivialising parent-child relationships, homelessness, and role-modeling in the hit style of the X-Men. The big ladies are not wearing much, but the man's gun is triple-barrelled so we know where we are. Despite it all, though, the art of Adam Hughes and Kevin Nowlan on Gen^{13} looks good.~GK

WILL EISNER'S Quarterly

Kitchen Sink: *8 issues 1983-1986*

Predominantly black and white magazine showcasing Will Eisner's work. The major presentation is the serialisation of *A Life Force* in 1-5 prior to its appearance in a single volume. This thematic sequel to *A Contract with God* depicts urban decay in the 1930s Bronx shortly after the Great Depression, focusing on a tenement building inhabited by deprived immigrants and un-deprived cockroaches. Eisner's great gift shines in the depth of imagery and storytelling conveyed by his minimalist artwork, yet great excitement is rarely generated and much of the social satire is heavy-handed. Long-underwear characters and Pamela Anderson clones refuse to be spotted, no matter how hard you look. Anyone who believes that superheroes are a requirement for good comics should take note of this eye-opener.

From 6 onwards, stand-alone stories take centre-stage, eventually collected as *The Will Eisner Reader*. Irregular back-ups include 1940s newspaper reprints of the Spirit, Mr Mystic and Lady Luck, the latter two by Bob Powell and Klaus Nordling. Irritating partial colour and format changes detract from the overall package, which is rounded off with several interviews and articles concerning Eisner.~APS

WILL TO POWER

Dark Horse: *12 issue limited series 1994*

Now a government representative, Titan takes a tour of the *Comics Greatest World* venues, meeting the local cast. Manipulated at every turn, but with his power increasing, Titan is finally pushed over the edge. Decent story and decent art.~FP

WIMMEN'S COMIX

Last Gasp: *10 issues 1972-1984*
Renegade: *3 issues (11-13) 1987-1988*
Rip-Off: *4 issues (14-17) 1989-1992*

Created by the San Francisco Women's Comics Collective, this was a follow-up to *It Ain't Me Babe*, the first women's underground comic, and designed as an ongoing anthology title to help publish women in the often violently misogynistic world of underground comix. The initial run of *Wimmen*'s often featured immature and amateurish work, but also gave folks like Trina Robbins, Lee Marrs, Roberta Gregory, Melinda Gebbie and Sharon Rudahl greater exposure, in some cases their début, and consolidated their progress. When *Wimmen's Comix* returned in 1982 several former mainstays were still present, but new contributors appeared Lee Binswanger, Leslie Ewing, Mary Fleener, Leslie Sternbergh, Julie Hollings and the standard was higher. Theme issues appeared, international contributors were invited... even the occasional male was allowed to be an ancillary contributor, provided a 'grown-up lady' was doing most of the work! *Wimmen's* (*Wimmin's* for 17) averaged an issue about every couple of years, but after 17, the 'Kvetch' issue, the collective threw in the towel, declaring it was their last issue. The Supernatural issue 13, 'Disastrous Relationships' issue 14, and 'Men' themed 16, are the best overall, the latter including an outrageously horny 'Desert Peach' vignette by Donna Barr.~HS

Recommended: 13, 14, 16

THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS

NBM: *4 Volumes 1997-2001*

Kenneth Grahame's 1908 children's book is in many ways the quintessential English pastoral fantasy. In his rhapsodic hymn to the glories of the countryside, Grahame lovingly depicted a idyllic world of high teas, punts down the river and jolly japes in motorcars, all complimented by a strain of ecological mysticism that's best exemplified by the famous 'Piper at the Gates of Dawn' sequence. Ernest H. Shepherd's original, charming yet unsentimental, illustrations remain the definitive visual interpretation of the main characters Mole, Ratty, Badger and Toad, and any new adaptation of the novel also has to contend with A. A. Milne's popular, high-spirited 1928 stage version, 'Toad of Toad Hall'. Happily, in these full colour hardback graphic novels, French writer/artist Michel Plessix more than rises to the challenge of turning this much-loved classic into a comic strip. He wisely uses as much of the original text as possible, yet simultaneously avoids a static, over-reverent style. You get plenty of broad visual comedy and pure comics storytelling, too. Plessix is fully in tune with Grahame's vision of England as a lush, exotic natural playground, and his gorgeous, highly detailed line and colour work luxuriates in every green leaf, dark brown branch and sun-kissed twig. When depicting Toad and chums, the artist also finds an acceptable compromise between Disneyesque cuteness and Shepherd's more refined, classical penwork. In short, this is exactly the kind of meticulous labour of love that helps to give comics a good name.~AL

Recommended: 1-4

WINDS OF WINTER

Antarctic: *One-shot 2001*

Visually impressive if simplistic fantasy from Gianluca Piredda and Stefano Cardoselli wherein the embodiment of death falls in love with a mortal woman, although his merest presence would mean her doom. Classical tragedy that art fans will find well worth seeking out.~WW

WINTER WORLD

Eclipse: *3 issue miniseries 1987-1988*

The writing of Chuck Dixon is combined with the Argentinian artwork of Jorge Zaffino to produce a European-style adventure comic that wouldn't be out of place in *Heavy Metal*. In a cold, bleak post-holocaust world a trader and his pet badger meet a young woman, only for them all to be captured and enslaved on a jealously-guarded enclosed farm, where it's still possible to grow food. The series chronicles the trader's escape and subsequent attempts to rescue the woman. The script's as bleak as the landscape and as violent as you'd expect. Zaffino's artwork, influenced by Caniff and Toth, never quite reaches those heights but is pleasurable, although the third issue looks rushed.~NF

Vertigo: WINTER'S EDGE

DC/Vertigo: *3 issues 1998-2000*

Annual anthology featuring short story selections of Vertigo favourites celebrating Christmas and the holiday season. *The House of Secrets* provides a framing sequence in 1, which has a very half-hearted interview with the *Preacher* team of Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon, and the Minx does so in 2. That also boasts cutout Invisibles dolls and a promo interview with Paul Pope about upcoming series *Heavy Liquid*. *Books of Magic*, *The Dreaming* and *Hellblazer* feature in all issues, the latter in 3 a text story by Dave Gibbons. Otherwise the features are Sandman (in 1, but actually Desire of the Endless) by Neil Gaiman and John Bolton, *Deadenders* (3), *Death* by Gaiman and Jeff Jones (2), *The Invisibles* (1), The Minx (1), *Nevada* (1, 2), *100 Bullets*, *Outlaw Nation* (3), *Sandman Mystery Theatre* (1, 2), *Scene of the Crime* (2), *Swamp Thing* (3), and *Transmetropolitan* (2, 3). In the scaled down 2000 edition Desire returns by Gaiman and Michael Zulli. All in all a surprisingly mediocre collection considering the host of big names assembled, but die-hard Vertigo fans will love it.~WW

WISE SON: The White Wolf

DC/Milestone: *4 issue miniseries 1996-1997*

Ho Che Anderson crafts a disturbingly uncompromising tale of racism and black male disaffection, as the indestructible leader of the *Blood Syndicate*, in response to a surprise twentieth birthday party, and resultant early mid-life crisis, leaves his homeys and searches for Purpose. Sinking deeper into himself whilst white supremacists murder black ministers, and his woman and child become pawns in a political game, Wise Son spends an unheroic four issues griping and whinging and cussing. Heavy-handed and not to everyone's taste.~WW

WITCH

Eternity: *One-shot 1989*

The (Love) Witch is a young woman with a pet dragon who lives in Stonehenge. She fights a perpetual battle with druids, armed only with her magic powers. It's all just an excuse for the artist to draw naked women, really. Originally seen in Skywald's *Psycho* 3 and *Nightmare* 6 from 1971 it re-presents some of the earliest work of Marv Wolfman and Ernie Colón.~WW

WITCH

Slave Labor: *3 issues + 2001 to date*

Lorna Miller's professional debut is steeped in observations stemming from her Glasgow origins, even though the contents encompass a pseudo-biblical tale. There's also the frustrated life of a university graduate working in an off-licence and sharing a flat with tossers, and, in the first issue, a strip drawn by Peter Bagge, a fan of Miller's work. 3 is padded with earlier work not of the same standard, but has its compensation in the form of pages from Tobias Tak, who'd drawn comics for twenty years, but never previously shown them to anyone. His art is similar to David Boswell, but his story impenetrable. Overall, *Witch* is a funny and promising debut from the marine life title logo on in, and a collection is also available.~WJ

THE WITCH AND THE JACKAL

Chisai Publishing: *3 issues + 2002 to date*

There have been very few new takes on the sword and sorcery genre in comics, and this hasn't managed it either. So far it's been little more than one long chase sequence uniting the Tolene witch and human jackal, both escapees from the Tolene society that practises witchcraft and enslaves humans. There is apparently a wider story, but there's little sign of it yet.~FP

WITCHBLADE

Image/Top Cow: *60 issues, 3 one-shots (Witchblade/Darkness, ½, 'Infinity') 1995-2003*

The witchblade is a gauntlet of incredible power passed through the ages, which affixes itself to improbably proportioned policewoman Sara Pezzini. Able to transform into very scanty body armour (wouldn't want to omit any tits or ass shots!), it guides its novice owner against others coverting the gauntlet's power. From frequent 'homages' in the early issues Michael Turner's pencils develop an attractive style, but lacking foundation. He's never one to sacrifice a pin-up shot for basic storytelling, which, as he's also co-plotter, is a fundamental flaw, prolonging thin plots stringing the issues together. None of this harmed sales, however, and it mattered not to buyers that scratching beneath the surface gloss revealed little other than soundbites and poses. The most positive aspect to 1-25 is the understated relationship between Pezzini and her police partner.

10 introduces smooth assassin Jackie Estacado, later of *The Darkness*, and he and Pezzini meet again in 18-19, with repercussions for her as the witchblade is transferred. There's a further crossover begun in 36, continued in two *Witchblade/Darkness* specials and concluding in *Darkness* 28, a daft trip into a sordid underworld. With 26 Turner departs leaving the plotting to his collaborators Christina Z and David Wohl, with the former writing alone from 32, and the pencilling to Randy Green. There's a discernible improvement, with more attention to story, and 31 revealing some secrets from Sara's past is a sample. A slim recurring cast of tedious evildoers is the bane of the series until 40, always lurking, always aloof, and always dull. Paul Jenkins prioritises the police work aspect of the series, resorting to the Witchblade sparingly in writing 40-49. It might seem daft to regular readers, but matches the procedure of the TV series that had then emerged. It also produces the best issue of the run dealing with parental ignorance, sketchily drawn by Michael Zulli in 47.

In 50-52 Jenkins changes focus for a story explaining the remaining mysteries of the Witchblade, its' purpose, and the purpose of recurring nasty Ian Nottingham. Nottingham becomes more important in the issues to 60, with original co-writer David Wohl now back on board and bringing old baggage with him. The series temporarily ends with 60, but is scheduled for an early relaunch. Throughout plots are raised and dragged beyond the point where only the most dedicated don't realise they're being conned. An example concerns secrets Pezzini's boss knows about her father, dealt with in the comic by her marching into his office every five issues and mentioning the topic only to be interrupted by something. The Infinity special spotlights an alternative witchblade host, and 'Collected editions' combine two original issues, reprinting 1-14. There's also been a black and white reprint of the first issue, and all issues to 25 are available in book form.~FP

Tales of the WITCHBLADE

Image/Top Cow: *9 issues 1996-2001*

This provides a history of the Witchblade, including a partial origin in 5. As an ancient and possibly alien weapon that chooses only women as wielders, there's plenty of scope for carriers down the centuries, even as historical figures – pirate Anne Bonny in 1 (which also features Mary Read and Blackbeard) and Annabella Altavista in 16th Century Sicily in 2. Christina Z primarily writes 1-4, with David Finch providing a story set in Roman times in 6, and Warren Ellis a very nasty tale about sensory deprivation, murderous revenge and sexual manipulation featuring a Witchblade of the future (3-4). Michael Turner and Bill O'Neil round off the series by completing a story begun in *Witchblade/Tomb Raider* about an ancient Egyptian goddess and her mortal lover who are enemies of the Witchblade (7-9).

The artists each bring some style to the comic, Tony

Daniel's cleanly depicted pirates, Finch's oppressively religious monastery (2), Billy Tan and Brian Ching's bright yet sinister future and Richard Bennett's detailed science fiction meets the Mayans (5). That is until the final issues which are the work of multiple pencillers and inkers.~NF
Recommended: 3, 4

WITCHBLADE Miniseries and One-shots

Image/Top Cow: *One-shot (Witchblade Tomb Raider) 1997, one-shot (Witchblade Tomb Raider) 1998, 2 issue microseries (Witchblade Darkness Special) 1999, one-shot ('Infinity') 1999, one-shot (Witchblade Darkchylde) 2000, 3 issue miniseries ('Destiny's Child') 2000, one-shot (Withcblade Lady Death) 2001, one-shot ('Obakemono') 2002*

Sara Pezzini and Lara Croft first fight a demon, then an escaped Egyptian goddess and her familiar. Both meetings are written by Michael Turner and Bill O'Neil, with Turner's art as usual more concerned with style and a pretty pose than good storytelling. *The Witchblade/Tomb Raider* collections reprint these issues, then individual issues from each of the characters' own titles. Randy Queen overwrites and under-draws the Darkchylde team-up, and clear storytelling is the best to be said about the Lady Death issue. The *Witchblade/Darkness* specials are two parts of a four part crossover between the two titles, as Jackie Estacado, on his way to testify against his 'uncle' Frankie Franchetti, escorted by Sara, is kidnapped by Cull, employed by the shadow race, the Necrobi. 'Infinity' provides an alternate origin for Sara Pezzini and the Witchblade, as the weapon is given to a dominatrix with connections to Sara's police partner. 'Destiny's Child' tells the tales of Ian Nottingham (1), Sara (2) and their clash to determine the Witchblade's destiny (3). Christina Z writes interestingly about the characters in 1-2, but 3's nonsense and the artwork's completely uninspired. After the murder of her husband, Lady Shiori gathers a group of women warriors on a quest to find the Witchblade, which is summoning her, in order to avenge him and defeat the tyrant who killed him. The Witchblade itself is just a weapon, a prop that's hardly used in the otherwise archetypal 'Obakemono', well told by Fiona Avery and well drawn by Billy Tan.~NF

WITCHCRAFT

DC/Vertigo: *3 issue miniseries 1994*, 3 issue miniseries ('La Terreur') 1998*

The former hosts of DC's *Witching Hour* are the traditional three aspects of womanhood, the Maiden, Mother and Crone. Each motivates an opportunity for revenge for the reincarnated leader of a Goddess-worshipping women's coven slaughtered by barbarians. Peter Snejbjerg draws a tale of the Dark Ages in 1, while the explorer and adventurer Richard Burton's diaries provide the inspiration for Michael Zulli's 2. A modern-day tale of an old woman with good reason to distrust her son-in-law is illustrated by Steve Yeowell, completing the cycle. The package is rounded out with framing sequences drawn by Teddy Kristiansen and fine Mike Kaluta covers. The artwork throughout is excellent, but James Robinson's plots vary considerably, with the third particularly daft. The thematic unity never really convinces, and only the second issue really stands up, as Burton recounts a shaping experience of his early life. The sequel is a rite of passage story set during the French revolution, again written by Robinson. Well illustrated by Zulli and Vincent Locke, it also fails to engage, lacking both plot and warmth amid a surfeit of atmosphere.~FP

WITCHES' CAULDRON

Heritage Collection: *One-shot 1997*

Having delineated several American Civil War battles, Wayne Vansant here turns his attention to the Germans under siege from Russian forces in the Ukraine during World War II. It features his usual confident art, but a lot of explanation is required for the complicated alliances, and this is too often imparted in the form of clumsy expository dialogue. Interestingly, Vansant depicts the battle independently of any political causes and moral judgements, detailing the incredible bravery of the Germans in a hopeless situation.~WJ

THE WITCHFINDER

Image: *3 issue miniseries 1999*

History is given a wide berth in this "you killed my brother" revenge story, as Father Morand, local Irish witchfinder, begins to doubt his mission after teaming up with England's Witchfinder General Matthew Hopkins. There's a lot of dialogue, yet none of it seems to further either the plot or the character development. Why burn witches when you can burn this?~DB

WITCHING HOUR

DC: *84 issues 1969-1978*

As with other DC horror comics, *Witching Hour* was a mixture of the excellent and the bland, although its horror hosts, the three witches, gave it a character of its own. Up until 12 most of the witches' intro pages were drawn by Alex Toth, who provided many of the comic's artistic highlights. His strips in 1, 3, 8, 11 and 12 were typically fine, but he excelled himself on Gerry Conway's haunting script for 'Hold Softly, Haunting Death' in 10. The stories were typical DC horror material, rarely outstanding, almost always competent, and rarely appalling, and as such it's largely the contributions of the artists that raise them occasionally to greatness. Other early artistic contributors of note included Berni Wrightson (3, 5), Neal Adams (8), Gray Morrow (10, 13, 15, 16) and Gil Kane (12). This early period's best issue was 14, with lovely art from Jeff Jones, Stanley Pitt and Al Williamson, although it was the following issue that contained the best story, 'Freddy Is Another Name For Fear', by George Kashdan and Wally Wood.

16-21 were fifty-two pages long and featured a number of 1950s reprints by Jack Kirby, Nick Cardy and Ruben Moreira amongst others. From this period on the comic was increasingly drawn by Filipino artists, and consequently from 20 to 50 most issues have at least one nice job. Artists to look out for include Alex Niño (31, 40, 45, 47), Alfredo Alcala (24, 27, 33, 41, 43), Nestor Redondo (20, 21, 23, 34), and the little-known but highly talented Romy Gamboa (32, 36, 49). The Canadian Bill Payne provided this period's finest hour, though, with 'Happy Death Sweet Sixteen' in 25, a deliciously rendered story in Graham Ingels mould. Art enthusiasts should also look out for a lovely Ralph Reese strip in 23.

Adding to the feeling of consistency, each cover from 15 to 52 was by the excellent Nick Cardy, and it's no coincidence that his departure coincided with a general downturn in Witching Hour's quality. Since 14, when Murray Boltinoff had become editor, almost every story had been written by Carl Wessler, George Kashdan or Boltinoff himself, and, not surprisingly, later issues are rather lacking in inspiration. Artistically, the highspot was 83's five-page strip by the woefully obscure Nords Cruz, but in general issues after 50 contain little of note. 38 was a hundred-page collection reprinting some choice early material.~DAR
Recommended: 1, 3, 5, 8, 10-15, 20, 21, 23, 25, 31, 32, 34, 36, 40, 45, 47, 49, 83

WITHIN OUR REACH

Star*Reach: *One-shot 1991*

Although Star*Reach stopped producing comics in 1979 the company continued to represent comics creators' rights. This one-off Christmas special was a charitable project in aid of an AIDS and an environment charity. Most of the stories are worthy rather than interesting, but there are some gems to be found, including a Concrete Christmas tale by Paul Chadwick and an adaptation of O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi* by P. Craig Russell. The Spider-Man story about evil landlords and poor tenants is execrable, even if it is for a good cause.~NF

WITNESS TO WAR

Caliber: *One-shot 1997*

Earnest but mediocre tale relating the observations of a female reporter trapped on the front lines during the Nazis final push at the Battle of the Bulge in 1943. The usual "War is Hell" platitudes abound but the gimmick of having a female everyman/narrator is inexplicable and serves no discernible purpose. Ho-Hum.~WW

WITZEND

Wally Wood: *4 issues 1966-1968*
Wonderful: *5 issues (5-9) 1968-1976*
CPL: *1 issue (10) 1976*
William Pearson: *3 issues (11-13) 1978-1985*

As the first significant example of self-publishing and distribution directly to comic shops, Wally Wood's *Witzend* is of historical importance. It was the first time mainstream artists produced work for a primarily adult audience and sold it directly to the fan market. In this it even predates the underground comics. However, the creators had seemingly little idea of what constituted adult material, and much content was inconsequential. 1-8 contained work from several different directions: mainstream professionals, unpublished strips from Wood's artist friends, early strips by underground artists and work by new discoveries.

Of the mainstream cartoonists, Wood was the most prolific, and his contributions varied from straight adventure (Animan in 1 and 2) through winsome cod psychology ('Pipsqueak Papers' in 3-5) to Tolkienesque fantasy ('The Wizard King' in 4, 5, 8). While Wood's idea of artistic freedom didn't extend much beyond drawing naked women, for Steve Ditko it meant an opportunity for a good old rant. His notorious right-wing strips Mr A (3, 4) and 'Avenging World' (6, 7) must have come as a shock to unsuspecting Spider-Man fans. Gray Morrow's work in 2 and 7 was also high on the tits-and-ass count, and it was left to Archie Goodwin's affecting tale of religious intolerance in 1, to produce the title's intellectual content.

Previously unpublished material included strips by Al Williamson (1), Frank Frazetta (3, 8) and Wood (6) that had been lying around for a while, and a series of Edgar Rice Burroughs illustrations by Reed Crandall in 2-5. Art Spiegelman (2, 3), Roger Brand (3-5, 7) and Vaughn Bodé (5, 7) would develop, but only Bodé's work had much to offer at this point. His 'Cobalt 60' (later reprinted in *Epic Illustrated*) was one of Witzend's more thought-provoking stories. New mainstream discoveries Jeff Jones (6), Berni Wrightson (7) and Ralph Reese (8) were to go on to better things.

9 was, bizarrely, all text about W.C. Fields, and readers had to wait five years for Witzend's best issue. It was far less ambitious, favouring more straightforward fare by the likes of Dick Giordano, Mike Zeck, Joe Staton and Wood, in this case an episode of his Sally Forth. Howard Chaykin's three-page 'March 17, 1969' was intriguing, but the issue's real substance was provided by Alex Toth's '39/74', a majestic piece set on a 1930s cruise liner and reprinted in the *Toth Black & White* book. By comparison 11 and 12 were a sorry collection of mostly semi-pro material, with Wood himself clearly past his best (he was to die soon after). 13, actually titled *Good Girls* on the cover, was a collection of illustrations from editor Bill Pearson's collection, including art by Roy Krenkel, Mike Zeck, Stan Drake and, inevitably, Wood. Despite its shortcomings, there's much to enjoy here for most readers, but *Witzend* is something of a missed opportunity.~DAR

Recommended: 10

The WIZARD OF 4th STREET

Dark Horse: *2 issues 1987*

The comedy-fantasy novels of Simon Hawke, star a thief in the 23rd-century, when science has all but been forgotten, and the ancient arts of magic have been rediscovered. Plans for heisting some ancient gems lead to farce, fun and frolic in a 23rd century, here remarkably similar to 1988. Given that and that only two issues of the planned six ever saw publication, the original novel might be a better read.~WJ

WOLF AND RED

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries 1995*

Henry Gilroy's scripts make this the most successful of Dark Horse's Tex Avery titles. Sparsely written, with just enough plot to keep things moving, the Wolf And Red strips are actually quite droll, avoiding comparison with the frenetic pace of the cartoons by playing to the strengths of the comic page. Bob Fingerman's overwritten Screwball Squirrel is the poorest of the back-ups (2), while, fittingly, the Droopy story in 3 is practically another Wolf And Red adventure.~NF

WOLFF & BYRD, Counsellors of the Macabre

Exhibit A: *23 issues, one-shot ('Greatest Writs') 1994-1999**

"Beware the creatures of the night!" screams the cover, "They have lawyers". Wolff and Byrd, paranormal solicitors, began life as a newspaper strip, and their early comic length adventures suffer from jerky pacing and low-rent jokes that might be excusable on a daily strip. Later the writing improves as writer/artist Batton Lash has to work harder to find unusual supernatural plots for them to become involved in, such as defending a guardian angel when his client accuses him of not being watchful enough. A broadening cast including their secretary Mavis – a girl not phased by the accidental conjouring of Cthulu-like elder gods or a client's brain living in their water cooler – and other lawyers they encouter allows the creator to poke more fun at the legal profession and rely less on the supernatural elements of the stories. The strip's concept is almost a one-joke idea but the quality of the later scripting and artwork carries it through. Lash's angular, elegant-lined artwork suits the quirky nature of the stories. From 24 the series changed its name to *Supernatural Law*. 'Greatest Writs' is a sampler reprinting a strip from 1 along with short strips produced to accompany collections of the Wolff & Byrd newspaper strip.~FJ

WOLFPACK

Marvel: *12 issue limited series, Graphic Novel, 1988-1989*

In the midst of their superhero comics, Marvel attempted a take on 'normal' streetwise kids, following the adventures of a gang of interracial tough-but-well-meaning teenagers from the wrong side of town. This is not a complete success, and comes over far more as a picture of how Marvel writers think streetwise kids behave than the kind of social comment it sometimes tries to be. Early issues, written by Larry Hama are better than later ones by John Figueroa, but none are really worth the trouble, although Ron Wilson's pencils (especially under Kyle Baker's inks in earlier issues) deserve an honourable mention and at least suit the subject matter, which is more than can be said for any other aspect of the series.~JC

WOLFSHEAD

Cross Plains: *One-shot 1999*

Conan fans may be surprised to learn that Robert E. Howard also dabbled in gloomy gothic horror. Howard fan Roy Thomas merges two stories starring Simon deMontour, a 17th century equivalent of the grim Solomon Kane. They're awkward throughout, containing an un-necessary framing sequence that results in flashbacks within flashbacks, and a colourist's palette that rarely strays from shades of brown muddying artwork reproduced from Tony DeZuniga's pencils. At almost $7 buyers deserved better.~FP

WOLVERINE

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1982*, 188 issues + 7 Annuals, 2 Specials, 1988 to date*

Hulk 181 introduced a feral character with retractable metal claws. His next appearance was as a surprise member of 1975's revived X-Men, an apparent lack of the prerequisite inborn powers notwithstanding. Carefully placed hints as to a mysterious past and Wolverine's reclusive and belligerent nature made him the most popular of the team by some distance. His mutant abilities were eventually revealed as heightened physical senses and a capacity for rapid healing, while his indestructible adamantium claws (and skeleton!) were the result of experimentation. Marvel were extremely cautious about a *Wolverine* title, tentatively issuing a miniseries. But what a miniseries! Writer Chris Claremont and artist Frank Miller were both at a creative peak, and provided a dramatic and compelling tale of gang warfare, love, honour and betrayal. It was all the more successful for removing Wolverine from his superheroic milieu and transporting him to the alien culture of Japan. Miller's art drew heavily on Japanese comic influences, and Claremont's plot writhes like a squid in the hand. Fifteen years of ongoing issues haven't topped it.

The belated regular series was set in the fictional Asian port of Madripoor, and involved Wolverine (without costume until

14) in adventure plots befitting the locale. Claremont indulged himself with *Casablanca* homages, and penciller John Buscema was patently uninterested, and even less inspired by the scripts of Peter David in 9-16. The odd pairing of John Byrne and Klaus Janson in 17-23 was a slight improvement in the course of a meandering story from Archie Goodwin, who emphasised superheroics. 25 is a fine poetic debut from Jo Duffy concerning a favour called. Buscema was still on autopilot, but the story offered some adapted Kipling, a good reason for Wolverine's alias, conducted a gang war largely off panel and hinted as to his past.

31 saw Larry Hama arrive to write almost ninety issues, joined initially by the art team of Marc Silvestri and Dan Green, who retained Buscema's style while adding more depth and enthusiasm. Hama's offered a variety of plots and moods. While quality varyied he rarely failed to deliver a decent action pageturner, often devoid of costumes, and when the superheroes or villains appeared Hama's use of them bore an individual touch. His initial issues concerned Japanese gangsters moving into Madripoor (31-34), starting with a brutal issue long battle. Wolverine's Spanish Civil War exploits co-starring Ernest Hemingway occupy 35-37, and 38-39 have an ingenious murder plot by a pair of sympathetic assassins. One is a robotic Wolverine simulacrum and the other a robot with the looks and personality of a five year old girl, yet with genius level intelligence. Both continue to appear until 53, and for another of Hama's idiosyncratic takes on robots try 72-74 with a poetic Sentinel. Wolverine's mysterious past is a continuing subtext in the form of hints, quests and revelations that monopolise the comic. Over time, though, the tinkering carried out on Wolverine's mind and those of his past companions renders many revelations false or redundant, such as 41's claim from Sabretooth to be Wolverine's father. The Origin miniseries eventually reveals the truth, and the best of the issues taking the search for the past as main plot is 50, offering up many secrets.

From that point guest appearances from fellow X-Men and X-Men related villains are more commonplace, with junior X-Person Jubilee a long-term supporting character. Silvestri and Green draw most issues to 57, and while their replacements are perfectly adequate, the appointment of Andy Kubert and Mark Farmer as the art team with 75 provides some artistic highlights. 75 also has the repercussions of Wolverine being stripped of his adamantium skeleton (in *X-Men* 25), a worthwhile plot device beyond shock value. Previously over-reliant on all-shredding claws, Wolverine is left with bone claws and a diminished healing factor. Attempts to rectify things take around the globe, with 82 in Japan particularly good, as Logan checks back on the daughter of his dead love Mariko, well followed up by Steve Skroce in 150-153. To further compound his problems, he reverts to a more primal and feral nature, as exemplified by a stunningly brutal battle with Sabretooth in 90. Hama protracts this plot way too long, though, seemingly treading water until 100, but there confounds all expectations as to a resolution. Along the way there's plenty of decent art, with 82 again being worth a look to see Adam Kubert's pencils, inked by his father Joe as well as by Farmer.

Post-100 there's an involvement with ninja warrior Elektra, while 107-109 are the best of the run since 82, and, coincidentally, have Wolverine back in Japan. The art team of Leinil Francis Yu and Edgar Tadeo arrive in 113, starting well, and improving issue by issue to 122, thereafter drawing 125-130. Hama departs with 118, his last three issues an X-Men story in all but title, followed by four clichéd Warren Ellis issues about the world's best assassin, collected as 'Not Yet Dead'. Chris Claremont's subsequent return is a disaster, introducing daft plots (the marriage of Wolverine!) and dumping the title into the standard superhero bin. Erik Larsen continues this between 133 and 149, restoring the adamantium claws in 145. These are improved by Yu returning to pencil most of 139 to 148, but Larsen deserves credit for a novel idea behind some dumb plots. Decent atmospheric thrillers served up by Todd Dezago in 128-132, and Frank Tieri and Sean Chen take over with 159 and produce the best regular issues since Hama was on form, largely in three part story arcs. They introduce novel new characters alongside familiar guest stars, and vary the settings while having fun with Marvel's history. Chen restores a human dimension to Wolverine, and is never less than dynamic while also coping well with Wolverine's feral side. Try 164-166 set in a prison for those with super-powers and five pages drawn by Barry Windsor-Smith in 166, or 173-175 in which three old enemies set about devastating Wolverine by targeting his friends. The conclusion to 175 may be a surprise, but its swift resolution isn't, and the title sees out 2002 in good form with Tieri recycling Sopranos as Wolverine takes on organised crime.

The annuals bear the publication years from 1995 rather than numbers. It's '97 that's the best, teaming moody Leonardo Manco art with a John Ostrander plot diverting enough to quickly suppress the groan promptes by learning it concerns yet another enemy from Wolverine's distant past. *Wolverine* is well served by collections, with the three 'Essential' volumes reprinting 1-69 in cheap format black and white the best value.~WJ

Recommended: Miniseries1-4, 25, 38, 39, 50, 82, 166, 181, 182

WOLVERINE Miniseries and one-shots

Marvel: *One-shot ('Battles the Incredible Hulk') 1989, graphic novel (...Nick Fury: The Scorpio Connection) 1989, 4 issue miniseries (Wolverine Saga) 1989, one-shot ('Blood Lust') 1990, one shot ('The Jungle Adventure') 1990, one-shot ('Save the Tiger') 1992, one-shot ('Inner Fury') 1992, one-shot ('Blood Hungry') 1993, one-shot ('Bloody Choices') 1993, one-shot '(Global Jeopardy') 1993, one-shot ('Killing') 1993, 3 issue miniseries (Wolverine and Punisher: 'Damaging Evidence') 1993, one-shot ('Rahne of Terra') 1993, one-shot ('Evilution') 1994, one-shot ('Rahne Fall') 1994, one-shot (...Scorpio Rising') 1994, one-shot ('Typhoid's Kiss') 1994, 4 issue miniseries (Wolverine/Gambit: 'Victims') 1995, one-shot (Wolverine vs Spider-Man) 1995, one-shot ('Knight of Terra') 1995, one-shot ('Logan: Shadow Society') 1996, one-shot ('Path of the Warlord') 1996, 3 issue miniseries ('Days of Future Past') 1997, one-shot ('Doombringer') 1997, one-shot ('Black Rio') 1998, one-shot (Wolverine/Cable: 'Guts and Glory') 1999, 4 issue miniseries (Wolverine/Punisher:'Revelation') 1999, 4 issue miniseries (Wolverine/Hulk) 2002, 4 issue miniseries ('Netsuke') 2002*

Marvel/Crusade: *One-shot (Wolverine/Shi:'Dark Night of Judgement') 1995*

For such a popular character, it's strange that so many of Wolverine's special appearances are of such poor quality. The man called Logan is brash, good at fighting, noble, misunderstood and indomitable, just the characteristics that the average adolescent would claim for himself given the choice, although they'd probably want to be taller. Coupled with the fact that until recently Wolverine's history has been a blank slate, it should make for quality entertainment but...

Many of the specials are compilations from a long run in *Marvel Comics Presents*, including 'Bloody Choices', 'Save the Tiger', 'Typhoid's Kiss' and 'vs Spider-Man'. The best is 'Blood Hungry' compiling Peter David and Sam Kieth's run from 85-92. *Wolverine Battles the Incredible Hulk* reprints the little mutant's first appearance from Hulk 180-181,

Most Wolverine tales are remarkably single-minded affairs, pick a location, a time frame, and wait for the claws to pop. For instance, the unremarkable 'Black Rio' finds him in Brazil for the carnival and a few brews when all of a sudden he's hip deep in killer biker zombies. Alan Davis and Paul Neary's 'Bloodlust' broaches new territory with its Arctic encounters, while 'Guts and Glory' from Joe Casey and Stephen Platt teams the secret weapon of the Canadian military with Cable, freshly back from the future. 'Days of Future Past' is set in, and a prequel to, an alternate tomorrow where Sentinels control America and any surviving mutants live in concentration camps. When a power grab by the Hellfire Club goes awry Wolverine teams with Magneto to prevent the deadly robots from sterilising the planet in retaliation. 'Doombringer' features an above average clash with the Silver Samurai, whereas the awful 'Evilution' from Anne Nocenti and Mark Texeira is a half-baked eco-fable set in a sleepy town with a gang problem. 'Global Jeopardy' also has an ecological message, but as its sponsored by the World Wildlife Fund and written by Peter David it manages to be fun, readable, and unpretentious. It also has lots of guest-stars.

'Inner Fury' pits Wolverine's mutant healing factor against murderous nano-machines in his bloodstream, in a trite tale magnificently illustrated by Bill Sienkiewicz. 'The Jungle Adventure' is a romp through the prehistoric Savage Land in a great looking yarn from Walt Simonson and Mike Mignola. Kent Williams' 'Killing' also looks great, but John Ney Rieber's quasi-philosophical ramblings on man against beast are hard to stomach. 'Rahne of Terra' and its sequels, 'Rahne Fall' and 'Knight of Terra' are woeful alternate magical universe adventures, rushed and uninspiring.

George Pratt's 'Netsuke' is a rare treat. To save the woman he loves Wolverine journeys to ancient Japan, and seemingly into a previous life to gather a lost set of carved kimono toggles – the Netsuke of the title- for an evil snow witch. 'Scorpio Connection' and 'Scorpio Rising' hark back to Wolverine's Canadian Secret Service background as he teams with superspy Nick Fury to combat Fury's brother Scorpio and the evil hordes of Hydra. 'Shadow Society' is also set during Logan's agency days and deals with the rising paranoia in the days before mutants were revealed. It also features the first meeting of Wolverine and his arch nemesis Sabretooth. *Wolverine Saga* is a compilation of text, clips and quotes that purport to tell his complete history, most since superseded.

'Damaging Evidence' typifies many team-ups with the Punisher and is little more than a body-count competition, but 'Revelation' is an attempt at a *Dark Minds* type of story, complete with art from Pat Lee. A Morlock girl escapes from a dungeon with the uncontrolled ability to kill people via the radiation she emits. This is set during the Punisher's brief co-opting by the angelic host to atone for his sins by fighting evil without killing, and is different, but not startling. 'Victims' is a very poor showing from Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale as Logan and Gambit wander about a ridiculous parody of London, mistaking each other for the reincarnation of Jack the Ripper. *Wolverine/Hulk* reunites the old foes in an eccentric mystery as Wolverine is approached by a little girl who can't be there, who moreover wants him to help the Hulk rescue her dad. Another fine change of pace story from Sam Kieth.

Wolverine/Shi by Bill Tucci is set in a war blasted Tokyo and is just one long beautifully drawn fight, heavy-handedly wrapped in Samurai "Right Way to Die" pseudo-philosophy, which seems par for the course really.~WW

Recommended: 'Bloodlust', 'The Jungle Adventure', 'Netsuke' 1-4, *Wolverine/Hulk* 1-4

WONDER MAN

Marvel: *One-shot 1986, 29 issues, 2 Annuals 1991-1994, 2 issue microseries ('The Wonder Years') 1995*

A one-shot villain in *Avengers* 9 (1964), the superstrong Wonder Man died and was forgotten. His resurrection in *Avengers* 152 was a surprise to all concerned. The one-shot was to test ownership of the name, since DC considered it infringed upon their Wonder Woman. Featuring the safari-suited geek incarnation, it was a throwaway slugfest. In 1991, following favourable responses to his presence in West Coast Avengers, the ionic-powered hero had another try. Simon Williams moved to Hollywood to pursue an acting career. Gerard Jones deftly introduced a cast of phonies, eccentrics and hangers-on, and Jeff Johnson's pleasing, clean line was a refreshing change from the hyper-distorted illustration prominent at the time. The emphasis on characterisation, humour and intelligence was sadly lost on readers, and the series changed direction after a three-part introspective story that culminated in 25. Purists should disregard 26-29, cynical team-ups with the Hulk and Spider-Man attempting to revive the title. Both annuals should also be dismissed. Make these culls, and you're left with twenty-five issues of definitely B+ entertainment. 'The Wonder Years', featured a look back at Wonder Man's career through the eyes of one of his grieving fans following his apparent death. Moving and thoughtful, it's extremely well-presented.~HS

WONDER WART-HOG

Miller Publishing: *2 issues 1967-1968*
Rip-Off: *2 issues ('The Best of') 1973*
Print Mint: *1 issue ('The Best of Vol III') 1973*
Rip-Off: *1 volume (Wonder Wart-Hog and the Nurds of November) 1980, one-shot ('The Battle of the Titans') 1985, 3 issues (Hog of Steel) 1995-1996*

Gilbert Shelton's Wonder Wart-Hog began in 1961as a humour-packed parody of *Superman*, even down to his human identity as mild-mannered reporter Philbert Desanex. Strips from student papers were reprinted in Help!, and from there Shelton went to *Drag Cartoons* published by Miller. Much of that work is published in the 1970s *Best of*. Spurred by his seeming popularity, Miller published newsstand *Wonder Wart-Hog* magazines, which were a total failure, and according to Shelton, partially responsible for bankrupting the company. These, though, contain tremendous work, with a biting political edge long absent from Shelton's material. Strips are set in the ghetto, comment on the war in Vietnam, and have President Lyndon Johnson bare-knuckle fighting. And Wonder Wart-Hog meets God, which must have gone down a treat with the newsstand customers of middle America.

The strip marking the future for the character was 'The Battle of the Titans', only the first two chapters of which appeared. It was a knockabout romp in which Wonder Wart-Hog meets a prehistoric ancestor and a descendent from the distant future. It was only concluded fifteen years later in the pages of *Rip-Off Comix*, before being reissued as a one-shot. After the Miller magazines Wonder Wart-Hog appeared in a few one-shot undergrounds, but lay largely dormant until *Rip-Off Comix* began running new strips. These along with work from *Hydrogen Funnies* and others were reprinted in *Wonder Wart-Hog and the Nurds of November*, which also contained several new strips over 210 pages. There's little in the way of connecting threads between chapters. Indeed 'Philbert Desanex's 100,000th Dream', has been issued as a separate comic, and occupied most of *Rip-Off Comix* 6. The title story is by a fully-formed Shelton casting his net wide in providing a satirical look at the election process via Philbert Desanex. Also later issued as a one-shot by Rip-Off, it was the final new Wonder Wart-Hog story, and among the best. The 1990s *Hog of Steel* series is a chronological hodge-podge spanning twenty years, but frustratingly omitting the never reprinted strips from the Miller issues.

Wonder Wart-Hog doesn't quite match the belly laughs of Shelton's Freak Brothers strips, but there's still plenty of worthwhile material and the cartooning is great.~WJ

Recommended: Miller 1, 2, Best of 3, Nurds of November

WONDER WOMAN

DC: *Series one 329 issues 1941-1986, series two 188 issues +, 8 Annuals, 3 Secret Files, 1 Special, 1987 to date*

In the late 1930s, William Moulton Marston, psychologist and inventor of the polygraph lie detector, was concerned about the then infant comics medium. He deplored the violence, the emphasis on criminal activity, but primarily what he termed "the blood-curdling masculinity", where women, if present at all, were decorations, or trophies to be fought over by the men. Marston was a popular psychologist with a wide readership, the author of numerous articles for national magazines. DC's executives cynically, but accurately, reasoned that Marston's criticisms might be set aside if he was invited to join the "Advisory Board" of psychologists and educators who, nominally, supervised DC's output. From this position, Marston lobbied to create a series that would encapsulate his views on the relationship between the sexes, offering a counterpoint to the often brutal heroes of comics' formative years. Together with artist Harry G. Peter, an illustrator who cut his teeth in sophisticated humour magazines, Marston created Wonder Woman, who débuted in *All-Star Comics* 8.

On the island hideaway of the legendary Amazons, Princess Diana and her friend Mala see a plane crash. The pilot, on the brink of death, is swiftly restored to health by Amazon science. This presents Diana's mother, Queen Hippolyta, with a dilemma. The Goddesses of ancient Greece, whom the Amazons still worship, have commanded her to send an Amazon champion to warring Man's World, to fight for freedom. The winner of a contest to determine the mightiest Amazon will accompany the pilot, Steve Trevor, back to the United States. Hippolyta knows that Diana is the Amazon champion, and fears that she is already half in love with Trevor. Does she allow Diana to win, and leave Paradise Island? Well, this would be a pretty short review if she didn't. Diana wins, is awarded a costume bearing the stars and eagle of her new nation, and flies to the USA as Wonder Woman. From her one-off première to the lead story in *Sensation Comics*, her own title, stories in *Comics Cavalcade*, and membership of the Justice Society of America back in *All-Star Comics*, within a year of her début Wonder Woman was one of the most popular and recognisable characters in comics. Perhaps one reason for this is that, contrasting the youngsters who comprised the bulk of comics workers, Marston (operating under the pseudonym of Charles Moulton) and Peter were both mature men when they began work on *Wonder Woman*, lending the series a gravity and authority its contemporaries often lacked. Furthermore, Peter's distinctive, organic, woodcut style gave it a look unlike anything else on offer, an incalculable advantage by a mid-1940s with hundreds of comics on the market. Under their guidance, the Amazing Amazon fought some of the most bizarre villains in comics history: the misogynistic Dr Psycho, the schizophrenic Cheetah, Zara, Priestess of the Crimson Flame, Dr Poison and Hypnota. Then there was the Duke of Deception, pawn of the war god Mars, the psychotic Mask, in reality an abused wife pushed over the edge, and Villainy Inc., the first alliance of female villains in comics, with several of the Amazons' most noted foes teamed to destroy her.

Many critics and comics historians have been severely disparaging of Wonder Woman. She has been accused of encouraging lesbianism and sadomasochistic practices, and of appealing to male fantasies of sexual domination. The last charge may have some validity. Marston's own comment, in response to the unpopularity of heroines in comics, that men, "given an alluring and powerful woman to submit to... will become her willing slaves", is certainly open to interpretation. Loaded language such as the Amazons' credo of "Submission to loving authority" has been seized upon by detractors, but the submission in question relates to rehabilitation. Unlike most heroes of the time, who were content to either kill or imprison their opponents, Wonder Woman made strenuous and frequently successful attempts to reform her enemies. Paula Von Gunther, an implacable foe in 1941, became one of Diana's closest friends and allies, and in the strip's first ten years several other women are shown as having turned away from crime or delinquency thanks to the intercession of Diana and her Amazon sisters. The female solidarity of the stories is a bond of empowerment and mutual support, not of sexual allure. Far from the aloof and unattainable feats of Superman, Wonder Woman is adamant on many occasions that any woman can achieve power such as hers if she can overcome the mental shackles placed upon her by Man's World. Samples of her dialogue to other women from the middle 1940s include "You saved yourselves. I only showed you that you could!", "All you have to do is have confidence in your own strength", "Make yourself strong! Don't be dependent on a man – earn your own living!"; and, from a woman who has been betrayed by her lover; "I've learned my lesson – I'll rely on myself, not on a man!" Contrary to many critics' beliefs, Wonder Woman's stories do not centre on hatred of men, but on righteous indignation towards bullies and abusers of all kinds. True, she is shown saying that romantic love is often (not always) a trick men use to make women give up their independence, and that marriage is often (not always) a mind-numbing trap for women, but to true love between equals she's the first to give her blessing.

And yes, Wonder Woman tied people up a lot; this was because her main weapon was a magic lasso, which she used to restrain her captives harmlessly, as opposed to punching them out. Get a grip, folks. People didn't bitch about the number of times Robin the Boy Wonder got his tight little buns tied up over in Batman! Not that socio-political or putatively quasi-sexual themes were all that Wonder Woman had to offer. Rooted in mythology and magic rather than the pseudo-science of the majority of superheroes, she ranged between historical, extraterrestrial and contemporary adventures, presenting a rich and dazzling canvas to her readers. If the stories were sometimes a little inaccurate (as when she travelled back in time to help Boadicea overthrow the Romans and drive them from Britain!), then what the heck, they were more fun that way.

In 1947 Marston died, though he was so far ahead of schedule that his scripts continued to be published for at least two years. Without his patronage, Wonder Woman's star began to fall. The empowerment ethos faded, the villains, with the exception of the limp Angle Man and a toned-down Duke of Deception, were gone, and she became just another adventuress. Even Peter's art, through the bulk of the 1950s, altered in tone, looking cluttered and badly dated. When he died in 1958, a radical new look was introduced in 98 courtesy of artists Ross Andru and Mike Esposito, who gave Wonder Woman a slick European makeover with wild, windblown, tousled hair. Unfortunately, DC decided Wonder Woman looked too 'loose', and the curly permed look returned by 110. Under writer/editor Robert Kanigher, Wonder Woman's powers were revealed to be the gifts of the Gods, making her in effect a super-Amazon. 'Wonder Girl' and 'Wonder Tot' flashback stories, showing that even at an early age Diana had been capable of feats her sisters could not hope to equal, left the original concept of any woman being a potential Wonder Woman trailing in the dust. As her powers expanded, her aspirations narrowed, becoming domesticated. She daydreamed about marrying Steve Trevor, but these fantasies inevitably went awry, usually because her Amazon education hadn't covered cookery or housekeeping. Things went from bad to worse. Wonder Girl and Wonder Tot were written into contemporary stories, firstly as 'Impossible Tales', narrated by Hippolyta (who got a blonde rinse and started calling herself Wonder Queen, trying to muscle in on her daughter's act!), then, without explanation as to how these characters could exist alongside Wonder Woman, as bona fide members of Amazon society. The comic was haemorrhaging readers, but because of her long history, and her involvement in the *Justice League of America*, it would have been too embarrassing to cancel her. A silly attempt to restore her to her 1940s glory was initiated in 159, but it came across as a camp parody of the old tales.

A more radical revamp occurred in 178, where, under the new team of Denny O'Neil, Mike Sekowsky and Dick Giordano, Diana quit her job at military intelligence, ditched the female Clark Kent frump look, and went undercover to help Steve Trevor when her Amazon alter ego could not. In the next issue her sister Amazons retreated to another dimension to replenish their magical energies. Left behind because she couldn't leave Steve Trevor, Wonder Woman was suddenly bereft of all her Amazon powers and weapons, and forced to face the world as a mortal, fragile human. Several feminist critics, including Gloria Steinem, look down upon these stories as a negation of the liberated Wonder Woman, dismissing these adventures as those of a "female James Bond, but even more boring because she was denied his sexual freedom". These folks have missed a couple of important points. Firstly, that the true Wonder Woman, who insisted that any woman could achieve her feats and believed that even enemies could be rehabilitated, hadn't actually been published for decades at this point. The silly, fluffy stories of an addlepated Amazon whose powers were a christening gift from the Gods was the true violation, and had been the status quo for a long time. Secondly, the non-powered Wonder Woman was a symbol of empowerment and self-determination. She was a woman of vast power and wealth, who has all that stripped from her in a moment, and, completely unprepared and untrained, re-invents herself and takes charge of her life again. Okay, she had help from her friends (including, yes, a rather embarrassing blind Oriental mentor who handily teaches her self-defence skills), but she still had to do the work. And it was quite a workload. Reeling from major losses in her life, she's caught up in the machinations of one Dr Cyber who murders someone close to her. In rapid succession, Diana and her allies faced an international crime cartel; urban sadists who prey on runaways; the War God Mars, who has followed the Amazons to their dimensional hideaway; a stroppy carousing witch; assassins, ghosts, cross-dressing pickpockets and more. After Denny O'Neil's initial script assistance, artist Mike Sekowsky wrote the stories, deftly alternating espionage, supernatural and slice of life stories and establishing Diana as a warm, vivacious character with a previously unsuspected sense of irony. The illustrations were stylish and engrossing, Sekowsky's kinetic approach lending a sense of movement even to the talking-heads scenes, and Giordano's inking finishing off the package with slick sophistication. These stories may not be 'real' Wonder Woman to the purists, but they were closer to the original concept than most people acknowledge. Sadly, health problems made editor/writer/artist Sekowsky later and later. There were fill-in issues, reprinting material barely two years old, and some of Sekowsky's last issues were uninspired. By 199, the series was back in the hands of O'Neil, who tried to turn Diana into a toned-down Modesty Blaise. These issues were not without merit, even the notorious 'Women's Lib Issue' (203), which, though justifiably hootered, er, hooted at for its chick-in-bondage cover, raised some intelligent concerns inside.

In the early 1970s, Diana was optioned for a TV movie, so she was back in the star-spangled panties, but with the hallmarks of a rush job. Steve Trevor was alive again; no, he wasn't, it was an illusion of Amazon scientists; yes, he was; whoops, he's dead again; now he's back. Wonder Woman has to be tested by the JLA to prove she's fit to rejoin; she's a member in good standing; she's on probation; now she's back; Wonder Woman has a black sister called Nubia; no, she doesn't, she never existed. For the next eighty issues, creative teams changed faster than most people's underwear, barely establishing one set of parameters before the next, equally mediocre, team altered it all again. The TV show starring Lynda Carter was the only reason the comic survived at all for several years. And for a couple of years, the title focused on World War II adventures to tie in with it, the contemporary Wonder Woman being unseen in her own comic. With 288, a relaunch that stood a chance took effect. The track records of Roy Thomas and Gene Colan stood them in good stead, but both rapidly lost interest, and there was scant improvement. Following 300, which had a semi-intelligent story about different perceptions of the Amazon, and several interesting guest artists, *Wonder Woman* fell into the hands of writers Dan Mishkin and Gary Cohn, and workhorse artist Don Heck. All parties, unexpectedly, produced some decent work, Heck, in particular, having shaken off his 1970s hack mantle to produce his nicest art in twenty years. Tragically, it was too late to help: Wonder Woman's fate was already sealed, and the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* crossover ended the old *Wonder Woman* to make way for the new. In the final issue of the series, pleasingly, Diana did marry Steve Trevor, (handily alive at the time) before going off to meet her final fate. It could be argued that the comic should have been cancelled long before, but, to those with memories of her finer hours, it's hard to read the last issue without a pang or two.

Following *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, it was retroactively declared that Wonder Woman's career 'never happened' and she was reintroduced as a new character, starting from issue 1. New writer Greg Potter was teamed with superstar artist George Pérez, but Potter's name vanished from the credits, and from comics, after 3, leaving Pérez illustrating and plotting, with Len Wein helping with the scripts until 16, after which Pérez flew solo. The new incarnation of Wonder Woman, like the old, was the daughter of Queen Hippolyta of the Amazons, sculpted from clay and given life by the Goddesses. When US pilot Steve Trevor crashes on Paradise Island, now named Themyscira, in keeping with a greater emphasis on Diana's Greek background, he is once again taken back by an Amazon champion, who becomes a heroine in the United States. This Steve Trevor is older, and becomes a friend and ally of Diana's, rather than an insipid romantic interest. The new version is closer to her predecessor's original philosophy, too. Once more the first among equals, she strives to deliver a message of peace and forbearance – though, Man's World being what it is, she often has to kick in a few heads to do so. Settling in Boston, she develops a circle of friends: Julia Kapatelis, Professor of Archaeology at Harvard University, and her daughter Vanessa; Etta Candy, in the original series treated as comic relief, here given a dignified role and a romantic involvement with Steve Trevor; Ed Indelicato of the Boston Police Department, who may or may not be in love with our heroine; and Myndi Mayer, a gloriously synthetic publicist who seizes upon Diana, whom she names 'Wonder Woman', as her meal ticket. Most importantly, Wonder Woman is given intelligent, well-crafted stories, thoughtfully paced and full of interesting characters who are around to do more than just advance the plot or be kidnap fodder of the month. These stories are slower paced than those in many comics, and there is, particularly in the early issues, a grandeur, an epic feel, suiting the characters' ties to mythology. And Pérez's art, sumptuous and detailed, has never been finer.

Forced by Myndi Meyer's machinations into the role of a superheroine, something for which she is completely unprepared, Diana faces some of the classic menaces including Mars (now Ares), the Cheetah, and the tragic Silver Swan. All the time she's still trying to understand her mission in this strange new world, her new human friends, and her relationship with her Gods, several of whom, particularly the pushy Hermes, become significant supporting characters. A high point was 20, with the death of a major character, and the impact of her demise on the rest of the cast, being subtly and movingly portrayed. With 25, financial hardship ("It sold better than any other version of Wonder Woman had done for years, but that still wasn't enough to make royalties") forced Pérez to withdraw from the art, and new artist Chris Marrinan proved inappropriate. Muddy art and less imaginative stories, as Pérez devoted the bulk of his time to other projects, led Wonder Woman into the doldrums. Mindy Newell became co-plotter with 36, but made little impact. Different artists were tried: Colleen Doran, Jill Thompson and Cindy Martin all filled in on the odd chapter and issue. 46's powerful and moving tale of teenage suicide and its repercussions, Mindy Newell's last issue and Jill Thompson's first entire issue, featured the strongest work either would do on the series. 50 included guest contributions from Chris Bachalo, Brian Bolland, Adam Hughes, Kevin Nowlan, P. Craig Russell and Marie Severin, among others, after which Thompson's etiolated version of Wonder Woman was seen in most issues until 65.

Pérez left after 62, passing Diana into the hands of Bill Messner-Loebs, who promptly took her into outer space in 65-71, which rambled endlessly and served no purpose. Despite lovely cover illustrations from Brian Bolland between 63 and 100, these issues are disposable. When Diana returned to earth, Loebs made a consistent and conscientious attempt to reintroduce character-driven stories. New supporting characters were introduced, and with artist Lee Moder (from 72) things were promising. Unfortunately, with 90, Mike Deodato took over the artwork, and it all went horribly wrong. Suddenly, Diana was ten feet tall, with a six-inch waist and enormous hooters. So was Queen Hippolyta, her regal robes replaced by three (small) handkerchiefs and a string of pearls. So were both the fifty-something Julia Kapatelis and her fifteen year old daughter! In came a new supporting character, a rival Amazon named Artemis, who fought Diana for the right to be Wonder Woman. Guess what she looked like? Yup. Deodato just wouldn't draw any other kind of physique. As the stories nose-dived at this point, either Messner-Loebs saw the art, thought "Oh my God" and gave up trying, or, more sadly, that all his plot and characterisation was editorially excised in favour of more boob-and-butt shots. Sales shot up and *Wonder Woman* was suddenly a big hit with the retarded adolescent market, accounting for these stories being collected.

Thankfully it was a temporary phenomenon, and, from 101, John Byrne took over the writing and art. Disappointingly, though superior to the issues that immediately preceded it – what wouldn't be? – his take on the Princess of Paradise Island was a generic, hatchet-faced superwoman, stripped of everything distinctive and unique. During his second year on the title, Byrne came up with a few intriguing ideas, most notably a time-travelling 'continuity implant'. This involved Diana's temporary ascension to Olympus as the Goddess of Truth, and Hippolyta's replacing her as Wonder Woman for a period (from 128) involving a lengthy sojourn in the 1940s, thereby again giving the Justice Society of America a Wonder Woman to call their own. 113 saw the débūt of the new Wonder Girl, a pretty ghastly character who developed, albeit primarily as a member of Young Justice, into an appealing new hero. From 139 neither writer Eric Luke nor artist Yanick Paquette produced involving work, and more excitement was generated by Adam Hughes becoming regular cover artist. He turned in gloriously-illustrated scenes that – despite the abbreviated costume, bimbo poses and stunned-halibut expression he habitually depicted Diana with – were great sales draws.

With 164, Phil Jimenez began his run as artist and writer, and started promisingly with the 'Gods of Gotham' storyline, (164-171), which had excitement, tension, characterisation and detailed and intricate artwork. Perhaps involving every member of the Batman and Wonder Woman cast was too much, but hey, got to give him credit for effort. Hughes remained main cover artist, and Jimenez's run of solid, meticulously-crafted stories perked the series up considerably. The worst to be said about his work is that he's over-respectful of the character's history, but after years in which she's had no respect, that's no bad thing. 171-175 are now collected. Avoid the crappy 'Joker; Last Laugh' tie-in (175), and, sadly, the 'Villainy Inc.' revival (179-180), which has very shoddy fill-in art, and most of Jimenez' run is quality, if very wordy, craftsmanship.~HS

Recommended: Series one 1-6, 10, 11, 21, 24, 28, 178-190, 192, 193, series two 1-23, 46, 164-173, 176, 177, 181-188, Annual 2.

WONDER WOMAN Graphic Novels and miniseries

DC: *4 issue miniseries (Legend of Wonder Woman) 1986, Graphic Novel ('Amazonia') 1997, one-shot (Wonder Woman + Jesse Quick) 1997, one-shot ('Once and Future Story') 1998, one-shot ('Realworlds') 2000, one-shot ('Spirit of Truth') 2001, one-shot ('The Hiketeia') 2002, one-shot ('80pg Giant') 2002*

Considering her longevity, only a handful of Graphic Novels, miniseries and specials concern the Princess of Paradise Island, and few have been unqualified successes. Bridging the old Wonder Woman title and her reworking, Legend of Wonder Woman opens with Queen Hippolyta mourning her daughter. Trying to ease her grief, she uses the Magic Sphere to look upon happier times, and takes courage from one of Diana's triumphs against Atomia. Kurt Busiek writes this intriguing hybrid of old and new, and Trina Robbins' homage to 1940s Wonder Woman illustrator H.G. Peter is skilful and enjoyable. It's a respectful and affectionate farewell to the old girl.

'Amazonia' is her only Elseworlds outing to date, William Messner-Loebs placing her in Victorian England as a performing strongwoman and paradoxical victim of male oppression. Phil Winslade's art is intended to resemble Victorian engraving, but is overly cluttered and unappealing to the eye. 'Once and Future Story' has Trina Robbins running parallel storylines, one in the present day and one in ancient times, about two Wonder Women's attempts to free friends or family from an abusive husband. Although it starts strongly, it fizzles out and becomes didactic rather than engrossing, and Colleen Doran's pencils are sapped of all life by the heavy-handed and inappropriate inks of Butch Guice. 'Spirit of Truth' was a sixtieth-anniversary tribute tabloid by Alex Ross and Paul Dini, a creative combination that ordinarily guarantees top-notch entertainment. Sadly, they treat WW's iconic stature as equating to 'dull', and deliver a long waffle about the nature of and need for truth and deception in the environs Diana must work in. The art is striking, but Ross' inability or unwillingness to give our heroine more than two expressions (smiling or baffled) eventually irritates. 'The Hiketeia', by Greg Rucka and J. G. Jones, concerns an ancient rite of hospitality and protection, and its use and abuses, and co-stars the Batman. Sounds tedious, right? Not at all. It's a densely-written story of intrigue and manipulation, and while there is an inevitable confrontation between the two heroes, it's entirely plausible and integral.

Wonder Woman + co-starred second-generation speedster Jesse Quick, in an adequate but unexceptional 'female crimefighters bond' story. 'Realworlds', written by Glen Hanson and Alan Neuwirth, details the struggle of an aspiring actress, playing the heroine in a movie serial during the McCarthy era, who is caught between her ideals, her personal loyalties, and that elusive One Big Break. Art by the presumably pseudonymous Salgood Sam captures the feel of the era perfectly. *The Wonder Woman 80 Page Giant* was one of several reprint compilations published under the premise "if so and so had had an Annual in the 1960s, this is what it would have been like". It features the classic Marston/Peter 'Villainy Inc.' story from 1948, and a bunch of cute, camp early 1960's Kanigher/Andru and Esposito tales.~HS

Recommended: 'The Hiketeia', 'Realworlds'

Rick Geary's WONDERS AND ODDITIES

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1988*

Collection of short strips by the magnificently offbeat Rick Geary. He's possessed of a talent similar to Gary Larson in being able to view the mundane with a unique perspective and transform it into something strange and magical.~FP

Recommended

WOODSTOCK

Marvel: *One-shot 1994*

An overblown glossy production of charmless, cretinous trash about a gang of idiot aliens from the far future who time travel to the famous festival of din and bullshit in 1969, and to the sequel in 1994, with which this was published to coincide. The tone, with big helpings of fictitious hep lingo, is that of mid-1960s Harvey rock comics, which were just bad Archie rip-offs anyway.~GK

WOOFERS AND HOOTERS

Eros: *One-shot 1992*

There's some nice cartooning from Greg Budgett and Gary Dumm in this collection of Shooty Beagle strips, primarily reprinted from *Dr Wirtham's Comix & Stories*. The perpetually randy Shooty interacts with the TV in a series of tit and bum vignettes, but the idea is never taken anywhere and the material hardly serves as arousing, or very funny.~FP

WORDSMITH

Renegade: *12 issues 1985-1988*
Caliber: *9 issues 1996-1998*

It's the 1930s and Clay Washburn is a writer, makes his living writing for pulp magazines. Detective stories, gangster stories, Westerns, jungle adventures... he'll produce almost anything for his penny-a-word, but none of it under his own name. The comic deals with his searches for a good plot-twist and the right words, and with more abstract issues: how much should he analyse his stories? How much reality should he try to put into them? When should he say no to publishers and editors? And how much can you talk about politics without alienating your friends? In 1-6 David Darrigo and Rick Taylor produce an entertaining read, with his small, real-life dilemmas mixed to good effect with extracts from the raw, dramatic escapism he's producing. It starts to flag as Washburn becomes more successful, with the extracts longer, but the stories weaker, and by now it's obvious that the tone will remain abstract throughout, without a hint of humour and with characters who are mere mouthpieces. The Caliber issues reprint the previous material, the first eight issues of which were available in collections.~FC

Recommended: 1-6

THE WORLD BELOW

Dark Horse/Maverick: *4 issue miniseries 1999, 4 issue miniseries 1999-2000*

Paul Chadwick's able pastiche of Jules Verne, *The Lost World* etc. has six clichéd excuses for characters, working for a billionaire industrialist, in a red truck called Helen ("we're going to hell on wheels"), trying to bring back alien biotechnology from a dangerous subterranean realm. There is a truly frightening battle between giant patchwork monsters in the second issue but otherwise little new life is brought to this tired genre. The second series, in black and white, subtitled "Deeper and Stranger", works a little better. The industrialist's paranoia about Microsoft is fun, and the very downbeat ending is refreshing.~GK

WORLD CLASS Comics

Image: *One-shot 2002*

This Big Bang special continues that series' homages to the heroes and creators of the Golden Age. They're authentic enough, but that just means they're fun but pointless. Dr Stellar, Vita-Man, Mr Martian and Speed Queen are all featured, but the most accomplished piece is the Frazetta-ish 'The Atomic Sub', by Gary Carlson and Vatche Mavlian.~NF

THE WORLD OF KRYPTON

DC: *3 issue miniseries 1979, 4 issue miniseries 1987-1988*

The 1979 miniseries, DC's first, recounts a history of Superman's parents, including a computer attempting to keep them apart. Paul Kupperberg merely pulls scraps of detail from past stories and allows Superman the chance to be a guest at his parents' wedding, while the pencilling by Howard Chaykin is uninspired. Based on John Byrne's reworking of Superman in *Man of Steel*, the second miniseries attempts a history of Krypton. Byrne uses the questionable morality of cloning to spark a civil war, resulting in an ageless population, perfect but unfeeling. It's a more ambitious tale, and though flawed it at least looks good thanks to Mike Mignola and Rick Bryant.~NF

THE WORLD OF METROPOLIS

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1988*

After revamping Superman, John Byrne takes to opportunity to reshape the supporting cast and their past lives too. This focuses on Clark's Editor and father figure Perry White in 1, recounting his earlier days as a newspaper man. Lois Lane features in 2 where we read of her first scoop, and 3' is Clark Kent's first days in the big city. Cub reporter Jimmy Olsen is the inventor of a Superman signal watch according to 4. Byrne's scripts are surprisingly crisp, abetted by old pro Win Mortimer's pencils.~SW

THE WORLD OF SMALLVILLE

DC: *4 issue miniseries 1988*

Second of three series re-interpreting Superman's supporting cast and background after his reinvention at the hands of John Byrne. Here, we find out about Ma and Pa Kent (1-2) before having to endure some nonsense about how Lana Lang came to be a puppet of the Manhunters (see *Millennium*). The art of Kurt Schaffenberger solidly inked by Alfredo Alcala, is easy on the eye but Byrne's script is hard to take for anyone who's had any previous contact with Lana Lang.~NF

A WORLD OF TROUBLE

Black Eye: *3 issues 1995-1996*

His admirers consider Jeremy Eaton's work haunting and thought-provoking, and he's certainly been published by the more prestigious imprints. Are they blind to his ponderous writing style, hollow pontification and deliberately vague imagery? Questions are raised and never answered, probably because no answers exist beyond a supercilious fleecing of the gullible. The major piece here occupies most of 2 and 3 in revealing the life of former silent film star Charlie Gleason. He's never seen, but defined by his obsessions and the illustrated reactions of others. It's a repetitive and tedious piece, and there's more entertainment and edification to be derived from an average *Spider-Man* comic.~FP

WORLD OF WOOD

Eclipse: *4 issue miniseries 1986*

A collection of black and white stories drawn by Wally Wood between the late 1960s and early 1970s, but coloured, often very poorly. Writers include Archie Goodwin, Bill Dubay, Nick Cuti, Gerry Boudreau and Wood himself. Both episodes of Wood's superhero team 'The Misfits' (originally from *Heroes Inc*) are reprinted in the first two issues, alongside choice examples of the work Wood drew for *Creepy* and Eerie. There are also two war stories from *Blazing Combat*, and, mercifully in monotone, the superb 'To Kill a God', which traces vampirism back to Ancient Egypt. As a sampler of a magnificent artist you can't go wrong, but don't blame him for the colour.~SW

Recommended: 4

WORLD OF YOUNG MASTER: DEMON BLADE

New Comics: *One-shot 1989*

Much as Charlton's *Yang* inspired the 'historical' *House of Yang*, so too *Young Master* begat the *World of...* one-shot. Nitobe is a roving Samurai meting out instant justice to a bewildering array of hoods, soldiers and monsters, much in the manner of every Samurai film you have ever seen. With Chuck Dixon and Alex Niño on board, however, this is genuinely passionate, bloody, kinetic and feverish. Sadly, plans for more issues never materialised, but this obscurity is a hidden gem waiting to be discovered.~.DAR

WORLD WAR 3 Illustrated

Seth Tobocman and Peter Kuper: *15 issues 1979-1989*
Fantagraphics: *4 issues (16-19) 1989-1990*
Confrontational Comics/Modam Records: *13 issues + (20-32) 1991 to date*

This approximately nnual publication was conceived by Peter Kuper and Seth Tobocman, and developed into the cutting edge of underground and avant-garde cartooning, reaching out to interrogate every aspect of American political and social life without ever becoming part or party to the system it challenges. Controversial criticism mixes with fiercely, not to say stridently, illustrated assaults on all levels of venality, mediocrity and iniquity. On many occasions, however, the degree of commitment and outrage works against the material and, every so often, it stops being comment, it ceases to be art and it becomes just plain self-indulgent rubbish. In later years the content has moved further away from what could be called a liberal bent and toward a much more actively left wing and markedly strident agenda, and issue by issue seemed to bewail the lack of something to rail against.

Then the World Trade Center was destroyed on September 11 2001. As America galvanised so did the magazine, producing probably the best and most coherent issue in its long and checkered history. As a Pearl Harbor spirit gripped the USA, and other publishers rushed to release work of varying quality but uniformly emotive content, *World War 3 Illustrated* 32 contained a powerful and necessary counterpoint of reflection to balance the countrywide reaction. Christopher Cardinale produced an autobiographical strip of his bicycle ride around the city as the events unfold uptown, rife with trenchant observations such as tourists blithely posing whilst elsewhere buildings fell. Many contributors deal with the problems of perpetuating cycles of violence whilst the likes of Tom Tomorrow, Sue Coe and Spain Rodriguez examine the curtailing of personal freedoms, and the nature and history of America's involvement in Afghanistan. The most evocative response is Seth Tobocman's ironic and instruction manual-styled 'Not Enough People Have Died' wherein he took the prevalent arguments of the man in the street, that everyone who had given money or support to terrorists were equally guilty, to its absurdist extreme. Therefore Presidents such as Reagan and by extension anybody who had bought oil, used electric power or filled a car with gasoline were complicit and responsible.

Aggressive, self-important, and often stepping so far over normal bounds that it ends up doing itself more harm than good, *World War 3 Illustrated* is nevertheless a vehicle of social commentary that is impossible to deny. No fun at all, but compulsive reading nonetheless.~WW

Recommended: 32

WORLD WAR II: 1946

Antarctic: *2 issue microseries 1998, 12 issue limited series 1999-2000, 1 Annual 2000*

This is part of Ted Nomura's larger 'Families of Altered Wars' series spread over several titles, in which he depicts an alternative history, created by a few changed events, such as the death of Hermann Goring in 1917 and the successful development of German rocket technology. The microseries reprints short stories from *Tigers of Terra,* while each issue of the limited series concentrates on a particular aspect of the altered World War II, for example, Kamikaze pilots (2), communism (3), the Tuskegee Airmen (an all black fighter squadron, 8), the race into space (10) and Korea (12). The follow-up series is *Kamikaze:1946.*

Nomura's approach provides masses of exposition, but very little story, and a large cast (many related to each other, but on different sides of the conflict) is only revealed through biographical profiles. The artwork is a crude manga style and Nomura's insistence on including technical information in the dialogue is wearing. That said, the positive portrayal of women in combat, the narrative points of view, mostly through the eyes of female Luftwaffe pilots, and the technical detail are commendable and can be fascinating.~NF

WORLD WITHOUT END

DC: *6 issue miniseries 1990-1991*

Sumptuously illustrated by John Higgins, this is a convoluted science-fiction parable set on a devastated Earth. There's ongoing war between the sexes, who are divided into two separate camps, and Jamie Delano's bleak story matches the bleak planet as the aptly named Rumour moves ever further towards a showdown with the brutal and megalomaniac Brother Bones. Not one to be read for comfort and relaxation, Delano's script pulls no punches regarding gender relations or, by implication, a need for greater ecological awareness. Any messages, though, are couched in the unrelenting and off-putting stylised language Delano created for Brother Bones and his acolytes. It can be understood, but it takes time, and doesn't really repay the effort. Delano would later address similar concerns in far more satisfying fashion in *Animal Man.*~FP

WORLDS COLLIDE

DC/Milestone: *1 issue 1994*

This opens a crossover story that ran through the *Superman* titles and the entire Milestone line in the summer of 1994 in a brave but futile attempt to convince a mass audience to pick up the underrated Milestone titles. The cities of Dakota and Metropolis are merged by the mutant powers of Fred Bentson, a disgruntled mail carrier, and Superman, Superboy, Static, Icon, and company have to sort all the mess out. The creative teams' changing every few pages in this issue does not help readability at all, though the resulting crossover was generally satisfactory. There was also a 'premium' edition with a laminated cover and re-useable stickers of the cast for the purchaser to create their own battle.~HS

WORLD'S FINEST Comics

DC: *323 issues 1941-1986, 3 issue miniseries 1990*, 3 issue miniseries (Legends of the World's Finest) 1994, 2 issue microseries 1996, 10 issue limited series 1999-2000, one-shot ('Our Worlds at War') 2001*

For the first issue titled *World's Best Comics,* Superman and Batman shared the early covers, often in patriotic stance once the USA entered World War II, but didn't meet inside for over a decade. The earliest issues featured a variety of strips to contrast the superheroics of the cover stars. Hop Harrigan was an adventurous pilot, Young Dr Davis is self-explanatory, and Red, White and Blue were three young soldiers battling Nazis and saboteurs. There was also the Crimson Avenger (until 5) and offbeat superhero strips Johnny Thunder and his humorous Thunderbolt, and Zatara the magician ran to 51. Gradually, though, other superheroes edged out the supporting features. T.N.T. and Dan the Dyna-Mite, two heroes with explosive punches, were only in 5, But Sandman (by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby in 6 and 7) and Star Spangled Kid (from 6) lasted longer. So did Green Arrow, who made an impressive début in 7, not surrendering his slot until 140. The Boy Commandos joined the line-up from 8. From 10 the page count started shrinking from a generous 100, and the late 1940s fall in the popularity of superheroes meant they were replaced, initially by a succession of short-run features. War of Independence and frontier hero Tomahawk managed a long run, though, from 65 to 101, sometimes drawn by Nick Cardy, strangely running simultaneously with his own title.

1954's 71 was an important issue. Further reduction in pages prompted the Superman and Batman strips being combined, thus introducing the team-ups for which the title is best remembered. There was no danger of incompatibility because the 1950s Batman was encountering aliens and travelling through time in his own titles. Much like Superman in fact. Superman was the brawn while Batman used his acrobatic and detective skills, but as editor Jack Schiff also edited the *Batman* titles, Batman tended to predominate visually, with his artist Dick Sprang being a regular here, sometimes inking Curt Swan's pencils. At the time, however, Superman was by far the more popular of the pair. The stories were gimmick-driven, with plots very similar to those in the Superman titles, but more likely to use the Batman supporting cast. In 90, for instance, Batwoman takes the Lois Lane role of acquiring superpowers for a single story. The team-ups from 71-101 are available in two volumes of *World's Finest Archives.*

In the back-up strips Green Arrow was still going strong, largely drawn by George Papp, but in 96-99 Jack Kirby took over, with Lee Elias thereafter. Tommy Tomorrow replaced Tomahawk in 102, and you couldn't ask for a greater contrast than a historical strip giving way to stories of intergalactic policemen of the future in purple shorts with yellow boots. It was a charming strip, illustrated by Jim Mooney, who would progress to the lead strip, alternating with Dick Sprang. Beautifully illustrated by Nick Cardy for two issues, then Ramona Fradon, in 125 Aquaman displaces Tommy Tomorrow, and runs until 139. In these issues *World's Finest* presented four of the five DC superheroes to survive since their 1940s introduction, the exception being Wonder Woman.

There was a drastic change with 141, as Mort Weisinger became editor, planting *World's Finest* firmly in the *Superman* stable. There was a greater flair to the stories from this point, some being far better than those appearing in the other *Superman* and *Batman* titles, although elements from both were used here. Jim Shooter wrote some of the best and his peak came in 164, in which the evil android, Brainiac, creates a female computer to battle the World's Finest team. Weisinger introduced 'imaginary' stories already familiar to *Superman* readers, telling tales unconstrained by established continuity. An early example is 154, with the sons of Superman and Batman, who make an early return in 157. These children were kids, as opposed to the 1970s series where the sons were teenagers. A nice variation on the regular theme came with the teaming of Supergirl and Batgirl in 169, plotting to usurp their male counterparts. The best of the 'imaginary' stories is 172, positing that Bruce Wayne might have also been adopted by the Kents, making Superman and Batman brothers.

Losing sales to Marvel, in 1968 DC refurbished their titles to compete. There's a Neal Adams cover on 174, and he draws the stories inside the following two issues. While his art is lovely, his pseudo-realism doesn't suit the style of story. It's below-par Ross Andru and Mike Esposito art from 180, with the writing handled by Cary Bates, whose strength was ingenious plots, Robert Kanigher and Bob Haney. By 1970 the title was failing to live up to its name, and drastic surgery came with 199, as Batman was evicted, giving Superman the chance to team with other characters. Denny O'Neil began with a crowd-pleaser as Superman raced against The Flash, with art regularly by Dick Dillin and Joe Giella. The Superman team-ups lasted to 214, with 210's script by Elliott Maggin picking up on a plot last seen in Green Lantern, in which the socially aware Green Arrow planned to run for mayor. The best of a generally decent bunch, though, is 212's return of The Martian Manhunter. When last seen in Justice League of America 71 he'd left Earth to locate other survivors from his race, and this story followed on. 207-212 were forty-eight page comics providing back-ups dating from the 1940s, the best being a very nice looking Black Pirate from Sheldon Moldoff in 210.

Batman was back in 215, although only by proxy as one of inexplicably popular teenage Super Sons, under writer Bob Haney. Always a good plotter, and packing a lot into his stories, these weren't his most exciting work, and he didn't improve when the real Batman returned in 220. 223-228 were each one hundred pages, with the reprint strips more than compensating for the lacklustre lead. The Super Sons appeared every now and then when the comic reverted to normal size; the less said about them the better.

It's ironic to note that what eventually breathed new life into *World's Finest* was a return to the original premise of an oversize comic with a selection of all-new features. From 244 Green Arrow, Black Canary, Martian Manhunter and Wonder Woman all ran in solo strips after the Superman and Batman team. The best of the early runs was the Gray Morrow-illustrated Vigilante in 244-248, although the Sal Amendola drawn Black Canary strip in 247 looks very nice. Steve Ditko returned to his creation The Creeper in 249-255, and the E. Nelson Bridwell and Don Newton Captain Marvel strip modernised the classic old hero without destroying the innocent feel of the character in 253-282. 283 drops back to a standard twenty-four pages, though it retains a back-up strip, Green Arrow nicely drawn by Gil Kane. Throughout the changes in format the Superman and Batman team-ups remained uninspired. A long story in 300, drawn by George Pérez and guest-starring the Justice League, Outsiders and Teen Titans, only temporarily livened up a dying title. Writer Joey Cavalieri institutes a marginal rise in quality as *World's Finest* limps to its demise, but there's nothing of real note.

Did the comic ever live up to its name? No, to be honest. There were some decent strips, but very little that can be ranked above acceptable, with the stories from the mid-1960s the best. When *World's Finest* died to make way for the new look Superman it was not mourned.

The 1990 miniseries has Dave Gibbons delivering a plot that mixes and matches Superman and Batman's supporting cast, cities and villains, contrasting and playing them off each other. Lex Luthor turns up in Gotham for a business deal, and the Joker decides to take a vacation in Metropolis, each well characterised. There's a nice touch in that all of Luthor's henchmen are bald, and the Joker is more manic than maniac: the exchanges between the two make good reading. Steve Rude's city designs are excellent, and he also captures Superman and Batman very well, with an original take on the latter. The smooth inks of Karl Kesel and colourist Steve Oliff contribute considerably as well. It's taken a long time, but this is finally a series that lives up to the title. In 1994 Walt Simonson includes supernatural elements, with Batman and Superman's dreams and nightmares blending with deadly consequences. Superman becomes ever more brutal, and Batman begins to question his sanity after dreaming constantly of Krypton's destruction. It's well-paced and lavishly illustrated by Dan Brereton.

World's Finest 3 teams Superboy and Robin, as the pair take on Metallo, now able to morph into any robotic shape, and the sexy Poison Ivy, able to control any man she's kissed. In this story it happens to be Superboy, whose help she wants in transforming Hawaii into a Garden of Eden. Metallo's abilities are imaginatively employed, and he has the best dialogue of Chuck Dixon and Karl Kesel's action-packed story, very nicely illustrated by Tom Grummett and Scott Hanna.

The 1990 series features ten meetings between Batman and Superman, one to an issue. They meet annually on a certain day to reflect on a death they apparently inadvertently caused. Each issue tries to capture the mood of the relevant year with guest-stars such as Batgirl in 5 and Catwoman in 8. It's written well by Karl Kesel, particularly his handling of the contrasting moods and styles of our two heroes. They're not an obvious team, but Kesel explains why they work well together. Along with crisp clear art and good storytelling, largely by Dave Taylor and Robert Campanella, this is a very readable series. The title was revived again to end DC's 2001 crossover, featuring the aftermath. It's a solemn occasion highlighting fallen heroes, but well handled by a multitude of creators.~HY

Recommended: 162, 164, 169, 172, 212, 1990 miniseries 1-3

WORLD'S FUNNEST

DC: *One-shot 2000*

Evan Dorkin has Mr Myxzptlk and Bat Mite kill every DC character, on every world or dimension or alternative reality, in a variety of inventive and/or sadistic ways. Clearly, this is not exactly Maus we're talking about, but it is all fun and, more to the point, it gives various pencillers and inkers a chance to strut their stuff. With over twenty artists, this is inevitably something of a mixed bag: Dave Gibbons, Alex Ross and Frank Cho are terrific; it's nice to see Jim Woodring and Jaime Hernandez in a mainstream setting; and Frank Miller is abysmal.~DAR

WORLDS UNKNOWN

Marvel: *8 issues 1973-1974*

1-6 contain adaptations of science-fiction stories that mostly suffer from being contracted to fit the comics' page-count, but with some notable art, particularly Ralph Reese in the first issue. The final issues adapt *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad*.~FP

THE WORM

Slab O'Concrete: *Graphic Novel 1999*

To raise funds for the London Cartoon Centre in 1991, a platoon of comic creators produced the longest comic strip in the world in a single day. Five writers broke down a story from chapter outlines supplied by Alan Moore (reprinted here), while dozens of artists drew individual panels. It took eight years to find a publisher despite contributions from John Bolton, Hunt Emerson, Glenn Fabry, Dave Gibbons, Arthur Ranson and Bryan Talbot among many famous names. Eventually it was enabled by a grant from The Swedish Council For Cultural Affairs, requiring awkwardly pasted over Swedish and French text. Divorced from its purpose, *The Worm* is a problematical creature. Moore constructs an adaptable scenario that whisks through the history of cartooning to an upbeat, if fanciful, ending. The variety of approaches, though, distracts from the story. Apart from the everyman cartoonist designed by David Lloyd, characters differ from panel to panel, and artists have fundamentally different ways of portraying essentially the same scenario. Usually of value, here it's to the detriment of the story. A brave attempt for a worthy cause, but now merely a curiousity.~FP

WORLD'S WORST COMICS AWARDS

Kitchen Sink: *2 issue microseries 1990*

A leisurely trawl through comics' lowlights presented as an awards ceremony. Categories such as Worst Costume (male and female), Worst Team, Worst Name and Worst Series are interspersed with other less than shining moments, leading to a top ten rundown of the Worst Comics. The choices are apt and the links amusing. To be avoided by those without a sense of humour about their funnybooks.~WJ

WOUNDED MAN

ComicsOne: *9 issue limited series 2001-2002**

Keisuke is hiding after having fallen foul of an organisation that specialises in blackmailing celebrities and sports stars into performing for pornographic films then sold to the world's elite. Keisuke's refusal to perform leads to the death of his lover, and he's now looking to finance his revenge. There's perhaps some grim humour as thereafter all Keisuke's lovers end up dead (after having had plenty of opportunity to be seen naked), in Kazuo Koike's men's adventure. It's visceral and intricately plotted, with artwork from Ryoichi Ikegami, who, even on autopilot, can make comics attractive.~NF

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* Available in a collected edition

WOW COMICS

Fawcett: *69 issues 1940-1948*

Wow began as an anthology featuring Fawcett's second stringers, the first issue starring Mr Scarlet and Pinky by Simon and Kirby as well as Atom Blake, Boy Wizard, Jim Dolan & Rick O'Shay among others. From 9, though, it became the starring vehicle for Mary Marvel, Captain Marvel's twin sister. Aimed at girls, the stories were generally gentle in tone, lacking the surreal, slapstick charm of the World's Mightiest Mortal or the slam-bang action of Captain Marvel Jr. Mary and a succession of back-up strips ran until 58 when she was replaced by humour strip Ozzie. Tom Mix began in 65, confirming the general decline in fantasy hero titles and the boom in Westerns. *Wow* became Real *Western Heroes* with 70.~WW

Recommended: First issue (not numbered), 9, 18, 28, 58, 60, 62

WRATH

Malibu: *9 issues, 1 Giant-Size 1994*

It's rumoured that Marvel bought Malibu to acquire their impressive computer-colouring process. Certainly the colouring on *Wrath* is the most impressive thing about this superhero series... and even that ain't so hot. Although the series has creators credited it might as well've been produced by another of Malibu's fancy computers, so generic are their efforts. Wrath works for the shadowy organisation Aladdin, seeking out other superpowerful "Primes" and teaming with fellow Ultraverse heroes in a series of dull escapades that never justify the high cover price or deluxe packaging.~AL

The WRETCH

Caliber: *1 issue 1996*

Amaze Ink: *5 issues 1997-1998*

Phil Hester and friends produce a quirky series of tales about a supernatural force that possesses people, places and things. Its a device that gives the creator a broad canvas on which to tell stories ranging from the grimly horrific to the surrealistically humorous, and originally appeared under the title *The Creep*.~WW

Recommended: 3

WU WEI

Animus: *4 issues 1995-1996*

Oscar Stern produces an impressive slice-of-life comic series centred around his Buddhist beliefs. Simple, powerful stories, rendered in an understated line style, ambitious and entertaining. Wu Wei means 'the way of the Tao' – but you probably already knew that.~WW

The Nine Rings of WU-TANG

Image: *5 issues 1999-2000**

Under the influence of much weed, the members of rap band Wu-Tang Clan created aliases for themselves from an eccentric set of influences that fused kung-fu movies, buddhism and mob culture. Attempting to attach a rationalisation to this hotch-potch was always going to be difficult, particularly since the real lives of some band members, particularly Ol' Dirty Bastard, overshadow any fiction. The result is third-rate *Conan* with a side order of half-baked spiritualism.~WJ

WULF The Barbarian

Atlas: *4 issues 1975*

Of the many sword-and-sorcery books produced in the 1970s this, although not particularly original, was one of the best. 1 and 2 are handsomely drawn by Larry Hama, who also wrote the title, and inked by Klaus Janson (and a cast of thousands in 2). 3 and 4 are respectively bizarre and banal and need only trouble completists.~DAR

Recommended: 1, 2

WWF World Wrestling Federation

Valiant: *4 issues 1991*

Considering that in its heyday the World Wrestling Federation was the nearest thing to live-action superhero fights, their transfer to comics is surprisingly feeble. The central idea is that the wrestlers carry their grudges out of the ring into social situations. For hardcore WWF fans only.~FP

WYATT EARP

Marvel: *34 issues 1955-1960 (1-29), 1972-1973 (30-34)*

Exploits of the frontier marshal by Stan Lee and Dick Ayers. They're all flaccid Western fare, as are the accompanying strips by Lee, with such talents as Al Williamson, Reed Crandall and Angelo Torres on art. The 1970s reprint series was deservedly short-lived.~SW

WYNONNA EARP

Image/WildStorm: *5 issues 1996-1997**

U.S. Marshall Earp, a possible descendant of the legendary Wyatt, confronts supernatural criminals in this fun, action adventure. Beau Smith writes Wynonna as a strong action hero without particularly falling into a Bad Girl riff but the artwork (Joyce Chin 1-3 and Pat Lee 4-5) is patchy and often seems unsuitable to the western/horror atmosphere that Smith tries to create. At any rate, it wasn't strong enough to last.~NF

X

Dark Horse: *24 issues, 1 Special 1994-1996*

Part of Dark Horse's *Comics Greatest World* superhero titles, X concerns a masked vigilante who warns his victims once only with an X mark. The next time he kills them. Initially his targets are the corrupt controllers, police, politicians and gangsters of Arcadia. Ghost appears in 8, and with 15 X has to face forces from outside, while a Predator turns up in 18, after which the series concerns his visit to Washington to warn off federal interference and the subsequent invasion of Arcadia by every psycho looking for a home.

Full of early promise, Steven Grant has some good ideas but doesn't really develop them, always prioritising action. Artists are Doug Mahnke and Jimmy Palmiotti (1-5), Ron Wagner and then Chris Warner until, with 13, Javier Saltares became the regular artist. Although he provided a consistency his compositions are rather rigid and dull.

The Special, 'One Shot to the Head', is actually a prequel to X's first appearance, and the only other element of note is Frank Miller covers for 18-22 and the special.~NF

XENA: WARRIOR PRINCESS

Topps: *3 issue miniseries (1,2,0) 1997, 3 issue miniseries ('Joxer: Warrior Prince') 1997-1998, 3 issue miniseries ('The Dragon's Teeth') 1997-1998, 3 issue miniseries ('vs Callisto') 1998, 3 issue miniseries ('The Orpheus Trilogy') 1998, 2 issue microseries ('Bloodlines') 1998, 3 issue miniseries ('The Original Olympics') 1998, one-shot ('The Wedding of Xena and Hercules') 1998, 2 issue microseries ('The Wrath of Hera') 1998*

Introduced as a villain in the *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* TV show, Xena progressed to hero status her own series, where she gained a companion in Gabrielle. Regrets and guilt about her past are major plot elements. In comics she first appeared in Topps' *Hercules* title before her own succession of miniseries. Roy Thomas revels in retellings of the past, whether historical or mythological, and introduces 'new' characters like Perseus and Gilgamesh, and Oedipus ('The Dragon's Teeth'). 'Callisto' features TV characters, including Pandora and Cassandra. Tom and Mary Bierbaum begin less successfully in 'Joxer: Warrior Prince'. Much better, is 'The Orpheus Trilogy', which includes Xena in a retelling of the myth of Eurydice's return from Hades. There is a better grasp of Xena's character here and the mythological elements are nicely handled. Samson and Arthur Pendragon show up in 'The Original Olympics' and the Bierbaums move closer to the light-heartedness of the TV show's comedy episodes. Aaron Lopresti is the final writer, normally illustrating his own strips ('Zero Issue', 'Bloodlines'), which have a horror feel.

The first miniseries is drawn very attractively by Joyce Chin, but other artists fail to enliven the scripts. Robert Teranishi's art is firmly in the fantasy tradition, not unattractive on 'The Dragon's Teeth', but much better when inked by himself on 'The Orpheus Trilogy'. The comics follow the TV show's lead in being unconcerned about whether featured characters can realistically co-exist, which is at once painful and intriguing. There's no additional information about the TV show's regulars but fans will find much to enjoy.~NF

XENA Warrior Princess

Dark Horse: *14 issues 1999-2000**

There are closer ties to the TV series than the Topps version, making for a jarring transition between 3 and 4, but otherwise this is much the same. The best artwork comes from Mike Deodato (3, 4, 9-14), although it's heavily photo referenced, and chances are those who enjoy the TV show will also enjoy the comics. There's more Xena in *Dark Horse Presents* 148 and *Dark Horse Presents Annual* 2000. The comic comes with illustrated covers or a run of increasingly unflattering photos of *Xena* actress Lucy Lawless.~FP

XENE

Eyeball Soup Designs: *4 issues 1995-1996*

Had the editors lavished as much care on the content as the production this Singapore produced anthology might still be with us today. Sadly, though, strips continue, but not from issue to issue, and most showcase an impressive use of Photoshop for the backgrounds, but amateur use of a pencil for the figures.~WJ

XENOBROOD

DC: *7 issues (0-6) 1994-1995*

A couple of anthropologists find some crystals that hatch four superpowered aliens made of super dense protoplasm. Unfortunately, while they have to learn all about their new environment, other aliens want them back. Doug Moench can't do much with this slim premise, even with Superman guest-starring in 3 and 4. Changes in artist after only the second issue suggest that DC didn't have any confidence in the strip either.~NF

XENOZOIC TALES

Kitchen Sink: *14 issues 1987-1996*

Although it's the 26th century, post-cataclysm, Mark Schultz' world of dinosaurs and ruined cities owes more to the 1950s. In the Xenozoic Age small pockets of humanity, who've spent the last four and a half centuries underground, emerge and set up tribal societies in the ruins of the old world. Jack 'Cadillac' Tenrec is a mechanic who spends his spare time fixing old cars until he meets Hannah Dundee, an ambassador from the neighbouring Wassoon tribe. She's on a mission to find the stash of books Jack's people are reputed to hold in their ruined City in the Sea, but seems perfectly happy to hang out, have adventures and ride around in his cars.

There are usually two or three inter-connected stories in each issue, with plenty of action, but *Xenozoic Tales* is actually a slowly developing love story between the two leads, drawn in mock Wally Wood style with just a hint of Williamson for good measure. Schultz has all the things he likes in one comic (shapely women, guys in safari suits, dinosaurs and classic cars), and while the exercise is diverting and well drawn, it's ultimately a load of very pretty fluff.~FJ

Recommended: 1-3, 13

XERO

DC: *12 issues 1997-1998*

Black basketball star Trane Walker, revived and reconstructed after a fatal accident, goes to work for a US Government agency as a "Closer". Decked out in a super-suit and disguised as a blond white guy, he walks through walls and executes criminals, subversives and anybody else the Department of Justice tells him to. The underlying theme, as related by Walker's brother, is Power versus Responsibility or perhaps Law versus Justice. Xero closes case after case, oblivious rules of ethical behaviour. When a mission will delay his arrival at a basketball game, he allows a waitress to be killed in a hostage situation, an event that plagues him and eventually results in his downfall. Blind to all overtures of friendship from the excellent supporting cast, Walker coasts through one dirty mission after another until reaching a realisation that should have occurred earlier. Complex and sophisticated, the narrative unfolds in an innovative, uncompromising

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* Available in a collected edition

manner as Christopher Priest, Chriscross and Eduardo Barreto, craft an absolute gem.~WW
Recommended: 1-12

X-FACTOR

Marvel: *149 issues, 9 Annuals, one-shot ('Prisoner of Love') 1986-1998*

X-Factor débuted, amid much hype, after a lead-in story in *Avengers* 263 and *Fantastic Four* 286. Initially written by Bob Layton and drawn by Jackson Guice, the comic reunited the five original X-Men. Disillusioned by the growing anti-mutant bigotry and angered by Professor X's decision permit former enemy Magneto to run the X-Men, Cyclops, The Beast, Angel, Iceman and Jean Grey set up their own team. Posing as mutant hunters who could be hired to 'remove' mutant problems, they gather frightened young mutants – including many who would later become major characters in *X-Force* and other X-titles – aiming to train them in the way they themselves had been trained. There's a heavy soap-opera feel to early issues, along with a subplot that leading into the introduction of major villain Apocalypse.

Louise Simonson writes from 6, and is joined by artist husband Walt from 10 to 40. His arrival coincides with events leading to the loss of the Angel's original wings and his transformation into one of Apocalypse's horsemen, a subplot that ran over a decade. The team sensibly drop the mutant hunters charade, for an eminently readable comic. Louise Simonson then works with a series of artists (including Art Adams on 41-42) until Jim Lee (with occasional assists from Chris Claremont) and Whilce Portacio take over on 61. They bring a welcome vitality on their short but nonetheless impressive run, and 68 sets into motion the events that will one day lead Cyclops' young son to become the futuristic warrior Cable, complicating *X-Men* continuity for evermore.

With 71 the original members return to the X-Men, to be replaced by Havok, Polaris, Strong Guy, Wolfsbane and Madrox the Multiple Man. Under the wing of government liaison Val Cooper the team become, effectively, the US government's pet mutants during a run by penciller Larry Stroman and writer Peter David. The new look was well-received, but relied on David's tricks with in-jokes and one-liners to carry plots generally weaker than the scripts.

After David's departure with 92, *X-Factor* suffers from frequently changing creative teams until John Francis Moore and Steve Epting arrive with 114, bringing the criminal Mystique into the team as a means of repenting her crimes. This change was forced by Val Cooper, and the heroes begin to question the amount of government control over their operation. The subplot continues when Howard Mackie seamlessly takes over the writing from Moore, and is still a major feature when Jeff Matsuda replaces Epting on the art. Towards the end of the run more and more 'reforming' criminals are forced on the increasingly unhappy team, with predictably divisive results, as Duncan Rouleau becomes the artist from 138. Mackie writes to the end, eventually returning Havok, but realising a new approach was necessary, *X-Factor* was cancelled to make way for *Mutant X*.

Throughout its run *X-Factor* was never outstanding, but was always a solid read, with generally above-average storytelling. If you can get the entire run, you could do worse than sit down and read them in one go. The one-shot, though is dire, with the usually cheery Beast moaning about being a monster. The most interesting aspect is how Jackson Guice and Jim Starlin obviously wrote it as a *Fantastic Four* story, and how out of character the X-Factor heroes are made to act in a reworking that merely changed the names.~JC

X-FACTOR

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 2002*

For some reason the vacant title was transferred to this, related solely through its use of mutants, although largely in peripheral fashion. It's a character piece spotlighting two FBI agents, each with their own problems to resolve, investigating anti-mutant incidents and eventually making an unsavoury discovery. Jeff Jensen's story is well plotted, but the star quality is provided by artist Arthur Ranson, whose work is rarely seen in the USA. His detailed and gritty realism is gorgeous, with Paul Mounts providing gloomy colouring suitable to the downbeat tone. If only all mainstream comics reached this standard.~WJ
Recommended: 1-4

X-51

Marvel: *12 issues 1999-2000*

Machine Man is back, now looking more like Robocop. 1-5 feature The Brotherhood of Mutants in a confusing start, a subplot about The Hellfire Club and trainee Avengers Firestar and Justice before 5's battle with The Vision. Karl Bollers' writing is dense and downright obstructive in early issues where he's co-scripting with Mike Higgins, while Joe Bennett's manga-influenced art (with more than a nod in Alan Davis' direction) conveys the effects, the power and the machinery well. His figurework and objectified females lose points. Our hero has to come to desperate terms with the realisation that he's part mutant-hunting Sentinel, and 9-10 involve A.I.M. with Machine Man reborn once again. 12 is a patience-testing illustrated narrative with the entire development of man and machinekind covered. The plot reincorporates the mysterious obelisk from Jack Kirbys *2001* series where "Mister Machine" first appeared, then summarises the previous 11 issues. The very cosmic ending is clearly a compacted version of what was planned for further issues. Exciting if somewhat po-faced and macho.~SW

THE X-FILES

Topps: *44 issues (-2-41), 2 Annuals, 3 Digests, 5 Special Editions 1995-1998, one-shot ('AfterFlight') 1997, 9 issues ('Season One') 1997-1998, 4 issue miniseries ('Ground Zero') 1997-1998, one-shot ('Fight The Future') 1998*

Stefan Petrucha writes 1-16 in the same vein as the early episodes of the TV series, and his interest in the subject matter shows in the wordiness of the scripts. 1-12* are linked by a common theme (memory), and subsequent issues investigate computer programs (13), survivalists (15-16), ball lightning (18-19), spontaneous combustion (33), bird attacks (34), Bigfoot (Digest 1) and Chupacabras (Digest 3). Kevin J. Anderson's two-parter (20-21) features mummification, but John Rozum's stories (17-19, 22-41), adjusting to the changes in the TV show, include more conspiracy theory and regular FBI actions, including international terrorists (27-29), hostage negotiations at a militia compound (30-31), witness protection (35-36) and cult murders (Digest 2). The Annuals and Digests contain new adventures, but the Special Editions are reprints of 1-13 and Annual 1. The -2 and -1 issues reprint promotional stories from *X-Files Magazine* and *Hero Illustrated* respectively. Generally, the scripts and art work hard to capture the spirit of the TV show. Charles Adlard (1-16, 18-19, 22-23, 27-29, Annual 1, Digest 1-3) successfully captures the FBI agents' likenesses in his heavy-lined, blocky style, but, given the nature of the stories, can't avoid drawing a lot of pages of talking heads. His successors, Gordon Purcell (17, 20-21, 24-29) and Alexander Saviuk (30-41) continue this approach, but are generally more cartoony and less stylish than Adlard. 'AfterFlight', by Petrucha and with artwork from Jill Thompson and Saviuk, is about an old man's attempt to rebuild his grandfather's early flying machine and with its aliens, men in black and crime elements feels very like a TV episode. The 'Season One' series contains adaptations of episodes from the TV show by Roy Thomas. Artwork on these issues includes John Van Fleet on 'Pilot Episode' (reprinted from 0) and 'Fire', Claude St Aubin on 'Deep Throat' and Val Mayerik on 'Squeeze'. The other episodes covered are 'Beyond the Sea', 'Conduit', 'Ice', 'Shadows' and 'Space'. 'Ground Zero' is Anderson adapting his own X-Files novel with artwork by Purcell, while Rozum and Van Fleet adapt the *X-Files* movie in 'Fight The Future'. Titan Books reprint the main Topps series in seven volumes, as well as 'AfterFlight' and two of the Digest issues.~NF

X-FLIES

Twist & Shout: *1 Special 1995, one-shot ('Conspiracy') 1996, 4 issue miniseries ('Bug Hunt') 1997*

Richard Johnston's recasting of adventurous agents Scully and Mulder as flies. Yes, that's about it. Johnston's gloppy, gelatinous art style is skillful and not unappealing, and there's the odd pleasing slapstick gag, but those slender merits alone don't hide the fact that this title was long past it's sell-by date on publication. The appearance of guest-strips by people like the very talented Mark Stafford means one mildly amusing pun is not all the series has to offer. But it's very nearly all.~HS

X-FORCE

Marvel: *129 issues, 4 Annuals 1991-2002*

Back in the early 1990s, Rob Liefeld was the darling of both comic fans and the industry, riding high on the big guns and ultraviolent manga-influenced style that offered something different to the boy scout, mom-and-apple pie values with which comics were most associated. In *New Mutants* he introduced a character named Cable, an enigmatic time-traveller who immediately became a fan favourite. With 100 *New Mutants* was cancelled and relaunched as *X-Force*, a showcase for Liefeld's style and ideas. Under Liefeld's guidance, and with Cable rather than Professor Xavier at the helm, they woke up from Xavier's impossible dream of humans and mutants living in peace and became more militant. Early issues establish the team, their viewpoint on the human/mutant situation (cynical, basically) and introduce characters such as Deadpool and Kane (in 2) who would also become fan favourites. Cable's origins are also explored, tantalising with a story readers would have to wait years to fully understand.

Liefeld's fall from grace was fast and hard, and it's often forgotten that he brimmed with good ideas and creativity that needed a stronger editor than he was ever offered. Give him a chance and you'll find some of his best and freshest work in these early issues, including his transformation of the gawky hick Cannonball into a strong leader who fully understands and sympathises with Xavier's dream yet rejects it. Cable departs in 10, and Cannonball's development survives Liefeld's parting at 14. His position somewhere between Xavier's open hand of friendship and Cable's closed fist of attack is a theme that recurs again and again.

Fabian Nicieza and pencil artist Greg Capullo (later replaced by Tony Daniel) take over, and while the series loses the in-your-face rawness Liefeld injected, the greater emphasis on characterisation is no bad thing. The team are no longer naïve teenagers, they're older and wiser, more often operating as a mutant underground than traditional superheroes. Like all mutant titles throughout the 1990s, this suffers cross-company events (not to mention alternate cover versions of virtually every issue between 30 and 50), but mostly manages to maintain its own identity. 38 leads into *Generation X*, and the series is interrupted by its transformation to *Gambit and the X-ternals* for four months between 43 and 44. The lead-in to *Onslaught*, the next cross-company event, obstructs most subsequent issues. This is a shame, as left to its own devices the sense of team spirit in the face of adversity and us-against-the-world attitude that forms the heart of *X-Force* generally provides a perfectly good read.

After 50 the comic rarely manages a settled creative team, and as a result it's often merely treading water, although it's rarely poor, and there are interesting moments. Writer John Francis Moore plays around well with concepts of post-teen directionless disaffection as he sends the group on a literal and metaphorical road trip starting in 71, and Adam Pollina's more cartoony art complements this lighter tone perfectly. The team's visit to the mutant separatist homeland Genosha, guest-starring Pete Wisdom, in 94 and 95 is worth a mention. As the series edges into treble figures, there's a new direction from writer Warren Ellis, who treats it as a sequel to his *Excalibur*, nudging it in the direction of the superhero-noir style he favoured elsewhere. Ellis is assisted by Ian Edginton, who eventually supplants him while continuing to explore his pet concepts, many of which can be traced back to the Alan Moore golden era of *Captain Britain*. It's fin-de-siecle superheroes by numbers, however, and proceedings are brought to a halt with 115.

116 is essentially a completely new title, with nothing but the name carried over. Michael Allred is only credited with the art, but the characters and concepts have a lot in common with his work on *Madman* and *The Atomics*, presenting a group of dysfunctional but media-savvy mutants who live the high life on the back of PR-controlled celebrity. Their missions are dangerous and often fatal, but the public love them. Pete Milligan writes a screwed up and awkward bunch in a 1960s Marvel way updated to the 21st century, and it's wonderfully fresh, vibrant, painfully self-aware and brilliant fun. In essence, it's a satire on the comics industry and the cult of celebrity tarted up as the best superhero comic available. The new direction proved such a word-of-mouth hit that the title was relaunched as *X-Statix*, to see if extra readers could be enticed.~JC

Recommended: 116

XIN: Legend of the Monkey King

Anarchy Studios: *1 issue + 2002 to date*

The series is based on the Chinese folk legend, 'Journey to the West', with a science fiction, superhero update. 1 has a big fight between the arrogant Monkey King and some defenders of Heaven. It's prettily drawn by Kevin Lau, but there are no other redeeming features.~NF

X-MAN

Marvel: *75 issues, 1 Annual, one-shot ('All Saints Day') 1995-2001*

Starting in Marvel's 'Age of Apocalypse' alternate timeline experiment, X-Man is the alternate version of Cable. Adolescent Nate Grey was bred by Mister Sinister from the genetic material of Scott Summers and Jean Grey (Cyclops and Phoenix) to be a weapon against the evil Apocalypse, but was freed by Summers and raised by a troupe of mutants disguised as travelling actors. When 'reality' was restored the immensely powerful Grey bled into the regular Marvel Universe, further complicating an already ridiculously convoluted alternate world/time-travel continuity.

Early issues are unremarkable. Jeph Loeb writes entertaining enough fights with the X-Men, Cable and the Hellfire Club, but did Marvel need another time-twisted X-comic? Even one in which the lead character is having an affair with his alternate-world father's ex-wife, who also happens to be a clone of an alternate-world version of his mother, whom his formidable psychic powers resurrected from the dead because he was curious about her!

There are good points. Nate's power burns brightly, but it's also burning him out, threatening an early death, investigated by writer Terry Kavanagh in the 20s. Nate's attempts to find his place in the world lead into the series' best sequence in 33-36: his inadvertent courting of an X-Man cult, unaware that he is being manipulated by the Purple Man. A team-up with Spider-Man follows, and a Cable crossover in 45-47 suggests flagging sales may have required guest-star bolstering. Kavanagh produced a generally entertaining though unremarkable superhero romp until his departure in 62. In his later issues, he starts to play with the idea that Grey, born of an alternate reality that may never have really existed, has a special link to other realities. Warren Ellis and Steven Grant pick up on this, guiding storylines towards a more European science-fiction style, unmissably influenced by Brian Talbot's *Luther Arkwright* and Vertigo comics. Proclaiming himself Shaman of the mutant tribe across all realities, Grey makes the multiverse his playground. Until, in 75, his candle burns out, as it always threatened to, bringing a disparate series to a neat and conclusive end. Remarkably *X-Man* didn't outstay its welcome.~JC

X-MEN

Marvel: *137 issues +, 10 Annuals 1991 to date*

With the X-Men divided into two combat teams in *Uncanny X-Men* 281, one might consider the resulting two titles as separate publications, but such is not the case. Jim Lee got his own *X-Men* comic to play with, discarding three scripters in his 11 issues. It kicks off with Magneto tracked to the moon provoking an overblown punch-up (1-3), and progresses into a forgettable run of soap opera and mutant persecution nonsense. 9-10 cross over with *Ghost Rider* 26-27 and Longshot appears in 10. Fabian Nicieza arrives with 11 with a succession of artists, most notably Andy Kubert, as relentless crossovers afflict the now burgeoning X-titles, causing even the most dedicated fan pause. In 20 Psylocke turns up, claiming that the woman who's been fighting with the team is an imposter named Revanche and the ghastly machinations so much mocked in TV soap operas become part and parcel of the comic. The is she?/isn't she? nonsense lasts almost eighteen issues, briefly interrupted by the tedious wedding (30) of founding members Cyclops and Jean Grey/Marvel Girl/Phoenix (only one girl but lots of code names). Some edge enters with the introduction of Sabretooth in 34, as mentor Professor Charles Xavier convinces the team to attempt the rehabilitation of one of the world's most murderous mutants. Villains have reformed before but the manner in which this story unfolds is a rare high point in an otherwise largely mediocre series. The only quibble is that, as usual, much of the story development happens in other series, particularly Wolverine's comic.

40-41 are the second and fourth parts of 'Legion Quest' wherein Professor X dies again, leading directly into 'The Age of Apocalypse', at the close of which Professor X was alive again. Nicieza leaves with 45 and Scott Lobdell, who'd scripted some early issues, returns to lay the groundwork for the next big X-Thing. With the first hints in 46, the Emissary of Onslaught beats the stuffings out of the team in 50, and the saga proper runs in 53-56, as well as in every other Marvel title. For a brief time it "changed the Marvel Universe Forever", as the cosmically powerful dark side of Professor X nearly destroys the Earth. In 57 a repentant Xavier turns himself over to the US authorities, leaving the mutants to fend for themselves in a brief flurry of mawkish fights and fluttery hearts, including a guest shot for Shang Chi, Master of Kung Fu in 62-64. Then yet another crossover crisis looms as the mysterious Bastion, organises world governments to crack down on the potentially lethal mutant population. This is 'Operation Zero Tolerance' in 65-69 and all concurrent X-Titles.

70 introduces some brand-new X-Men (Maggot, Marrow, Cecilia Reyes) as the team retrench lacking the financial resources they're used to, and Cyclops and Jean leave in 71. The return of Nightcrawler, Kitty Pride and Colossus (80) prompts another X-Event. It's the search for the missing Professor X (82-84) as Joe Kelly and Adam Kubert hand over to writer/artist Alan Davis (85) in a prelude to 'Magneto War' (86-87, *Uncanny X-Men* 366-367). Davis' tenure, even the obligatory X-events 'Apocalypse: the Twelve' (96-97), and 'Ages of Apocalypse' (99) is a welcome blend of the old magic and a light touch, in a title increasingly histrionic and mega-melodramatic. It's a change in tone continued with the return of Claremont for 100, who, with new artist Leinil Francis Yu brought some narrative cohesion to what was for too long the equivalent of a point-and-shoot computer game. He's only around until 109, bidding farewell with a weepy Christmas tale. Lobdell then pops up one final time to handle the really, truly, honest, we-mean-it final showdown with Magneto.

The series is retitled *New X-Men* with 114, as Grant Morrison and rotating artists Frank Quitely, Ethan Van Sciver and Igor Kordey drop-kick the mutants to a new level. The first story to 116 introduces ultimate villain Cassandra Nova and re-invents long time X adversaries the Sentinels. The island of Genosha, long a metaphor for apartheid, had become a refuge for mutants, and in a bold move, Morrison has the entire population exterminated, provoking the X-Men to go public, and open the doors to any mutant in need. 118-120 deal with the newest batch of students and degenerate human businessmen before there is a return to the cosmic themes so well-beloved by X-fans (122-126) as Lilandra and her Shi'ar Empire re-enter the lives of the X-Men by invading and attempting to sterilise the Earth. After that we move back into the arena of relationships with humans, governments and that darned double-crossing military-industrial complex. John Paul Leon illustrates a low key tale dealing with the funeral of an extended team member and interior monologues on the deteriorating marriage of Cyclops and Jean Grey (131) and Phil Jimenez draws a haunting episode set on ghost-plagued Genosha (132) before the next big story-arc begins.

These stories are much darker than any previous *X-Men*, and more concerned with the world of realpolitik. Jean Grey heads a new and much more believable school for mutants, but one that has protesters picketing the gates. The X-Men are uniting mutants into a global rescue network and world governments are having to treat mutants as a dispossessed nation, and not a monstrous criminal plot. The most potentially chilling theme amongthe new narrative sensibility, is the theory that at the current rate of birth, baseline humanity will be extinct in six generations. There's still plenty of action and emotional interplay, but with a logical and sympathetic underpinning that makes for a more mature read. About time too. Marvel have been issuing collections as quickly as they can since Morrison's first issue.~WW

Recommended: 86-91, 98-99, 114-121, 126-128, 131-132, Annual '99

The Uncanny X-MEN

Marvel: *414 issues +, 25 Annuals, 2 Giant-Size 1963 to date*

One of the final titles introducing the first flush of Marvel Comics (only *Daredevil* would follow), the X-Men reflected the Fantastic Four. Another closely knit team, instead of being loved and admired by the public at large, their inherent extra abilities, designating them as mutants, made them figures to be feared. The slim reasoning that endemic superpowers somehow make their possessor a threat, whereas accidentally conferred abilities are okay with the public at large, has seen X-Men through forty years of plots. This stood up a little better in the less populated Marvel Universe of 1963, and a début issue that introduced Professor X, Angel, Beast, Cyclops, Iceman, Marvel Girl and Magneto, all still going strong four decades later, wasn't a bad week's work from Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. The adjective 'uncanny' was first appended on 114, appearing on most issues thereafter, and permanently from 151.

The teenage heroes were theoretically honing their abilities at Professor Xavier's School For Gifted Youngsters, yet emerged almost every issue to confront new mutant threats. 2's Vanisher was always a second-stringer, but 3's introduction of The Blob (a corpulent, immovable mutant) was more permanent, and further perennials arrived in 4, with Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver introduced as Magneto's henchmen. This is the most memorable of the early issues, packing a lot into twenty-three pages under a fabulous cover of Magneto and Co. looming over the X-Men. The Mastermind also débuted that issue and later prompted one of the most powerful stories of the 1970s revived team. Lee and Kirby were having fun here, and even the unsympathetic inking of Paul Reinman (1-5) couldn't dull the edge. Chic Stone, from 6, was a superior inker and remained until Kirby's final fling at full pencils in 11. 12 has the bizarre art combination of Alex Toth pencilling Kirby layouts, and Werner Roth did the same between 13 and 17 (under the alias of Jay Gavin) before pencilling to 49. The Juggernaut was introduced in 12, but a daft moment of plotting established him as Professor X's half-brother, a fact generally forgotten these days. The X-Men's other great recurring foes, the Sentinels, arrived in 14-16. Fearing mutant supremacy (after all, there were over a dozen of them at Marvel by that time), giant robots were constructed to protect humans, but proved too zealous in deciding that the best way to achieve this was to subjugate humanity. Roy Thomas arrived as writer with 20, one issue after Lee had created The Mimic in a memorable finale. All these issues are available in two hardcover editions of *Marvel Masterworks*, with a cheaper *Essential Uncanny X-Men* covering 1-24.

Thomas moved the plot on with less reliance on Magneto (eight villainous appearances in 1-19), moved the team out of the school more often, and produced a readable run to 39. Memorable issues included a battle with an endearing set of loser villains in 22-23, the début of the Banshee in 28, a subterranean romp in 34 and the very silly Mekano in 36. Thomas' ongoing plot concerned the foreboding Factor Three. Despite noting they sounded like a toothpaste, they were a threat, 39's disappointing conclusion until Professor X dies in 42, but don't worry, he doesn't really, it's all explained away in 65, but in 1967 this was a daring move and the issue retains a poignancy. Without the Professor the X-Men were aimless, and without Roy Thomas *X-Men* became gormless, as Gary

Friedrich, then Arnold Drake, turned in some dreadful efforts. 50 and 51 have noteworthy Jim Steranko art on a stupid story, while Barry Smith's first comic is 53, and boy, does it show. Between 39 and 56 only the back-up strips are of note, detailing the origins of the individual X-Men.

Thomas returned with 55, in the company of Neal Adams from 56, whose illustrative style and dynamic layouts resulted in a startlingly drawn run, on which Tom Palmer's smooth inking was a factor. Cyclops' brother Havok had been introduced in 54, also a mutant and unsure of how to cope with his blossoming power. Thomas and Adams showed the way in 57-59, with the frightening return of the Sentinels, this time looking invincible, and the desperate conclusion is excellent. It's truncated for republication in *Giant-Size X-Men* 2. 60-61 introduce Sauron, a villainous pterodactyl who's proved surprisingly long-lasting. It runs into 62's adventure in Ka-Zar's Savage Land, and the début of mutants genetically engineered by an old foe in 63. The Adams issues have been collected, but re-coloured in inferior fashion. Sunfire arrives in 64, drawn by Don Heck, and 65 is the last Adams *X-Men*, and even he can't save a daft Denny O'Neil story returning Professor X. The first-run finale in 66 is a surprisingly low-key battle with the Hulk, after which the title reprinted 12-45 until 93, two stories per issue until 72 permitting the otherwise impossible mathematics. In the meantime the X-Men were kept alive with odd guest slots (*Marvel Team-Up* 4, *Captain America* 172-175), while the Beast was transformed in *Amazing Adventures* 11-16.

The X-Men re-emerged in 1975, as comics' most successful makeover. *Giant-Size X-Men* 1, written by Len Wein with art by Dave Cockrum, told the story of the original team's disappearance and the efforts of a new team gathered to rescue them. The new X-Men retained the feel of a group of outsiders who found friendship and understanding with each other. The originals had been teenagers struggling to understand their mutant powers; the new team added a multiracial, multinational tilt to remind us even more that, at its core, X-Men has always been about intolerance towards those who are different. Of the newcomers, Wolverine (introduced in Hulk 181) became one of Marvel's most popular characters, and Storm and Nightcrawler still appear regularly.

After Giant-Size 1, the *X-Men* title switches back to new material with 94, and Wein and Cockrum guide it through the next two issues, with Chris Claremont co-plotting 95 and writing 96-279, an unbroken run over sixteen years. The early part of 94 deals with the departure of three original X-Men, reducing the cast from battalion levels, although everyone returns sooner or later. Claremont's first solo story, deals with Cyclops' remorse at the death of a team-mate in 95, starting as Claremont means to go on, with an emphasis on angst and soul-searching that was to become his trademark. The Cockrum and Claremont issues are good, solid superhero fare, and a little overlooked in the wake of what followed. In the landmark 100, returning from a mission on the moon, Jean Grey (then still Marvel Girl) apparently sacrifices her life to save her friends, piloting their crippled shuttle back to Earth through terrible radiation. In 101, though, she's revived as Phoenix, a being with phenomenal psychic powers, signalling the beginning of 'The Phoenix Saga'. As the team subsequently battle the alien Imperial Guard and then Magneto, it becomes apparent that the resurrection has turned Jean into something more godlike than human. The addition of John Byrne on art from 108 completes the *X-Men*'s creative team supreme, and for the next thirty issues there's hardly time to pause to catch your breath. After defeating Magneto, the team head to the Savage Land for a run-in with Sauron and Ka-Zar, then take on Moses Magnum (119, the only forgettable issue of this period), Alpha Flight, Arcade and, in 125, Mastermind. By now, Jean is effortlessly rearranging molecules of her costume to street clothes, holding back the forces of volcanoes, and wiping the floor with the best any villain has to throw at her. Mastermind, like Jean a telepath, starts playing with her mind. Unfortunately, it's at the same time that she's beginning to become overwhelmed by her powers, and the combination unbalances her completely. 129-137*, 'The Dark Phoenix Saga', are the peak of an incredible run, if not the best superhero comics ever produced. Jean fights to control her sanity, but becomes more addicted to the destructive nature of her powers until, having destroyed whole solar systems for thrills, she takes the only way out – suicide, while she still has enough lucidity to do it. The power of these issues, intermixed with the soap-opera aspects that were also sending the popularity sky high, is incredible.

After this, the storyline leads almost immediately into 'Days of Future Past' (141-142*), in which the body of the team's youngest member, Kitty Pryde, is taken over by the mind of her adult self from a nightmarish future. Despite all their best efforts since, the X-Men are no closer to preventing it now than they were then. This began the convoluted time-travel that still dogs the *X-Men*'s continuity today, but the story is excellent. Byrne leaves with 143's *Alien* pastiche, and Cockrum returns for another more than creditable run. The team face a constant stream of foes, including returns from old enemies Arcade, Magneto, and the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, but it's already apparent that John Byrne's influence on the plots is going to be sorely missed.

The next regular penciller is Paul Smith from 165. The tempo relaxes slightly from all-action adventures, as Claremont focuses more on the characters. There's an adventure with the Morlocks, deformed mutants who live in the New York sewers, the addition of former villain Rogue to the team, and the introduction of Madelyne Prior, Cyclops' amnesiac lover, who looks remarkably like the late Ms Grey. The is-she-isn't-she-Jean Grey plot occupies 171-175*, leading to a well-executed conclusion and wedding. Claremont then teams up with John Romita Jr from 176 to 212. While remaining considerably above average during this period, only a few fill-in issues by Barry Windsor-Smith (186,198 and 205) match the Claremont/Byrne days. The major subplot at this time is the introduction of Rachel Summers, the 'Days of Future Past' timeline's daughter of Scott Summers, and her efforts to prevent her world coming about. 201, in which Cyclops fights Storm for the leadership of the X-Men, is also very good.

By the time Romita leaves, however, it's clear that Claremont is growing bored. The art is handled by a succession of big-name, but irregular, pencillers, until Marc Silvestri comes on board with 220, at which point *X-Men* regains a sense of direction. Claremont's storylines start to ramble too much, though, despite some good new ideas including the anti-mutant island of Genosha and the emergence of Mr Sinister as a major villain. At this period the comic was bi-weekly and this frequency may have overstretched the creative team. *X-Men* picks up again with the introduction of penciller Jim Lee, again suggesting that Claremont works better with an artist who makes major contributions to the plot. Lee draws 248 and 256-258, then regularly from 267, at which point his contribution is most easily noticeable, as the issues brim with an enthusiasm lacking in Silvestri's. By 274, a superb tale of Rogue and Magneto in the Savage Land, Lee is taking the plotting credits, with Claremont relegated to scripter. Lee's run is unfortunately short as, following 277, he switched to the new adjectiveless *X-Men*, and after two further collaborations with others Claremont departed after nearly two hundred issues.

Artist Whilce Portacio moves the comic back to all-out action from 280, sometimes assisted on the plots by Lee and the scripts by John Byrne. Trevor Fitzroy and Shinobi Shaw are developed as new major villains, and the time-travelling Bishop is introduced in 281-284*. Around the mid-280s, Scott Lobdell joined the creative team, initially scripting Portacio's plots, then as writer returning a soap-opera feel. When Portacio left with 292, Lobdell continued, and the issues around the wedding of Cyclops and (the long since resurrected) Phoenix are particularly good. Joe Madureira first pencils 313 before becoming regular penciller with 325. His exaggerated, but open, style would make him a fan favourite, and once he's over his storytelling difficulties he's the best regular artist the title has seen for some while. The conclusion to the 'Onslaught' story in 337 had ramifications throughout the Marvel Universe, in the X-Men's case separating them from guiding light Professor X. A long-running subplot about Gambit's past is settled in 350, Lobdell and Madureira's finale, after which Steven T. Seagle writes. He provided too many quiet moments, exemplified by 351's good story of an outed mutant doctor adapting to the changes in her life, and not enough crescendos. Seagle is paired with stunning art by Chris Bachalo and Tim Townsend from 353. Long-time fans should enjoy the original team getting away from it all in 356-357, Rogue's disenchantment is dealt with in 359, and 360 begins a story returning Professor X with plenty of surprises along the way. Both Seagle and Bachalo depart with 365 having served up a satisfying run within limitations. At this point not buying the adjectiveless *X-Men*, and often other related titles, meant gaps in the stories, a cynical exploitation of a captive audience. During the subsequent better run plotted by Alan Davis, with most issues well drawn by Adam Kubert, all distinctions between the two *X-Men* comics vanished, with stories crossing between them continually. For those not concerned with having the original comics, this period is best read in the UK's *Essential X-Men* reprint title, printed on superior paper and featuring three stories per issue. Davis first returned Magneto, then has the X-Men encounter alien shapeshifter versions of familiar Marvel heroes, before setting up conflict between assorted X-Men in the exciting 375. Thereafter he returns one of their most powerful enemies in an ultimately unsatisfying story with tragic consequences. Of course, in the X-Men's world a tragedy is nothing a miniseries and a special or two can't set right.

Claremont is back from 381 for a disappointingly dull and introspective few issues, only perked up by the arrival of new penciller Salvador Larocca in 387. There follow two deaths. A character long associated with Claremont goes pointlessly in 390 (courtesy of Scott Lobdell) while in 388 a character he created succumbs to a more poignant demise, well followed-up in 389, the best issue of Claremont's second run. After some strange new X-Men in 392 there was a highly publicised re-tooling, which starts decently enough with Jean Grey and Wolverine exploring long-dormant feelings in 394. Thereafter it leaves the rails with extraordinary rapidity. New artist Ian Churchill bails two issues later, leaving the art alternating between the contrasting styles of Ron Garney and Sean Phillips, writer Joe Casey stretches slim plots to snapping point, and the most positive aspect is that readers no longer had to buy both *X-Men* comics for a complete story. Particularly dull is 400, kindly described as a failed experiment, with Eddie Campbell and Ashley Wood surprising choices among six artists, and Casey's best overall is his finale in 408-409. It's a character study offering a few ethical dilemmas and a novel way of dealing with an old villain. The idea of a mutant brothel in 399 is also interesting, but goes nowhere. Writer Chuck Austen's arrival with 410 provided the best story seen here in some years, viewing a crisis through novice eyes, in this case a set-upon teenager joining the school thrown into the middle of a battle between the X-Men and Juggernaut. Well drawn by Garney, the dialogue is sharp and there's a long absent exuberancee. 414 is even better, and with the companion title currently at a creative peak, the future for *X-Men* looks bright.

There have been twenty-five *Uncanny X-Men* annuals, numbered to 18, then designated by year from 1995, missing 2002. Despite top quality art for many years, few match the best of the regular title. George Pérez draws a sprightly annual 3 set on the world of faux-barbarian Arkon, and Art Adams' annual 9 teaming the X-Men and their protogées The New Mutants still reads well. He also illustrates 10, introducing Longshot, 12 and 14, the latter the first appearance of Gambit and Claremont's last annual, while Alan Davis pencils 11's insight into the X-Men's dreams. Notable artists drawing less notable scripts include Jae Lee on 16, Jason Pearson on 17 (collected with 3 and 10 as 'Danger Room Battle Archives') and Bryan Hitch on *Uncanny X-Men '95*. Beware Duncan Rouleau's grotesque distortions on '97, while 2000 is the best of the recent annuals, although stretching a slim story about an emerging mutant a long way. Mention should also be made of the wretched, wretched Ashley Wood art on the 2001 annual. All flat technique with no storytelling, the word balloons have more depth. What were they thinking?

This title has been better served than almost any other by reprints, with almost any noteworthy story (and vast quantities of tosh) available. Three deluxe *Marvel Masterworks* volumes cover *Giant-Size* 1 and 94-120, while that run is also available as *Essential X-Men* volume 1, with three further volumes reprinting up to 176 and annuals 3-6.~WJ/JC

Recommended: 4, 14-16, 28, 58, 59, 62, 63, 97-101, 109, 111-114, 120, 121, 129-137, 141, 142, 175, 179, 186, 198, 201, 268, 274

X-MEN ADVENTURES

Marvel: *Series one 15 issues 1992-1994, series two 13 issues 1994-1995, series three 13 issues 1995-1996, series four 12 issues (Adventures of the X-Men) 1996-1997*

Adaptations of animated TV series episodes with a variety of artists, retrofitted and pared down for the attention deficient TV audiences. Initially, the stories are often more accessible than their source material, but by the middle of series two pressure to introduce more of the character back catalogue to the TV fans (and their attendant action figures to the toy shelves) had grown. The result was that the show and its comic adaptation became as bogged down and wearisome as the real thing. Completists only~WW

X-MEN Chronicles

Marvel: *2 issues 1995*

Bookends for the 'Age of Apocalypse' story occupying many *X-Men*-related titles in 1995. The past is altered, resulting in alternative groupings of Marvel's mutant teams. The first issue has Magneto leading a team of X-Men's first mission, and the second has the same, now far more experienced, team in an altogether better tale of love and superhero fights. That's not saying much, mind.~FP

X-MEN: EVOLUTION

Marvel: *9 issue limited series 2002*

Based on the animated *X-Men*, this is the origin of the team, starting with Professor X, Wolverine and Storm in 1 and continuing until there's a whole troupe by 4. At that point the emphasis shifts to the X-Men mixing with the teens at the local high school. There's interesting art with Udon Studios producing manga style cartoon figures laid over computer generated backgrounds. Aimed at the younger end of the X-Men fanbase, it's a job well done. The best issue is 5, with Rogue tempted.~WJ

X-MEN: The Hidden Years

Marvel: *22 issues 1999-2001*

John Byrne's aim here was to produce substitute issues of *Uncanny X-Men* 67-93, providing original stories within the established continuity to replace the reprints in those issues, an idea he first suggested in the early 1980s.

It starts with Professor X dispatching the team to ascertain Magento's fate after *Uncanny X-Men* 63 in the Savage Land. Subplots include a bickering love triangle involving Iceman, Havok and the green haired Lorna Dane (later Polaris). The Beast is rescued by a "goddess" called Ororo, Marvel Girl's phoenix-like powers begin to manifest in 9, and the Angel experiences a personal tragedy in 15. Byrne can be a good writer, and his pencils shine under the inks of Tom Palmer. Best of all, he knows how to tell a story. He includes plenty of guest stars, and villains include the Sentinels, Kraven the Hunter and the Mole Man, and his final story incorporates the events in *Fantastic Four* 102 involving Magneto and the invasion of the surface world by Namor, the Sub-Mariner. Everything slots nicely into continuity, and this was only cancelled as uncompatible with the planned revamp of other X-Men titles. A shame, as it was a readable comic.~HY

X-MEN: THE MANGA

Marvel: *26 issues 1998-1999*

A tag-team of various Japanese creators produce a series of mutant misadventures roughly echoing the continuity of the *X-Men* animated series, beginning with Jubilee's abduction by Sentinels and her subsequent induction into the team. At least, unlike the companion *Spider-Man* title, this features the 'real' X-Men rather than re-casting the heroes as Orientals, but that's its sole and slender merit. The stories remain warmed-over re-introductions of established characters and themes, and it's both inferior mutant fodder and inferior manga.~HS

X-MEN Miniseries and One-shots

Marvel: *Graphic novel ('God Loves, Man Kills') 1982, one-shot (The Uncanny X-Men and The New Teen Titans) 1982, one-shot ('Special Edition') 1983, 4 issue miniseries (The X-Men and The Micronauts) 1984, one-shot ('Heroes For Hope') 1985, 2 issue microseries (X-Men and Alpha Flight) 1985-1986*, 4 issue miniseries (vs. The Avengers) 1987, one-shot (vs. Dracula) 1993, 4 issue miniseries ('Archives') 1995, one-shot ('Alpha') 1995, one-shot ('Omega') 1995, one-shot ('Prime') 1995, one-shot ('Rarities') 1995, 2 issue microseries ('Chronicles') 1995, 4 issue miniseries (Amazing...) 1995, 4 issue miniseries (Astonishing...) 1995, one-shot ('vs. Exiles') 1995, 7 issue limited series ('Archives') 1995-1996, 2 issue microseries (X-Men & ClanDestine) 1996, one-shot ('Earthfall') 1996, one-shot ('Firsts') 1996, one-shot ('Road To Onslaught') 1996, one-shot ('Onslaught') 1996, 2 issue microseries ('Brood: Day of Wrath') 1996, one-shot ('Wrath of Apocalypse') 1996, 2 issue microseries ('Lost Tales') 1997, 2 issue microseries ('X-Men/Alpha Flight') 1998, one-shot (X-Men/Alpha Flight: 'The Gift') 1998, 4 issue miniseries ('Liberators') 1998-1999, one-shot ('Magneto War') 1999, 3 issue miniseries ('The Astonishing X-Men') 1999, 3 issue miniseries ('True Friends') 1999, 6 issue miniseries ('Children of the Atom') 2000, 5 issue miniseries ('Black Sun') 2000, 4 issue miniseries ('The Hellfire Club') 2000, one-shot ('Declassified') 2000, one-shot ('Codename: X-Men') 2000, one-shot ('Movie Adaptation') 2000*, one-shot ('The Movie Prequel: Magneto') 2000, one-shot ('The Movie Prequel: Rogue') 2000, one-shot ('The Movie Prequel: Wolverine') 2000, 5 issue miniseries ('Forever') 2001, 4 issue miniseries ('Savage Land') 2001*

'God Loves, Man Kills' was the fifth of Marvel's graphic novel series, but has since been reprinted at comic size. It's Chris Claremont's sharpest definition of the role of the X-Men in a world prejudiced and scared of mutants, well illustrated by Brent Anderson. The 'Heroes for Hope' charity comic, is a jumble of good intentions, but poor comics. 1980s teaming with The New Teen Titans by Claremont and Walt Simonson makes good use of both teams, without appearing too crowded. They meet a Phoenix resurrected by Darkseid in order to turn Earth into another Apokolips, and it's Simonson on top form. The lamentable team-up with the Exiles has Juggernaut a member of the Exiles and an X-Men appearance seemingly inevitable.

The team-ups with the Micronauts and Avengers are insipid affairs, with too much plot and too little characterisation. On the other hand, the X-Men have always worked well Alpha Flight. The first, by Claremont and Paul Smith concerns a magical threat, the second, by Ben Raab and John Cassaday, the theft of Vindicator's technology by Baron Strucker and Alpha Flight's rescue of the X-Men after their capture. Both are visually enjoyable, but the latter's emphasis on Vindicator's emotions and the shorthand narrative style are wearing. 'The Gift' reprints the first of these miniseries. *X-Men & ClanDestine* is primarily a showcase for the latter group, as cosmic demon manipulates the two teams. Alan Davis puts on a good show artistically, but it's difficult to care about what's happening in his script.

X-Men titles were suspended during the 'Age of Apocalypse' involving an alternate timeline in which Professor Xavier is killed. Magneto continues his work, but Apocalypse becomes master of the world, annihilating humanity and rebel mutants alike. Different groupings of X-Men were involved in a likeable set of comics, with some interesting and entertaining stories. *Astonishing X-Men*, by Scott Lobdell and Joe Madureira focused on the mutants led by Magneto, his wife Rogue and their child. *The Amazing X-Men*, by Fabian Nicieza and Andy Kubert has Storm and Quicksilver among others, facing the threat of Apocalypse's religious fanatics. Both are linked by common plot-threads, though the attitudes of the heroes are different, with Rogue and Magneto more positive about success. Within the same event, 'Chronicles' covers turning points leading to the Age of Apocalypse, the opening battle and the death of the Scarlet Witch (1) and the well-portrayed, romantic triangle of Rogue, Magneto and Gambit (2). The entire saga is book-ended by the 'Alpha' and 'Omega' one-shots, and 'Prime' followed in its wake, ostensibly a young mutant's attempt to reach the X-Men, but really an excuse to preview storylines from upcoming comics. Bryan Hitch and Gary Frank are among seven different pencillers. 'Road to Onslaught' and 'Onslaught' are parts of another major event, in which the personification of the combined evil in Professor X and Magneto threatened to destroy the world, until stopped by the sacrifice of the non-mutant Marvel characters (though Spider-Man must have been on holiday at the time). The actual assault on Onslaught makes no sense, and the whole premise was spectacularly unsatisfactory.

In John Ostrander and Hitch's 'Brood: Day of Wrath', the Brood Empress send assassins to Earth to eliminate a Brood Queen, who's somehow found the strength to resist the Empress' will, after infecting many of the members of her husband's ministry. A team of X-Men arrive to help her (or kill her, in Wolverine's case), and the series becomes one long fight, occasionally interrupted, disturbingly, by some cloyingly moralistic dialogue. 'Liberators' is the tale of Wolverine, Colossus and Nightcrawler travelling to a Russian detention camp. Joe Harris attempts to widen his tale around the morality of such places and the artwork's by Phil Jimenez, but this is a disjointed, dull affair. 'The Magneto War', by Davis and Nicieza with artwork by Lee Weeks, prefaces the storyline of the same name beginning in *Uncanny X-Men* 366, as the Acolytes search for information about Magneto's whereabouts. In much the same way, the sole purpose of The *Astonishing X-Men* (1999 version), appears to be to kill Wolverine. It's a terribly scripted story (by Howard Mackie) about a new manmade race and a very powerful character called Death, whose origin and identity remain unexplained. 'True Friends' is better, and more offbeat, featuring Shadowcat and Phoenix (Rachel Summers), travelling back in time to 1936 Scotland. There they team up with a pre-Wolverine Logan, Shadowcat falls in love and Nazis in league with Amahl Farouk are plotting the downfall of the English monarchy. It's good, old-fashioned adventure somewhat burdened by Claremont's moralising.

'Children of the Atom' begins well, as a first-time telling of how Professor Xavier established a school for mutants, exploring, in more detail than before, the lives of the founder members before they joined the X-Men. It's competently written by Joe Casey, who avoids too much tampering with what's already been revealed, but beautifully drawn by Steve Rude, at least for 1-3. Thereafter, Paul Smith (4) and Essad Ribic (5, 6) seem poor in comparison, not helped by rougher inking. 'Black Sun', written by Claremont (with occasional help from Roy Thomas of all people), concerns the demon Belasco's support for an invasion of Earth by the N'Garai. Various X-Men try to stop them both. This is a dull idea, and even Thomas Derenick gives up, leaving 3-5 to other artists. 'The Hellfire Club' is told as the biography of the Shaw family through the investigations of journalist, Irene Merryweather. It begins in Salem, 1692 with Hiram Shaw trying to prevent his son's liaison with Abigail Harkness. Hiram happens to be Sorcerer Supreme at the time so his attitude to witches is somewhat hypocritical, but leads to his descendant's position as head of the X-Men's archenemies regardless. Charlie Adlard's artwork works well, but the later issues are rather lifeless lists of events. 'Declassified' is little more than pin-ups, having a flimsy story about misleading scenes of past events interspersed with single-page character profiles of current X-Men. A deliberately unpleasant and ugly comic is *Codename: X-Men*, designed to be read as if published by the 'Marvels Comics' company within the Marvel Universe. Mark Millar and Duncan Fegredo provide a distorted view of the X-Men with some forming a government-sponsored suicide squad, others working for master terrorist Doctor Strange (of all people).

Marvel published a substandard adaptation of the *X-Men* film and three prequels. 'Magneto', by Joe Pruett and Mark Texeira, is a powerful story about the friendship between

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* Available in a collected edition

Xavier and Magneto that led to them creating the school for mutants together, before their ideologies clashed. Magneto wants to enforce tolerance, Xavier to overcome intolerance through teaching. It's easy here to see why Magneto is so popular a character – readers want to believe that Xavier is right, but think that Magneto is. 'Rogue' has her captured by genetic researchers and meeting others like herself for the first time before they team up to escape (though this contradicts her perceived knowledge in the film). 'Wolverine' sees him protecting a woman with amnesia from the police and the Yakuza, with guest villain, the Silver Samurai. All are let down by overly dark colour and printing. Beware the 'Movie Adaptation' collection, which reprints *Uncanny X-Men* (112, 113, 171) and *Marvel Comics Presents* (72-75) rather than the movie prequels.

In 'Forever', a sentient space ship projects Jean Grey, Iceman, Mystique, the Toad and Juggernaut back into their own past lives, in order to protect the future development of mankind. It seems they're the keys to human evolution and this experience should change them all for the better. Written by Nicieza and attractively drawn by Kevin Maguire, it's an effective examination of each character's motivations, with a twist at the end over who's been manipulating whom. Another series that's largely attractively drawn (by Kevin Sharpe), Claremont's 'Savage Land' is nevertheless a stunningly banal story.

The remaining titles contain reprints as follows: 'Archives' (1995) of *New Mutants* 26-28 and *X-Men* 161; 'Archives' (1995-1996) of *Captain Britain* strips by Alan Moore and Davis from titles published by Marvel UK; 'Earthfall' of the first Brood storyline; 'Firsts' of *Avengers Annual* 10, *Hulk* 181, and *X-Men* 221 and 266, the first appearances of Rogue, Wolverine, Mr Sinister and Gambit; 'Lost Tales' of backups from *Classic X-Men*; 'Rarities' of Bizarre Adventures 27 (coloured), *Classic X-Men* 1, *Marvel Fanfare* 40, *Amazing Adult Fantasy* 14 (Stan Lee and Steve Ditko prototype mutant story from 1962) and a Lobdell and Chris Bachalo promotional strip for *Generation X*; 'Special Edition' of *Giant-Size X-Men* 1; 'vs. Dracula' of *X-Men Annual* 6 and 'Wrath of Apocalypse' of *X-Factor* 65-68.~NF

Recommended: 'God Loves, Man Kills', *The Uncanny X-Men and The New Teen Titans*

X-MEN: THE EARLY YEARS

Marvel: *17 issues 1994-1995*

Reprints the early issues of the 1960s X-Men, thoughtfully repackaged with often very lovely new covers, several by Adam Hughes. Cancelled, not because of poor sales, but solely to clear a schedule space for the trashy updating, *Professor X and The X-Men*. Philistines.~HS

X-MEN 2099

Marvel: *31 issues, 2 Specials 1993-1996*

In the far future a man named X'Ian dreams of a "Mutant Nation", where the genetically enhanced can live in peace, free from prosecution. He holds gatherings at which mutants congregate, hoping to mobilise them, but when one is broken up by the ruling élite, he and a select few of his followers become fugitives, searching for their Mutant Nation. Written by John Francis Moore, illustrated by the lacklustre Ron Lim, this series patches together a bunch of post-Apocalyptic science-fiction movie clichés competently, but without vitality. Early on, the series becomes diverted into endless fights with various other groups – the Freakshow, genetic barrel-scrapings; the Chosen, a twisted version of Xavier's original X-Men – and X'Ian's dream of a mutant nation fades further into the background, to be replaced by slugfest-of-the-month. Even the use of the hijacked X-Men name didn't prevent this title from sliding into deserved obscurity with the rest of the 2099 line.~HS

X-MEN UNLIMITED

Marvel: *40 issues + 1993 to date*

With woefully convoluted storylines in the regular *X-Men* titles, Marvel decided readers needed a giant-size comic that concentrated on just a few characters at a time. There's little of note in the early issues. Assorted creators write to formula and you're lucky if there isn't a committee drawing the results. The worst example is 6, which not only has Paul Smith credited with storyboards, but also lists four pencillers and seven inkers. Artistically, the best of these issues are by Liam Sharpe drawing the X-Men in space (5), and Val Semeiks inked by Bob McLeod illustrating the return of wizard Belasco (9). In 4, years after everyone guessed as much, Mystique is revealed as Nightcrawler's mother, but the best story from this period is 8, though stretched way too thin by the format. A young mutant comes to terms with his powers when they manifest at school and the X-Men then tell him he's got the Legacy Virus. Stories are self-contained to 24, and the artwork's stronger, but only the writing of Brian K. Vaughan in 22 reaches past the surface conflicts.

Joe Pruett becomes regular writer with 24, hamstrung by closer ties to other titles during his run. From here there's a backup strip in most issues, with the best being Doug Moench and Mark Texeira describing a preachy, anti-hunting Wolverine in 25 and Jimmy Palmiotti and Liam McCormack-Sharp doing a poor Frank Miller with their Deadpool strip in 28. From 30 creators not normally associated with Marvel or the X-Men play with the mutants, and issues contain at least two stories. Andi Watson's tale of three female members of Generation X in space is fun enough and engagingly drawn by Jim Mahfood, but could be any three characters. 31 has a good X-Man story by Steven Grant and Charlie Adlard, while Michael Golden and Brian Stelfreeze work on Jean Grey with Rogue and Cyclops respectively. 32 is something of a high point artistically, with a Dazzler biography by Will Pfeifer and Jill Thompson, Nightcrawler by Pruett and Mike Deodato and comedy from the Starjammers, by John Ostrander and Ian Gibson. Villains are spotlighted in 33 with well-drawn offerings from Esteban Maroto and Quique Alcatena. Sabretooth versus Jean Grey by John Smith and David Finch is another winner in 35, which also features smooth artwork from Amanda Conner and Kevin Maguire on strips by Palmiotti and Gail Simone respectively. More good artwork on thoughtful pieces comes in 36 with Ian Edginton and Joe Chiodo on Magneto, and Jeff Jensen and John Totleben on the Beast.

38 has Shadowcat grieving for Colossus while fighting bigotry (nothing like packing in as much as possible), though Greg Rucka and Darick Robertson do make this a sympathetic piece, without becoming too maudlin. Storm takes the spotlight in 39's three stories, the pick of which is Jason Pearson's conversation between Magneto and Storm after yet another funeral. 40 is another all-villain issue, but it's to be hoped that with the title becoming monthly from 39, some wider ranging plots and different emotional content will emerge.~NF

X-NATION 2099

Marvel: *6 issues 1996*

Despite having little connection with the modern-day X-Men, the magic 'X' designation made *X-Men 2099* the most popular of the 2099 titles, and this spun-off. X-Nation is Halo City, a haven for mutants. One recent arrival is prophesied to be the Mutant Messiah, who will alter the known world for good or bad, and to this end former X-Men (2099 variety, natch) member Cerebra bands a selection of teens to train them right and proper. This is the 2099 version of *Generation X*, written for an audience with a minimal attention span. There are plenty of scraps, lots of arguing between the cast and a big fight each issue, but behind it all there's hardly a plot to be located. In the end all comes down to a battle between youth and the eternally old. Nice Humberto Ramos art in 1-3, though.~WJ

X/1999

Viz: *6 issue miniseries 1995*, 8 Volumes 1996-2002*

Kamui Shiro returns to Tokyo after an absence of six years. His childhood girlfriend, Kotori, is having prophetic dreams about the end of the world and Kamui is attacked by super-powered strangers. The final battle to decide the fate of the world is about to start and Kamui must choose whether to join the Seven Seals (Dragons of Heaven) or the Seven Harbingers (Dragons of Earth). This is revealed slowly as the action scenes depict Tokyo being struck by earthquakes as representatives of the Seals and Harbingers gather, occasionally challenging each other to a fight, but with no decisive outcomes. Kamui's fateful decision is left to the eighth volume, at which point Viz had to halt publication. Created by Studio Clamp, the script is repetitive and slow moving, concentrating on the characterisation and romance, with occasional lapses into extreme violence. The artwork, meanwhile, is studied, elaborate and ornate, full of symbolism. The first volume reprints the miniseries, after which the story was continued in anime magazine *Animerica* and then in manga anthology, *Animerica Extra*.~NF

X-O Manowar

Valiant: *69 issues (0-67 – two number 50), 1 Yearbook 1992-1996, 2 issue microseries ('Heavy Metal') 1996*

X-O is Valiant's armoured hero, but the inventive twist characterising the initial Valiant cast has him as a Goth barbarian who inherits a 20th-century corporation, Orb Industries. Early issues had Aric adapting to his new existence, aided and manipulated by Ken Clarkson, and the best were 9-10, as Aric returned to 400 AD and Ken had his chance to take over the X-O armour. Other factions shared an interest in the armour: the Harbinger Foundation (4), the government (18-20), the Armorines (25) and the spider aliens who created it. The initial concept serves the series well as Aric was a sympathetic character in an interesting situation and the interplay between him, Clarkson and Orb's security chief Randy Cartier could carry a mundane plot. Jorge Gonzalez wrote most issues between 14 and 44, and they're almost all better-than-average superhero adventure despite artists generally lasting no more than five issues. The team of Rik Levins and Katherine Bollinger in 26-40 was the exception: their best issue was 30, with Aric requiring new armour.

Complications pertaining to that new armour arose in the two issue 50s, in which X-O underwent wholesale changes, leaving Aric in space from 51. This new direction was dull, with issues to 57 slim on plot, big on large panels and extended fight sequences, and readable in three minutes. The grimly distorted art of Bart Sears and, to a lesser extent, Andy Smith was ugly and unappealing. Keith Giffen's arrival with 60 to write all but the final issue was welcome. Plot and humanity once again come to the fore, and there were more surprises and horror than at any previous time during the run. Sadly, by then it was too late, except for the last spasm of 'Heavy Metal', which teams X-O with Iron Man in two number one issues, the second published by Marvel and reversing the billing. It's standard stuff issued to tie-in with a video game.~WJ

X-O Manowar

Acclaim: *21 issues 1996-1998*

X-O is completely reworked for the Acclaim reboot, all-purpose scientist Donovan Wylie now occupying the armour. Never less than good, Sean Chen warms up for *Iron Man* by pencilling 1-4. Never less than professional, writers Mark Waid and Brian Augustyn are coasting. With 7 Augustyn becomes sole writer, but despite solid art from Scot Eaton in most issues X-O is never compelling. The reason is Wylie. He's a smarmy egotist whose glib dialogue grates. The origins of this X-O armour are revealed in 12-14, the best Augustyn issues. A new logo signals the arrival of Dwayne McDuffie in 17, and the combination of his writing and Eaton inked by Don Hudson provide the best issues by far. McDuffie ups the intrigue, adroitly wraps up dull dangling plots, introduces some surprises and there's finally a feeling of new ideas filtering through. Again, cancellation was a shame.~WJ

XOMBI

DC/Milestone: *22 issues (0-21) 1993-1995*

Xombi is David Kim, a research scientist working on "the application of nanotechnology to biological regeneration". When he's fatally wounded his assistant saves his life by injecting him with technology that continually renews Kim's limbs and organs. Unable to die, our hero becomes a weirdness magnet for such villains as 4's "four stable boys of the apocalypse", Manuel Dexterity, a psychotic killer with a giant hand for a lower torso (7), a bizarre cult called the Beli Mah (7-10's 'School of Anguish'), and a race of subterranean man-eating monsters. As David learns more about his new immortality he seeks advice from such offbeat supporting characters as superheroine Catholic Girl and paranormal investigator Rabbi Sinnowitz.

The early issues are uncertain, but by 4 writer John Rozum and artist J.J. Birch had struck the right balance between absurdist humour, occult intrigue and superhero conflict. Birch's scratchy, stylised artwork takes some getting used to, but nicely accentuates the title's mysterious, menacing atmosphere. Although the storytelling is occasionally obscure for obscurity's sake, this rather neglected series compares with the best Vertigo titles, and should appeal to fans of Grant Morrison's run on *Doom Patrol*, a clear influence on Xombi's surreal storylines.~AL

Recommended: 7-10

X-PRESIDENTS

Random House: *1 Volume 2000*

This is based on the satirical animated cartoon segment shown on *Saturday Night Live*. Jimmy Carter, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan and George Bush Sr become brain-dead loser superheroes. Their enemies are a cartel of evildoers including Castro, Ghaddafi, Saddam, Noriega, Milosevic, Yeltzin, Amin, the Ayatollah, the brain of Pol Pot and Imelda Marcos. There's a scaly alien called Reptilio and Electrobrain too as well as their agent Barbara Walters. No wait, it'll get funny in a minute. Seventy-seven pages later you're still waiting. So whilst Nancy Reagan saying "My astrologer told me that you're a homo" is priceless it also gives an idea of the level of humour. This shouldn't be read as a comic: this is political satire dressed as a comic to downplay the rank xenophobia and prejudice that feeds it. The hilarious indicia at the foot of page one eclipses the entire comic.~SW

X-RAY COMICS

Amaze Ink: *3 issues 1998*

Mistakes swearing, drinking and taking drugs for being 'adult' and having a life. No surprises here then.~JC

X.S.E. Xavier's Security Enforcers

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1996-1997*

Introduced in *Uncanny X-Men* 282, Bishop arrived from the future knowing a 1990s X-Man was a traitor. His future, or past, so to speak, is explored for the first time here. The title sounds like a squad of club bouncers, and inspiration was in equally short supply for the content. Expository infodumps occur as Bishop and Shard discuss their history, and the revelations aren't worth wading through the morass from the usually reliable John Ostrander. The art begins badly and deteriorates from 2 as the Deodato Studios produce their regular crimes against human anatomy.~FP

X-STATIX

Marvel: *4 issues + 2002 to date*

Peter Milligan and Michael Allred continue the satire on media manipulation and marketing via exaggerated soap opera theatrics that they began in *X-Force*. The team go about their business whining, bickering about and exploiting profile, and now sniping at a new team more popular than they are. Unfortunately an almost omnipotent mutant awaits both teams, and the only person who might have tamed him died in *X-Force*. The creative approach stunned when introduced, but there is now a feeling of recycling. That, though, is what superheroes have done for decades, and this is a unique approach.~WJ

X-TERMINATORS

Marvel: *4 issue miniseries 1988-1989*

This is well-nigh incomprehensible since major events take place before, after and outside these issues. It draws on *New Mutants* stories, but the cast is mostly assembled from *X-Factor*. And what a cast it is; Skids, Rusty Collins, Rictor, Boom-Boom, Artie and Leech, a barrel-scraping's worth of third-stringers and no-hopers. They're joined by a plucky paraplegic computer geek with a mighty morphin' wheelchair. Oh dear me, Louise Simonson. Jon Bogdanove actually appears to be having fun at first, using a semi-cartoony style with some grace and charm. By 3 both are flagging, and 4 might just as well have had "For Christ's Sake get This Over With!" writ large on every page. Why not just ignore the whole lot at once?~HS

X-TREME X-MEN

Marvel: *19 issues + 2001 to date, 4 issue miniseries ('The Savage Land') 2001, 2 issue microseries (' X-Pose') 2002*

During the great X-relaunch of 2001, former *X-Men* writer Chris Claremont claimed the characters he regarded as most 'his': Psylocke, Storm, Rogue, Thunderbird, Bishop and the Beast. The heroes seek the Books of Destiny, a precognitive's diaries of mankind's future, to prevent them reaching the wrong hands. As this doesn't readily lend itself to cheesecake poses on the part of the female cast, the lengths to which artist Salvador Larocca has to go to achieve this are remarkable. The poses are also embarrassingly inept and inappropriate. Amid the extraneous gussets, the opening story concerns a man named Vargas. Perhaps an oblique reference to the classic pin-up artist, hence the sleazy poses? No, Claremont's not that clever. Vargas overpowers the team, killing one of them, but it's only a couple of issues before she's a spiritual presence to sundry team-mates.

New characters include Sage, a shapely thing whose primary ability appears to be the power to squat in high heels while thrusting her leather-clad arse at the audience, Lifeguard, an Aussie metamorphing chick, and her brother Helpless Lad. Or is it Hostage Boy? No, Slipstream, that's it. The Beast escapes to *New X-Men*, but Gambit joins to reprise the tired old "I love you but we can never touch" angst with Rogue. This shambling, flatulent slurry of a series shambles forward, laden down with badly-judged flashbacks diverting any grain of interest in the narrative. Characters tell each other things that they must already know, again and again and AGAIN; people talk endlessly about emotions, displaying none. It's like a parody of Claremont's worst excesses, but without any redeeming humour.

The Savage Land miniseries is a pointless battle in Ka-Zar's old stomping grounds. Rather better is 'X-Pose', where a team of investigative reporters pursue the X-Tremes in a tight storyline, deftly-co-ordinated with events in the other X-titles. Artist Arthur Ranson does a stellar job, despite seeming vaguely embarrassed when having to draw super-heroics. If regular issues were up to this standard, everyone's patience would be in much better shape.~HS

X-UNIVERSE

Marvel: *2 issue microseries 1995*

In 1995 X-titles were replaced with miniseries about an Earth where Professor X had died before forming the X-Men. This sidebar series concentrates on the non-Mutant characters of the Marvel Universe, specifically, Don Blake, Ben Grimm, Gwen Stacy, Tony Stark, Sue Storm and Victor Von Doom. Set against a doomsday backdrop, these ordinary people strive to thwart the seeming unstoppable forces of Apocalypse from overwhelming the last outposts of humanity. It's competent and enjoyable, with just enough backstory provided to assist casual readers without boring the diehard collector.~WW

Star Wars: X-WING ROGUE SQUADRON

Dark Horse: *35 issues 1996-1998**

The further adventures of film favourite Wedge Antilles, Luke Skywalker's old pal from Tatooine, as he leads the best fighter squad in the Rebel Alliance. Mostly four part story-arcs, the series suffers from having different creative teams and usually flounder in clichés and irrelevant detail. Exceptions include the top-flight thriller 'The Phantom Affair' (5-8) with Darko Macan and Edvin Biukovic delivering a pacy mystery as the squad are sent to the College world to protect a prototype super-weapon. Another success is 'Masquerade' (28-31) as Michael Stackpole, on full writing chores, and Drew Johnson and Gary Martin illustrating, play bluff and double-bluff. The regular cast plus Han Solo, Chewie and Leia all go to extraordinary lengths to test the veracity of a high ranking Imperial defector. Dedicated fans won't ever be disappointed but the casual reader should consider caution.~WW

Recommended: 5-8, 28-31

X X X Triple X

Dark Horse: *7 issue limited series 1994-1995**

Forty years from now multinational industries control countries, and Hans Nobel has escaped American martial law. Relocating to Amsterdam to discover how his grandfather died, and living with a bunch of squatters threatened by totalitarian police, he becomes the prime suspect in a series of assassinations of leading corporate figures. Arnold and Jacob Pander craft a complex and depressing saga owing more to European adventure strips than to traditional US comics. It moves at its own pace, encompassing over a dozen major characters, and by the climax the body-count is high. Mention should also be made of the excellent black and white tones of colourist Pamela Rambo. The title has little relevance, and salacious content is minimal, but you could do far worse looking for a thriller.~FP

Recommended: 1-7

XXX WOMEN

Eros: *4 issues 1993-1994**

The logical extension of comics' largely misogynistic attitude to female superheroes. The XXX Women are big-breasted, near naked superheroes who bang like the outhouse door. It's all presented in graphic detail, with artist José Fonteriz having such an appealing style that he later went on to work for Marvel.~WJ

XXXENOPHILE

Palliard Press: *11 issues 1989-1995**

Xxxenophile Books: *6 issues + (The Xxxenophile Collection) 1998 to date*

The most accurate description here is the paradoxical phrase "Wholesome pornography". Yes, writer/artist Phil Foglio turns out a hardcore nomping comic, replete with dangly, wobbly and sticky out bits, but mercifully free of the appalling artwork, repetitive storylines, and blatant misogyny that infests most 'erotic' comics. It's also clever, inventive, charming, funny, and, yes, sexy regardless of your gender, or gender preference. Each self-contained story (two or three in most issues) has different characters and settings, exotic, alien and mundane. Unlike most porno comics, this is a series you can actually read, and enjoy the hell out of.

The series originally ran ten issues, with 11 reprinting new stories produced for collections. The second series starts by repackaging the first, but 6 is an all-new tale of a band of fantasy adventurers. A spin-off, *Xxxenophile Presents*, ran five issues (1992-1995), with full length stories by Foglio's friends, but, although not without merit, it's not as inventive or entertaining as the original.~HS

Y: THE LAST MAN
DC/Vertigo: *4 issues + 2002 to date*

For reasons as yet unrevealed, almost every male creature on Earth dies. The statistics are provided, but suffice to say society is devastated worldwide. There are two survivors, though, Yorick Brown and his recently acquired Capuchin monkey. Yorick's existence makes him a target for various reasons, while his mother, once a minor state representative, is now the highest ranking elected official, and so President. It's nice to see artist Pia Guerra on a high profile comic, and from the double meaning of the title on down Brian Vaughan has crafted a page-turning thriller with a brilliant hook. It remains to be seen whether he can sustain the intrigue, but for the time being it's provided Vertigo's biggest hit in years, which is why a collection has been rush released.~WJ

Recommended: 1-4

Y*2*K The Comic
NEC: *One-shot 1999*

A set of silly suspense stories coupled with articles, all on the topic of what could occur if computers were not upgraded not to malfunction as the century turned. The hysteria provided a golden year for freelance computer technicians and an unintentionally hilarious cover here of man looking out of his office window at planes crashing, buildings aflame and falling, and even a man in a lime green suit tumbling past.~FP

YAHOO
Fantagraphics: *6 issues 1988-1992**

This debut series from acclaimed cartoonist Joe Sacco began rather shakily, with a competent but undistinguished collection of humour strips, such as 1's 'Cartoon Genius'. In 2 Sacco offered his disillusioned look at the music business from a roadie's perspective, and Yahoo began to profit from increasingly unusual storytelling and acute first-hand observation. 5 contains some of Sacco's most scathing, troubled musings on the Gulf War. Strangely, the *War Junkie* collection omits this issue, while finding time for 2's largely unconnected story. 6 is a very effective change of pace. Written by cartoonist Susan Catherine, 'Take It Off' is a fascinating, coolly objective account of Catherine's career as a stripper, meticulously illustrated by Sacco.~AL

Recommended: 6

YAKUZA
Eternity: *4 issues 1987*

When the head of American Hydraulics is murdered in Japan, his replacement, Norman Peters, finds himself embroiled in the shadowy world of the Yakuza, the Japanese mafia. Jackie Gilmartin, assistant to Peters' predecessor, finds herself in a strange alliance with Yoshio, son of the Oyabun and the chief suspect, as he wages a quiet war with his brother for the right to eventually succeed the gangster overlord. An intense, intriguing thriller written by C.J. Henderson and Peter Palmer that sadly never reached its conclusion, probably due to the poor artwork from Walt Martishius, Jimmy Palmiotti and Kevin Farrell.~WW

YANG
Charlton: *17 issues 1973-1976 (1-13), 1985-1986 (14-17)*

Tedious kung-fu, not even bothering to hide the fact it borrows heavily from the David Carradine TV series that mined the same old Western ideas so much better. Dull scripts from Joe Gill combined with dull art from Warren Sattler make it amazing that anybody would buy the series in the first place, never mind four reprint issues ten years on.~FP

YARN MAN
Kitchen Sink: *One-shot 1989*

This is actually part of Don Simpson's continuing *Megaton Man*. It follows *Megaton Man Meets The Uncategorizable X+Thems* one-shot with a tale that includes Yarn Man (Ms Megaton Man's boyfriend) rather than stars him. There are some good laughs with the Origin Legion, who meet to retell their origins (though they save the best stories for the Secret Origin Legion), and Pammy's novel that's really about Megaton Man but no one notices. Fun but not essential.~NF

YEAH!
DC/Homage: *9 issues 1999-2000*

Krazy, Honey and Woo Woo are Yeah!, the most popular band in the universe – except at home on Earth. The series deals with their off-world tours, on-again-off-again manager, Crusty, rival Miss Hellraiser, boy band the Snobs, an origin (4-5), Woo Woo being courted by Hobo Cappiletto, leader of the most popular band on Earth (6-7), a war in space (8) and some alien rivals called !Heay. All of this knowing, light-hearted fun, parody and satire is brought to you by writer Peter Bagge and artist Gilbert Hernandez. There's a lot to enjoy here.~NF

Recommended: 1-9

YELLOW DOG
Print Mint: *22 issues (1-8, 9/10, 11/12, 13/14, 15-25) 1968-1973*

One of the oldest and longest-running underground titles (bettered only by *Weirdo*), *Yellow Dog* started life as an underground newspaper before becoming a regular-sized publication with the combination issue 13/14. Despite some nice Robert Crumb art, the earliest issues were very insubstantial, consisting largely of dope-oriented vignettes and scatological humour. Issues from 7 up were considerably better, although still with a fair proportion of filler material each issue. Highlights included Gilbert Shelton's Freak Brothers (7-10), Crumb's Mr Natural (8) and some great art from Robert Williams (7, 9/10), Kim Deitch (9/10) and Skip Williamson (11/12).

The first comic-sized issue was the best of the run, containing substantial strips by Crumb and S. Clay Wilson, and a nice Nard'n'Pat story from Jay Lynch. After this the title increasingly came to be seen as a showcase for new talent, and again, most issues were patchy, although there was still a lot to admire. Greg Irons developed from a psychedelic artist into a cartoonist with some bite, and this is reflected in his fine strips in 13/14 and 17-20. Other notable contributors were Justin Green (15, 19, 21, 22), Trina Robbins (19, 20, 23, 25) and Bill Griffith (18-20). Young cartoonists Bob Armstrong (23) and Howard Cruse (24) also got their breaks in *Yellow Dog*, though both were to progress to greater things.~DAR

Recommended: 13/14

YIKES
Steve Weissman: *4 issues 1994-1995*
Alternative Press: *2 issues 1997-1998*

Yikes is lots of stories about kids, whether they be Li'l Bloody, Kid Medusa, X-Ray Spence, The Pullapart Boy or Dead Boy (who gets eaten by a dinosaur). Parodying *Caspar* and *Peanuts*, amongst others, the humour's sharp and black. The Alternative Press scripts are more adventurous, particularly the extended 'A Hayride with Dracula' in 2. The pencils owe much to Daniel Clowes and the inking style is a mixture of old (Eisner, Wood) and new (Burns, Ware), but the combination is distinctive and makes Weissman a figure to watch.~NF

Recommended: Weissman 1-4, Alternative 1-2

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*Available in a collected edition

YOUNG ALL STARS

DC: *31 issues 1987-1989*

With *Crisis on Infinite Earths* rewriting DC's entire character continuity, the meticulous work Roy Thomas had been doing patching up the history of DC's heroes in *All-Star Squadron* came to an abrupt end. Thomas, however, persuaded DC to let him create a new team with adventures set in World War II that wouldn't clash with their revised history, scripting the whole series with his wife Dann. This team consisted of Arn 'Iron' Munro, Tsunami, Flying Fox, Neptune Perkins, Fury and Dyno-Mite. From the start they are presented as the Junior All-Stars, propaganda vehicles whose exploits were meant to appeal to the hearts of Americans during the war. However, the first storyline in 1-6 is actually condemnatory of the camps set up to house Japanese Americans during World War II (Tsunami included).

10 and 11 feature a retelling of Philip Wylie's 1930 novel *Gladiator*, the story of 'Superman' Hugo Danner that is widely credited with establishing the concept of superhumans. Thomas only puts a foot wrong when he brings in stranded aliens (being used by evil Nazis in the long 'Dzyan Inheritance' plotline in 16-19). The 1940s Atom turns up in 'Atom And Evil' in 21-25 in preparation for an all-hero slugfest (28-31) in which the whole of the All-Star Squadron join the Young All-Stars to battle the Nazis.

Artistically the series started badly, with Michael Bair, Brian Murray and Howard Simpson alternating 1-14. Ron Harris turned up with 19, becoming the regular penciller. Inker Malcolm Jones III did his best to deal with a number of disparate styles but the comic suffered from a lack of visual coherency. *Young All-Stars* is full of good characters, but it's overwritten, looks rushed and uncared-for, and is, ultimately, too much like hard work.~NF

YOUNG CYNICS CLUB

Dark Horse: *1 issue 1993*

Cold story of a group of teenagers facing up to leaving home, getting jobs and generally living in the real world, the one in which they'll become insurance clerks, not famous writers. Glenn Wong's script is fluid and his art is clean and confident, but somehow it fails to engage your emotions. It's just too drab and realistic, with no peaks and troughs to the story.~FJ

YOUNG DEATH the Boyhood of a Superfiend

*Fleetway/Quality: 3 issue miniseries 1991**

As seen in several battles with Judge Dredd, Judge Death is an other-dimensional undead fiend whose solution to the problem of crime on Earth is to wipe out humanity. No humans = no crime = perfect world. This warped agenda is extrapolated as Death relates his childhood, youth and transformation to a crass tabloid journalist, along the way also explaining his acolytes and companions. It's both terrifying and thrilling, and writer John Wagner also has the black-humour button pushed to the max, particularly with a great dentist scene in 2. After an unsuccessful campaign, Death is in hiding, lodging with a half-blind old landlady ("If you don't eat you'll shrivel away to nothing"), and there's suitably dark and gloomy art from a débuting Peter Doherty.~FP

Recommended: 1-3

YOUNG HERO

AC: *2 issues 1990*

For fifteen years from 1941 Charles Biro wrote stories of kid gang The Little Wise Guys for *Daredevil Comics*, well drawn by Norm Maurer and William Overgard for the most part. Hard to come by in their original printing, these issues each reprint two stories from the prime early 1950s period, by which time they'd ousted Daredevil from his own title. While somewhat dated, the quality of the plot and art remain high, although the attempt to revive Daredevil as Reddevil in 2 is misguided.~FP

YOUNG HEROES IN LOVE

DC: *18 issues (1-17, 1,000,000) 1997-1998*

United by the mysterious telekinetic, Hard Drive, several fledgling super-heroes are rapidly caught in a morass of seething emotions. Tempers flare, passions rise, misunderstandings occur with catastrophic consequences. Taking the soap-operatic subplots of modern comics to their logical extreme, co-creators Dan Raspler and Dev Madan produced rather a treat here. The dialogue is sharp and contemporary, the 'semi-animated' style art very attractive, possibly too attractive to younger readers, given at least one "implied sexual situation" per issue. Infidelity, deception, betrayal, enforced celibacy and bisexuality are all on the menu. Needless to say, a comic with this degree of skill and style fell profoundly between two stools: older readers largely dismissed it as a kiddie book, based on the art style while younger readers were sternly told by their mums that they weren't buying that again, and no mistake!~HS

Recommended: 1-17

THE YOUNG INDIANA JONES CHRONICLES

Dark Horse: *12 issues 1992-1993**

Dan Barry adapts episodes of the *Young Indiana Jones* TV series, writing each issue and pencilling most of them. Indy encounters plenty of significant historical figures during World War 1. Stories intended for TV don't always transfer well to the comic, and the best are 9 and 10, showing both the eight-year-old and the sixteen-year-old Indy meeting the crowned heads of Europe. Each issue also has a text piece by Kurt Busiek giving a background perspective on the events or people of the issue.~WJ

YOUNG JUSTICE

DC: *55 issues, 1 80-Page Giant, 1 Secret Files, 1 Special 1998-2003*

Spinning out of the events of *JLA*: 'World Without Grown-Ups', this showcases Impulse, Superboy and Robin as the nucleus of a new heroic team, setting out to fight the good fight in their own chaotic style. They find a mentor figure in the android Red Tornado in his only good characterisation to date. Having feared he'd lost touch with his humanity, he proves the existence of his emotions by a frequent desire to slap the hell out of his young charges! Many puns (courtesy of a less restrained than usual Peter David), are incomprehensible, but the bitchy aside about Hawkman's numerous continuity revisions almost justifies the publication on its own. 4 sees the end of the 'Boy's Club', with the addition of Wonder Girl, Arrowette and the Secret as the team's distaff component, and the core is complete. *Young Justice* is an unashamed comedy, with just enough drama to keep the action fans interested, and although many jokes misfire, they're frequent enough that all but the terminally po-faced will chuckle. The comedy tone accentuates the occasional serious issue for a vivid impact. An outstanding examples is 15, where Arrowette is forced to a decision about her future in the wake of a tragedy. By way of considerable contrast, 16, introducing Old Justice, a group of superannuated 'kid sidekicks' from the 1940s, is one of the better comedy spotlights, but the quality is pretty unfailing. Occasional new members are added to the team: Empress in 19, Li'l Lobo in 20, the Ray (who is way too old to be hanging around with kiddies...) in 31, and Snapper Carr, the JLA's former mascot, replaces the Red Tornado as the team's mentor, training the next generation of heroes. The lighter tone of Young Justice precludes unqualified recommendation, but any given issue is reasonably accessible, and if you like one, the odds are good that you'll like them all. Just avoid the 1999 Special, a poor 'No Man's Land' crossover not authored by David.~HS

YOUNG LOVE

Prize: *Series one 73 issues 1949-1957, series two 21 issues 1960-1963*
DC: *88 issues (39-126) 1963-1976*

Following the enormous success of their pioneering romance comic *Young Romance* in 1947, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby provided a sibling. Assembled by the same skilful artists (Ann Brewster, Mort Meskin, Bob Powell, Leonard Starr, etc.) with Simon and Kirby providing layouts and plots, *Young Love* settled into the mixture of sophistication and melodrama that characterised its older sister. Stories focused on insane jealousy, romantic duplicity, and the dangers a young girl faced on the road to, she hoped, matrimony. Unlike the many

* Available in a collected edition

imitators from other companies, though, they emphasised the need for fairness, honesty and responsibility, not only on the part of the young protagonists but on that of their parents too, who had the duty to deal fairly and openly with their children. A strong, but not preachy, morality was at the core of most of the stories. *Young Love* never reached quite the dramatic heights of its big sis, but the title featured strong and mature, but never lurid, stories until its final issue in 1957. The title was revived in 1960 for a continuation of another Prize romance title, All For Love, but had little in common with its predecessor. Now firmly in the grip of the Comics Code, it featured simpering stories with no conflict and little entertainment, but was nevertheless assimilated into DC's romance line when Prize closed. The second Prize run was issued as an annual series of volumes numbered 1-6, beginning with volume 3, issue 3, and ending with volume 7, issue 1.

The DC *Young Love*, beginning inexplicably with 39, gained a semi-regular character in 'Mary Robin, Registered Nurse', whose one-chapter crushes and flings always ended in disappointment. Illustrated by John Romita, Mary Robin epitomised the sleek, machine-tooled style of DC's romance titles at the time. In the mid 1960s, a slightly racier serial replaced Mary: 'The Lives and Loves of Lisa St. Clare', the saga of a rich girl looking for someone to love her and not her money, ran for several issues, but never really caught on. If she really wanted true love, Lisa should have tried to look a bit less overdressed and slutty, but maybe it was just the way Dick Giordano drew her. In the late 1960s and early 1970s *Young Love* fell victim to the same problems as every other romance comic. Still conforming to the Comics Code Authority, they just couldn't compete with the more salacious TV soap operas and Confessions magazines that were soaking up the female consumers. Not that they didn't try to feature stronger topics; 'That Strange Girl' was the first comics story to tackle the subject of lesbianism – albeit very, very obliquely, and only so that our heroine could turn out to be just a tomboy after all, much to everyone's relief. Other stories promised much in their titles – 'Daughter of Women's Lib!', 'Bad Trip!' and, Gods help us, 'Horoscope, Don't Fool With My Heart!' – but fizzled out. The loopy desperation of the 1970s romance titles is something to see. Nevertheless, *Young Love* did have the last laugh: while not the first romance comic, it was one of the last, outliving its big sister, *Young Romance*, by nearly two years.~HS

YOUNG LUST

Company and Sons: *1 issue 1970*
Print Mint: *1 issue (2) 1971*
Last Gasp: *1 issue (3) 1972*
Print Mint: *1 issue (4) 1974*
Kitchen Sink: *4 issues (5-8) 1977-1993*

Conceived as a hard-core spoof of romance comics, editors Bill Griffith and Jay Kinney gradually transformed *Young Lust* into a rather more interesting satire on contemporary society and its sexual mores. With 2 Justin Green was added to the creative line-up, and by 4 it was successful enough to add colour. The comic's highlights include Art Spiegelman's formalist 'Little Signs of Passion' in 4, Bill Griffith's jaded 'Too Much Fun' in 5 and Greg Irons' despairingly autobiographical 'Monkey Lust' in 6. Other noted contributors, like Spain Rodriguez (2-8), Kim Deitch (4, 6), Paul Mavrides (6, 7) and Daniel Clowes (7), helped make later issues far more essential purchases than the comic's original premise ever suggested. *The Young Lust Reader* collection cherry-picks from 1-4.~DAR
Recommended: 4-6

YOUNG MASTER

New Comics: *9 issues 1987-1988*

On what sometimes seems like a feature prepared a decade earlier during the height of the martial arts craze, Val Mayerik turns in some of his best comics art, and Alex Niño maintained the standard in 6. As initially plotted by Larry Hama, the nameless Young Master is a prodigious swordsman in a more primitive Japan. He hooks up with a blind child princess in 2, where he earns the anger of local villain Lord Yagyu, whose operatives plague him until a resolution in 8. The parallels to *Lone Wolf and Cub* are obvious, not least through the timeless simplicity of the stories, but also the mood and excellent action sequences from Mayerik, who also provides back-up strips in 1-6. Any issue can be sampled and understood, but the Chuck Dixon written 9 stands alone with a decent story about the Young Master's presence causing the repressed secrets of a town to erupt.~WJ

YOUNG ROMANCE

Prize: *124 issues 1947-1963*
DC: *84 issues (125-208) 1963-1975*

Launched by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, this title was inspired in part by a humour title, *My Date*, that the two had worked on a year previously for another publisher. Although *My Date* was short-lived, its romantic-comedy tone inspired the duo to try something that hadn't been attempted before, a straight romance comic. Although romance pulps and magazines sold well, no one had previously attempted to translate the genre to comics. The first issue was a huge success, and made waves in the industry. Martin Goodman, publisher of Timely Comics, attacked *Young Romance*, with its emphasis on adult protagonists and situations, as 'virtual pornography'. He presumably had some sort of epiphany on seeing the sales figures, because within three years of *Young Romance*'s release, Timely was publishing thirteen romance comics! Altogether, *Young Romance* had no fewer then fifty imitators, including its own sibling, *Young Love*, within three years of its début. A new genre had been brought to comics.

No imitator could compete with *Young Romance* for quality and value. Simon and Kirby did the bulk of the work in the early years themselves, but when they had to start farming it out, they hired the finest artists in the business: Jerry Robinson, Mort Meskin, Leonard Starr, Ann Brewster, Bruno Premiani, Bill Draut, Bob Powell, Ross Andru and dozens more filled the pages with vitality and emotion. Nor were they afraid to tackle contentious subjects. 'Different' dealt maturely with anti-Semitism, 'The Town and Toni Turner' had a young woman facing down her delinquent criminal past, and 'My Old Flame' neatly exposed the futility of romantic ideals and unrequited love, a controversial plot in a comic where those commodities were a stock-in-trade. The Simon and Kirby romances were also much more vigorous than the average romance comic; love affairs took place at roller derbies, at sea, in the middle of teenage gang fights; the heroes and heroines were caught in hurricanes, involved in car crashes, arrested – anything to get some action in the story! But occasionally such tricks weren't necessary. The best Simon and Kirby romance story, 'The Girl Who Tempted Me' (17, 1950), has a rural farm setting and only four characters. There's an elderly woman, her two sons, and the fiancée of the younger son, a "townie" with "loose ways" who decides to seduce the older, religious brother, but finds her game escalating out of control. In a rare story inked by Kirby himself, her mounting passion is virtually a palpable presence in the story, and the irresistible attraction between two people who know they're bad for each other is superbly portrayed. Oh, it's melodramatic schlock, sure, but of the very finest quality.

Following Prize's closure in 1963, DC grabbed *Young Romance* and *Young Love* for its own romance line, but having secured them, did nothing to make them exceptional. 'Bonnie Taylor, Stewardess' had semi-regular self-contained flings in exotic foreign parts, but apart from that, it was very much by-the-book DC romance, illustrated by all the thoroughbred workhorses of the era – John Romita, John Rosenberger, Gene Colan, et al. This state of affairs persisted until the late 1960s, when romance comics, haemorrhaging readers as the more lurid TV soaps grabbed their attention, resorted to ever more desperate come-on titles: 'Make Love to Me!', 'Greaser's Girl', 'Lily Martin – the Swinger!'. But because they had to abide by the wholesome Comics Code, the stories couldn't deliver the goods. Hitch-hikers, hippies, rock stars and motorcycle gangs became the new staples, but in amongst the dross, there were some well-meaning, if clunky, attempts to innovate. 194's 'Full Hands, Empty Heart', by Bob Kanigher and Rosenberger, showed, in a sympathetic way, the love affair between a white doctor and a black nurse (of opposite sexes: things hadn't loosened up that much. And needless to say, the guy got to be the doctor!).

Unfortunately, such efforts were lost in the frantic scramble for readers, and in an attempt to titillate, plots became ever more risible. A favourite is 'I Won't Kiss That Evil Way!' – written by a fledgling Tom DeFalco! – in which we not only don't ever find out what evil way our heroine won't kiss, but we're also not told how evil it is. Is it the osculatory equivalent of shoplifting? Grand theft auto? Napalming a busload of nuns? Enquiring minds want to know... Sadly, the craziness couldn't be sustained forever, and in 1975 *Young Romance*, mother of a genre, breathed its last. *Young Love* trundled on for two years, but the last nails were already being pounded into the coffin of the romance genre, which, apart from sporadic nostalgia specials, seems well and truly dead.~HS

The YOUNG WITCHES

Eros: *4 issue miniseries 1991*, 6 issue miniseries 1995-1996*, 3 issue miniseries ('Empire Of Sin') 2000*, 3 issue miniseries ('The Eternal Dream') 2000, 6 issue miniseries ('The Legacy') 2002-2003*

The first series is an atypical Eros comic as the sexual content isn't explicit, and there's a story, albeit a slim one, with gorgeous artwork from F. Solano Lopez. Lilian Cunningham is orphaned at birth, but sent to a college with feminist teachings dating back to the Amazons. Her latent powers of witchcraft emerge and it all ends very messily. Series two, as if by deliberate contrast, is so graphic there's an editorial requesting readers not to judge individual episodes, but the series as a whole, since it concerns the hypocrisy of the Victorian attitude to sex (and, presumably by extension, the present-day attitude). This is a load of tosh, as there's little purpose to the story beyond hardcore sex. Lilian and her companion Agatha reach Victorian London to encounter many out-of-copyright fictional characters in the company of historical figures and all kinds of sexual activity. It's still beautifully drawn, but the sexual variations involved are potentially repugnant. The third series is in colour and a more traditional sex comic, but Solano-Lopez hardly knocked himself out producing the sometimes extremely sketchy art. By the fourth series "Pol" has replaced Barreiro as writer for an investigation of dreams in the company of Sigmund Freud, Dorian Gray and Sherlock Holmes. It becomes very silly in 'The Legacy', which jumps forward a couple of generations with Lilian's daughter having trouble curbing her nineteen year old twins. The slimmest of stories connects hardcore variations on Hammer horror scenes, presumably in an attempt to keep Solano-Lopez interested, as he's all over the place. Sometimes he can't be bothered erasing his pencil lines, the once-detailed backgrounds are sparse, and some of his figures are poor. Regular readers won't care, but it should be pointed out.~FP

YOUNGBLOOD

Image/Extreme: *Series one 11 issues (0-10), 1 Yearbook 1992-1994, series two 10 issues 1995-1996, one-shot (Youngblood/X-Force) 1996*

Maximum Press: *1 issue (14), 1 Super Special 1997*

Awesome: *2 issues 1998*

Little kids that a certain comic wish there was more and more of it. Bigger kids with artistic aspirations make up their own stories and favourite characters are transformed into thinly disguised knock-offs. A young professional riding a wave of acclaim for work at Marvel can start their own company, do all that and no one can stop them. *Youngblood* was a launch title for the neophyte Image Comics, featuring two teams ("Home" and "Away" – each featured in one half of the first issue's flip format) of government sanctioned generic superheroes with very strong "echoes" of cast from *X-Force*, *Justice League* second series, *Avengers* and *Fantastic Four*. The stories themselves are a pointless morass of fighting and posturing, interspersed with mindless who's shagging who, and is my enemy my brother subplots. Rob Liefeld starts it all off but soon surrenders the bulk of the creative chores. 1-4 are collected. The reboot is better, with greater concentration on fewer characters and stories above fights, with tighter art, but even the crossover with its spiritual parent *X-Force* at the end of 10 couldn't save the title when Liefeld acrimoniously left Image. Restarting as Maximum Press, Liefeld tried to carry on, but although issues 11-15 were solicited, only 14 and the Super Special (a tale of earlier days by Eric Stephenson, beautifully drawn by Chris Sprouse) were actually released, rushed and botched looking. For the Awesome issues Alan Moore and Steve Skroce breathed life, albeit briefly, into the tediously derivative group of now ex-Federal superheroes in the wake of the *Judgement Day* miniseries. Moore's light touch and signature subversion of comic cliches, such as possession by aliens in 1, are fun, but fourteen alternate covers to that issue aren't.~WW

YOUNGBLOOD STRIKEFILE

Image/Extreme: *11 issues 1993-1995*

Overspill comic with solo or supplementary stories of Youngblood team members. Simplistic punch and pose nonsense, although the Masada feature in 6 by Tom and Mary Bierbaum with art by Chris Sprouse, at least makes an effort at more substantial content. For the simple fan only.~WW

YOU'RE UNDER ARREST

Dark Horse: *8 issue limited series 1995-1996*

Fast and furious comedy adventure about young police officers – either female or in dragicatching panty-thieves and paintball vandals. They also try to apprehend a vigilante who punishes people for petty antisocial behaviour and who calls himself alternately Strikeman and Santa Claus Man. Sexy and highly detailed when it comes to bikes or cars, Kosuke Fujishima's work isn't exactly PC but then it isn't meant to be more than high-speed fun. Beautifully drawn but slight.~NF

YUMMY FUR

Vortex: *24 issues 1986-1991*

Drawn and Quarterly: *8 issues (25-32) 1991-1994*

Chester Brown's work revolves as much around repetition of image, iconography and mythology as it does around plot and structure, making *Yummy Fur* a difficult but rewarding read. 1-3 reprint material from mini-comics, from which the recurring character, Ed The Happy Clown, emerges as star of the comic while Brown settles down to telling a more complex and distinctly lateral tale involving the trappings of B-movies but the intensity of myth. It's a great tragedy wrapped up in ridiculous notions, including the infamous Ronald-Reagan's-head-on-the-end-of-a-penis sequence. This amazing tale of vampires, aliens and disappearances was backed up with a re-telling of the gospels intended to emphasise the differences between the versions in the Bible. Unfortunately, when the series ended (with an all-Matthew special issue 32) only two had been completed.

After the obtuse nature of the Ed stories Brown progressed to autobiographical material, including an examination of his relationship with *Playboy*, which struck a huge chord with the readership (21-23*). 'Fuck' (26-30*) traces his adolescent unwillingness to swear, and leads neatly into the story of his first love. Brown enunciates the shy and playful gropings of adolescents, the sudden silences, the retreats into childhood behaviour to cover your sudden and perplexing lusts, beautifully, but the work is nowhere near as stimulating as either Ed or the Gospels. By Brown's choice, 13-19 remain uncollected.~FJ

Recommended: 4-18, 32

YUPPIES FROM HELL

Marvel/Epic: *3 issues 1989-1992*

Black and white prestige-format comics by Barbara Slate satirising yuppie manners, morals and standards. An obvious target, but still scathingly funny.~HS

Recommended: 1-3

Z

ZAP Comix

Apex Novelties: *7 issues (0-6) 1967-1974*
Print Mint: *3 issues (7-9) 1974-1978*
Last Gasp: *5 issues (10-14) 1982-1998*

Zap Comix is the quinetessential underground title, put together by a collective of cartoonists whose names have become synonymous with the movement; S. Clay Wilson, Robert Crumb, Victor Moscoso, Gilbert Shelton, Spain and Robert Williams. The unique mix of sexual abuse, drug-fuelled narratives, biting satire and crazy graphics in the early issues is still powerful today, and still shocking. The title was lionised for freeing comics from the grip of simplistic adventure stories, but many readers seem to have forgotten quite how nasty some of these creators' imaginations were. Anyone who worries about the depiction of women in Crumb's widely-known work should take a look at S. Clay Wilson's amazing vistas of degradation, the 1960s equivalent of Hogarth (the English allegorical painter, not the *Tarzan* artist). And predictably the title has its share of failed experiments, strips you can only understand when the wallpaper explains them to you, and unfunny parodies.

All the famous underground characters appeared here: Shelton's comic Fat Freddy's Cat and Wonder Warthog, Crumb's Mr Natural, Spain's impenetrable Trashman, Williams' Coochy Cooty and Wilson's The Checkered Demon. Although the drawing was often rough and scratchy the strips got their points across admirably, although by the 1980s the liberal agenda espoused by *Zap* was starting to look a little careworn. In the late 1990s Crumb had a falling out with his fellow cartoonists and wanted to close the magazine, feeling their worldview was outmoded and that they themselves had become, as he put it in his final strip, like weirdoes from a Dan Clowes comic. Reading the first half of 14, largely filled with Wilson strips up to twelve years old and Moscoso's doodlings, you can see his point. Once everyone pitches in to bitch about him, though, the final few pages become more interesting, if watching aging radicals display their dirty laundry floats your boat. The final word is given to 'newcomer' Paul Mavrides, who presents the 'hearsay' version of the falling out to hilarious effect. *Zap* was a huge liberating force in comics, and still rewards careful study with laughter, if nothing else. All issues have been kept in print since the original publication.~FJ
Recommended: 1, 3, 12

ZATANNA

DC: *One-shot 1987, 4 issue miniseries 1993*

Zatanna is DC's resident Mistress of Magic. The story of her quest to make peace with the spirit of her dead father Zatara was planned as a miniseries. Ill-judged economics resulted in drastic cuts, to the extent that the writer requested his name be removed from the credits, and the one-shot was all that remained. It's a shame, as the Gray Morrow artwork is deeply gorgeous. The later miniseries is profoundly ill-advised in its attempt to remove Zatanna from all that makes her distinctive and original and reduce her to a practitioner of the Generic Art Of Mystic Handwaving. Fortunately, it's subsequently been ignored editorially.~HS

ZEALOT

Image/WildStorm: *3 issue miniseries 1995*

Ron Marz and Terry Shoemaker span the centuries with historical tales from the past of the near-immortal *WildC.A.T.S.* heroine Zealot. Taking in ancient Greece, classical Japan and Nazi Europe, the series presents three self-contained stories mixing established myths and WildStorm history. A framing sequence makes them all part of team-mate Voodoo's training to be a Coda Warrior, and a running theme of Zealot's continued battle against an evil nemesis from the same long-lived alien race.~JC

ZED

Gagné International Press: *4 issues + 2001 to date*

Imagine the innocence of *Bone* given an injection of Jack Kirby, and that's roughly what *Zed* boils down to. He's a small cartoon alien whose invention is sabotaged to destroy a planet as an excuse for a declaration of war. Animator Michel Gagné's art is charming and successful in evoking strange worlds with strange beings, and this is a comic to be enjoyed by adults and children alike. The one problem is that with large panels there's very little story for your buck, making a quick read. The proposed collection will rectify that, mind.~FP

ZEN INTERGALACTIC NINJA

Entity: *4 issues (0-3) 1993, 3 issue miniseries ('The Hunted') 1993-1994*, one-shot ('Spring Spectacular') 1994, one-shot ('April Fool's Special') 1994, one-shot ('Summer Special: Video Warrior') 1994, one-shot ('Mistress of Chaos') 1994, one-shot ('Zen Yearbook: Hazardous Duty') 1994, one-shot (The Art of) 1994, 'Starquest' 11 issues + 1994 to date 'Colour Deluxe' series one 8 issues (0-7) 1994-1995, series two 5 issues + 1995 to date*
Zen Comics: *6 issues (0-5) 1993-1994, one-shot ('Xmas Special') 1993, one-shot ('Earth-Day Annual') 1993*

Zen is the product of a wise galactic race called the Gordons and is assigned, after bumming around the universe learning the secrets of combat, to a young human who is the Star Child, Earth's ecological guardian. The boy's magic crystal enables him to create superbeings to protect the world from natural and supernatural threats. As is always the way, as soon as you get this sort of power, aliens, monsters and supervillains explode out of the woodwork and lots of fighting ensues. And ensues. And ensues some more. Astoundingly over-marketed in games, cartoons etc., for something that is basically ill-conceived, very derivative, and poorly executed. In 1994 *Zen* suddenly sprouted several colour series, still sporadically published to this day. This is one of those rare cases where the spin-offs and cash-ins surpass the source material in quality.~WW

ZEN INTERGALACTIC NINJA

Archie: *3 issue miniseries 1992*
Entity: *3 issue miniseries 1994*

Ross Andru and Mike Esposito illustrate the Saturday morning kids cartoon version of the artificial warrior and his Earth chum as they fight villains and save the rainforest. Good for the kids. The Entity series reprints the Archie one.~WW

ZENDRA

Penny Farthing: *6 issue miniseries 2001**

Centuries after humans have been hunted to extinction by the Jekkarans, a benign geneticist attempts to revive humanity from fragments of found DNA. The result is Halle, guided by a member of an evolved race to fulfil ancient prophesies that she will be responsible for the return of humanity. Stuart Moore, highly regarded as an editor, takes the creation of artists Martin Montiel and J.C. Buelna to weave what was intended as the first part of a science-fiction saga. There's a suitably sadistic and imposing villain, but overall, while competent adventure, few elements will have an unfamiliar feel to science-fiction fans. Then that's what makes *Star Wars* great.~FP

ZENITH

Titan: *5 volumes 1988-1990*

This ran in British weekly *2000AD* between 1987 and 1990. Phase I is an introduction to Zenith and his world. His reality resembles ours but superheroes emerged during World War II and Maximan, who dies when the US drop the big one on Berlin rather than Hiroshima. Zenith becomes a pop star and needs an agent and also meets Welsh hero The Red Dragon, and 1960s hero Mandala, now MP Peter StJohn, an important ally. Apart from being a gradual build-up to all-out interdimensional war, Phase II, in books 2-3, reveals Zenith's origins. He and CIA agent Phaedra Cale investigate genetic experiments that spawned seven heroes in the 1960s including Red Dragon and Mandala. Phase III, occupying books 4-5, is a gripping battle against the chaotic Lloigor across alternate worlds, three of which are completely destroyed. A gathering of hundreds of heroes, many recognisable from forty years of British weeklies, travel in taskforces across realities using an Einstein-Rosen Bridge. You soon learn not to get too attached to anybody.

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* Available in a collected edition

Grant Morrison's hero is engagingly vain with a passing resemblance to Smiths vocalist Morrissey. Morrison chooses to keep the entire series very informal – nobody is conveniently named or has their powers explained in expository dialogue. The captioned flashbacks are equally matter of fact due to Zenith's low attention span! It's like a remedy for all the cretinous plot-clogged superhero gatherings of the 1980s. Steve Yeowell's artwork quickly matures from an early Alan Davis influence to the elegant dance of spare linework and audacious solids that he's famous for. Repeat doses of Phases II and III are recommended.~SW

Recommended: volumes 2-5

ZERO GIRL

Homage: *5 issues 2001**

Amy Smootster is a fifteen year old bespectacled, but pretty high school outsider bullied by other girls. When she is humiliated green gloop comes out of her shoes. She lives under a bench, likes circles and hates squares, which intrigues the male school councillor, who falls in love with her. While they are working out their feelings, all sorts of crazy shape related visions and stuff go down. Considering the lack of psychological complexity, it all goes on for a bit too long but Sam Kieth's pictures of Amy with a photo-realistic head and torso tapering away to straw thin legs in candy striped tights should grab some jailbait fanciers.~GK

ZERO HOUR Crisis in Time

DC: *5 issue miniseries (0-4) 1994**

Parallax (formerly Green Lantern – the Hal Jordan one) decides the DC multiverse is too confusing. He embarks on a scheme to obliterate it and restart space-time from the Big Bang without all those messy alternate worlds. Every superhero and his brother objects to this self-appointed godhood. They thwart Jordan, but as a side-effect of the mêlée, space-time restarts from the Big Bang without all those messy alternate worlds. In the new squashed timeline Superman made his début ten years ago, thus solving all DC's generation-gap problems.

The five issues were published weekly in reverse number order with a September 1994 cover-date. As a prelude to this series, about forty mainstream DC titles carried tie-ins featuring characters and locales from different timelines coexisting. All these titles had their October 1994 issues numbered 0, and most zero issues retold origins according to the new timeline.

Zero Hour fails as a story because every event, action and assertion is built on a foundation of cloud, candyfloss and thin air. Nevertheless, *Zero Hour* would still have been creditable if it had simplified DC continuity. It didn't.~APS

ZERO PATROL

Continuity: *5 issues 1984-1985 (1-2), 1988-1989 (3-5)*

Zero Patrol reprinted Estaban Maroto's classic 1960s Spanish strip 'Ginco Por Infinito', rewritten, and to a large degree redrawn, by publisher Neal Adams. Despite the glorious art the story rarely rises above standard space-opera fare. It's a daft idea: five humans are selected for their various abilities, including capacity for forward thinking and understanding of emotions. They're then costumed and sent out to fight robots! Those after a good read are better directed elsewhere. To round out the package Adams provided a number of back-up strips. There's the début of Megalith in 1, an Adams high-school-era project also titled 'Zero Patrol' in 2, and the first appearance of Shaman in 3.~DAR

ZERO STREET

Amaze Ink: *1 issue 1998*

Prefaced by a one page Tarantinoesque bar discussion on the merits of science fiction, this rapidly devolves into a manga style action comic starring the perfect female assassin. You've been there, done that, and bought the baseball cap, probably a dozen times. The start was interesting, but appears to have been self-critical justification. A shame.~WJ

ZERO TOLERANCE

First: *4 issue miniseries 1990-1991*

Zero Tolerance is an organisation founded to investigate government corruption in 2017. Populated by caricatures like the tough-guy agent, the feisty female agent and the cartoon villainy of the President, this could be adapted as an episode of *Scooby-Doo* with few changes.~WJ

ZERO ZERO

Fantagraphics: *27 issues 1995-2000*

Editor Kim Thompson wanted *Zero Zero* to be considered a worthy successor to *Raw* and *Weirdo*. Not entirely successful, he does manage to collect good contributions from a wide range of creators, though Thompson mostly avoids material from outside the US (apart from Max Andersson) until later issues. Avoiding autobiographical work was also a good move.

Frank Stack's 'New Adventures of Jesus' (1-3) is fascinating while Spain (12), Skip Williamson (3, 9, 13, 16), and Bill Griffith (7) from the old guard are joined by Chris Ware (5, 16), Archer Prewitt (8), Al Columbia (16, 20, 26, 27) and the controversial Mike Diana (1, 8, 10, 14, 23, 24), a man subject to regular house searches in his home state after the county court declared his self-published comics obscene. The most consistent of the short stories, however, are provided by David Mazzucchelli (2, 11, 27), Joe Sacco (15, 25, 26) and Andersson (1-3, 5, 7, 11-13, 16, 17, 19, 27), whose 'Death' (12), is like a very strange road movie. Lewis Trondheim's single page astronaut strips (20, 22, 24) are also beautifully crafted.

Of several long series, Ted Stearn provides the surreal story of 'Fuzz and Pluck'*, a chicken and a bear trying to escape from slavery (1, 3, 6, 9, 11, 13). Kim Deitch's 'Molly O'Dare' (6-8) and 'The Search for Smilin Ed' (all of 21, 22, 24-27) are sequels of sorts to all of his other series, and continue his fascination with tall tales and Hollywood. Dave Cooper's 'Crumple'* concerns the adventures of Knuckle and Zev, who travel to Hollywood and uncover a feminist/alien conspiracy. Francesca Ghermandi and Massimo Semerano's 'Pop. 666' (19, 20, 22, 24) is an unfinished tale of a ravaged future, splendidly rendered in a fine line style. The title was also home to Rick Sala's twisted magnum opus 'The Chuckling Whatsit'* (2-18), a convoluted horror tale about the Gull Street Ghoul, a notorious serial killer who starts killing again after years of inactivity. The collections of the Stearn, Cooper and Sala series are definitely worth seeking out, while fans of other creators may be interested in the individual issues.~NF

Recommended: 21

ZETRAMAN

Antarctic: *4 issue miniseries 1993, 4 issue miniseries ('Revival') 1996*

Action comedy series spinning off from Ben Dunn's *Ninja High School*, which sees much of the support cast in the roles of Super-heroes as the mysterious space element Zetranite makes its presence felt. The Zetranite concept is revived when rival gangs from Ninja High School become *Power Rangers* knock-offs in a lame comedy spoof of kids action TV and L. Ron Hubbard's Dianetics as Professor Steamhead and Zetraforce combat L. Roy Dullard's Steamanetics invasion. No, stop, my sides, they're splitting. One for completists only.~WW

ZILLION

Eternity: *6 issues 1993*

Tom Mason, Harrison Fong and Keith Conroy adapt the animé tale of yet another war-mongering race wanting to enslave humanity. On the colony world Maris (Earth II) only the three enigmatic Zillion Guns and the insufferably cute young heroes who use them can hold out against the otherwise invulnerable alien invaders. Manga diehards will love it but the rest of us have seen it all before.~WW

ZIPPED

Actus Tragicus: *One-shot 1996*

Bearing the production values of a fine art publication, those looking for story alone will find this slim and expensive fare. It's a three minute diversion of man who wakes one morning with a zip running down his chest. While Mira Friedmann's art is great, she takes this Kafkaesque set-up nowhere. Disappointing.~FP

ZIPPY Quarterly

Fantagraphics: *18 issues 1993-1998, 2 Annuals 2000-2001*

A magazine-sized compilation of underground legend Bill Griffith's daily newspaper strip *Zippy The Pinhead*. Griffith is one of the medium's finest creators and he's at his peak here, casting his scabrously critical eye over contemporary America. Zippy is a unique mixture of intellectualism, pop culture, knockabout humour and Dada that deserves a place in any collection. Griffith has been using Zippy in comics for years, and there are several collected editions of previous comic-format *Zippy* material, most prominently the Fantagraphics-published *Zippy Stories*. The two annuals present the cream of each year's output (in almost 150 pages) and reveal a new interest in the bizarre architecture of postwar America. Incredible though it may seem, in his fourth decade as a cartoonist Griffith may only now be hitting his peak.~DAR

Recommended: 1-18

Tales of the ZOMBIE

Marvel: *10 issues 1973-1975*

Much like Vampire Tales, with its main feature and themed back-up strips, Zombie (as its original credits ran) is similar in its lack of consistency. Steve Gerber tackles the Zombie's own story (1-9) as Simon Garth, once a wealthy New Orleans plantation owner, is turned into a zombie by the loyal Layla to avenge his death. As well as the tale of Garth's vengeance, Gerber uses the character much as he did Man-Thing, to comment on others, the Zombie being the deus ex machina that concludes the story. Pablo Marcos is very effective as artist, drawing in a style that's halfway between Maroto and Wrightson. Apart from Gerber, Doug Moench and Alfredo Alcala's fill-in issue (7) is a good *Cat and the Canary*-type story with very little zombie action at all. Brother Voodoo's appearances (6,10) are best forgotten, even drawn by Gene Colan, and only the short stories, drawn by Alcala, really have anything to recommend them. The exception is Tom Sutton's 'Grave Business' in 10, a wonderfully drawn tale, as Sutton's normally intricate pencils give way to a loose, freer style.~NF

ZOMBIE BOY

Timbuktu Graphix: *One-shot 1988, one-shot ('Zombie Boy's Hoodoo Tales)' 1989, one-shot ('Rises Again') 1994*

Antarctic: *1 issue 1996*

Morgan McCorkindale, whitebread son of a whitebread US Senator, suffers from a condition that has made him zombie (i.e. he's dead), and another that has made him a spoiled Hollywood brat (no reason, he just is). They all live in a Beverly Hills mansion with their faithful Vadoun servants, having the most peculiar adventures. Engaging, quirky, and often very funny tales from Mark Stokes. 'Rises Again' reprints the first two issues with some extras, such as a pin-up gallery by Chester Brown, Gilbert Hernandez, Moebius, Kyle Baker and many others. When picked up by Antarctic, most of the charm vanished, replaced by action/comedy one-liners. Voodoo lord Baron Samedi ousts the overlord Danballah in a mystic coup and only the princess Tabu escapes. Making her way to Earth, and specifically Beverly Hills, she attempts to steal a magical staff from Morgan. Nevertheless they team up in a lacklustre horror adventure to save the afterlife.~WW

ZOMBIE WORLD

Dark Horse: *3 issue miniseries ('Champion of the Worms') 1997, one-shot ('Home for the Holidays') 1997, 2 issue microseries ('Dead End') 1998, one-shot ('Eat Your Heart Out') 1998, 4 issue miniseries ('Winter's Dregs') 1998, 4 issue miniseries ('Tree of Death') 1999*

Intended by Dark Horse to be another long-running franchise with any interested creators given an opportunity to tell their zombie tales, *Zombie World* produced some excellent material before running out of steam. Mike Mignola and Pat McEown gave the series to Dark Horse as long as creators kept the rights to their own issues and their 'Champion of the Worms' depicts how the necromancer, Azzul Gotha, with his own death and resurrection, prepares the way for a world-wide infestation of zombies. He plans to take as his queen, Rebecca Dean, whose father discovered his tomb. She's protected by a small group of adventurers who vow to fight on against the hordes of undead.

Gordon Rennie and Gary Erskine's 'Home for the Holidays' is the story of a family reunion at Christmas, disturbed by rather more family members than expected. Stephen Blue's 'Dead End' adds some mystery to the horror as a man mourning his missing wife and daughter takes in a stranded woman, but zombies are not the only thing she needs to be afraid of. 'Eat Your Heart Out' is a tale of madness and obsession by Kelley Jones as a man tries to tames his beloved, now undead, girlfriend. 'Winter's Dregs' features the stories of several New York inhabitants as the zombie outbreak reaches their city, by Bob Fingerman and Tommy Lee Edwards. The Killcrop, a reincarnated, Hyperborean, zombie hunter is introduced in the Pat Mills and J. Deadstock produced 'Tree of Life', re-introducing Miss Dean. She tries to find the resting place of the Necronomicon's author in order to put a stop to Azzul Gotha's plans to re-introduce the Elder Gods. This final series is more tongue-in-cheek than previous episodes and as such, probably the least satisfying, for all that it's very bloody and entertaining.~NF

Recommended: 'Champion of the Worms', 'Dead End', 'Eat Your Heart Out'

Thomas Florimonte's ZOMBOY

Inferno: *3 issues 1996-1997*

Zomboy is the masked defender of the weak in his junior school. There's an enthusiasm to Florimonte's writing, but his cartooning lacks the rounded charm the feature cries out for.~FP

ZONE

Dark Horse: *One-shot 1990*

By Michael Kraiger and collected from *Dark Horse Presents* 28 and 31-34. Two artists have stumbled across a seven-foot alien in the landfill sites of New Jersey and are deciding how to handle the situation. It's about dumping and pollution, but it seems a very indirect way of tackling the issue.~FC

ZONE CONTINUUM

Caliber: *2 issues 1992, Volume II 2 issues 1996*

The world is composed of interconnected spheres called Zones, undetectable without special technology, and we mere mortals are generally unaware of them. When disaster threatens to destroy them, Tallon, a zone dweller, falls to Earth and events spiral towards a catastrophe that is only averted by the series' premature cancellation. Bruce Zick writes and draws effectively but with little discipline. When the series restarts, Sphere, Tallon's evil opposite, plans to destroy all Zones, but he's not reckoned on the interference of Manx, an expatriate of the Earth Zone, which is just as well as Talon (note new spelling) is hamstrung by the loss of his lover, Paris. Once again an intriguing start that dies before going anywhere.~WW

ZOOM'S Academy for the Super Gifted

Astonish: *3 issues 2001-2002*

Taking his inspiration very obviously from *Harry Potter*, Jason Lethcoe transposes wizards for superheroes. The plot concerns Summer Jones, who tests positive for super powers, but doesn't appear to manifest any. Another from the Astonish Comics school of animators who can't be bothered to erase the pencil lines on their work, Lethcoe's story is well produced and charming, and goes to unnecessary colour with the final issue. After this point he intends to publish illustrated novels with flip-corner animation pages.~WJ

ZOONIVERSE

Eclipse: *6 issues 1986-1987*

'Zoon' is the general term for any intelligent being in this part of the galaxy, where countless species meet to trade and intrigue and try to have sex. The three-Zoon Kren patrol is caught up in the intrigue when they are given the job of escorting a courier and things go wrong within minutes. The story is fine, but it's the travelogue aspects that make the comic special. Fil Barlow had been working out the details of these worlds and these species for years, and it shows. He's got quantities of imagination, most of it grotesque and quirky, and a sense of humour that's generally surreal but always grounded in a good understanding of human (zoonan?) nature. Any quibbles? The ending is decidedly abrupt, as if Barlow, in full flow, suddenly got a fax ordering him to wrap it up within three pages. This doesn't ruin the comic as it stands, but is cruelly tantalising. One could cope with a lot more of *Zooniverse*.~FC

Recommended: 1-6

ZOOT

Fantagraphics: *6 issues 1992-1994*

Even at this early stage the art of Roger Langridge was wonderful, a blocky and expressive delight. Unfortunately it's wasted on meandering pointless stories that often read as if plotted not further than a single panel ahead of the art. While largely forced and unfunny humour, the material sometimes trespasses elsewhere, such as 4's long profile of a murder victim, but it's no better. Look and admire, but don't attempt to read. A collection titled *Zoot Suite* was issued containing a lot of the material from these issues, but also a fair percentage of new material in the same vein.~FP

ZORA Lady Vampyre

Sound & Vision: *1 issue 2000*

The editorial page provides a vast amount of background information on this translated Italian comic, none of which disguises the fact that this is very old-fashioned eroticism indeed. It also seemingly includes only every tenth panel of the original, such is the shorthand storytelling, and is very poorly translated. Still, Balzano Birago draws nice pairs of tits and buttocks, and if you can't smuggle any Eros comics into the house, this will have to do.~FP

ZORRO

Dell: *22 issues (Four Color 228, 425, 497, 538, 574, 617, 732, 882, 920, 933, 960, 976, 1003, 1037), 8-15 1949-1961*

Gold Key: *9 issues 1966-1968*

ACG: *One-shot ('The Sword of...') 2002*

Sporadic and much-loved tales of the masked and mysterious hero fighting injustice in Spanish controlled California in some mythic period between 1795 and 1825. The first seven appearances are based on the Johnston McCulley novellas and the 1940 Rouben Mamoulion film *The Mark of Zorro*, starring Tyrone Power. It's now legendary in comics lore as the last movie Bruce Wayne saw with his parents. There are usually two complete comic tales and a short prose story per issue, unwieldy and laborious, concentrating on repetitive adventures, although Everett Raymond Kinstler handled *Four Color* 497, 538 and 574. The next seven issues are based on the Walt Disney TV show, hence the succeeding issues being numbered 8-15. Longtime western strip cartoonist (and creator of *Casey Ruggles*) Warren Tufts drew stories in 1037, 8, 9, 10 and 13, but the fame of the series rests on the magnificent and tempestuous run by the legendary Alex Toth (882, 920, 933, 960, 1003, 9 and 12). Toth had a long running battle with his editor, arguing that the many static set-pieces, lifted word for word and scene for scene from episodes of the TV show, were deadly dull and detrimental to a character that he felt was the epitome of swashbuckling, non-stop action. It culminated in a challenge to replace him as soon as they could, because he was going to draw Zorro his way until they did. 15 was his last work and the last issue published. When the TV show was revived during the height of the mid-1960s *Batman* craze Gold Key revived the comic, with Toth reprints in all but 3 and 6. It's compulsory reading for all fans of comic art and students of comic form, and thankfully the Toth issues at least are readily available as collections.~WW

ZORRO

Marvel: *6 issues 1990-1991*

Like the TV series on which it's based, the 1990s comic ditches any sense of rebellion or suspense and tells moralistic tales in which no one dies, swords aren't really dangerous and the soldiers are good guys at heart. Gag me with a spoon.~NF

ZORRO

Topps: *12 issues (0-11) 1993-1994*

Well-thought-out series written by Don McGregor, playing heavily on the political, racial and sexual problems of early-19th-century California. He creates a new supporting cast that includes Machete, an ex-slaver, Moonstalker, an Indian freedom fighter, and Lady Rawhide, a mysterious adventuress. Mike Mayhew (1-8*) and Hearn Cho (9-12) provide rather stiff artwork, but it's not unattractive, and there are some excellent covers from the likes of Paul Gulacy (7), Mike Mignola (6) and Adam Hughes (3). The scripts are kept interesting by McGregor's skill with words, but there are always going to be plenty of them to get through in a McGregor opus, and this sometimes slows the pace.~NF

ZOT!

Eclipse: *36 issues 1984-1985 (1-10)*, 1987-1991 (11-36)**

Zachary T. Paleozogt, otherwise known as Zot, seems to have come from the far future, battling robots, carrying a blaster and talking about a lost key to the Doorway at the Edge of the Universe which a neighbouring planet, Sirius IV, wants back at any cost. In fact he's from an alternative Earth circa 1965 which is a paradise compared to our reality. Jenny Weaver and her brother Butch follow Zot back to his world and Butch is promptly devolved into a chimp by a crazy representative of the Church of De-Evolution. As the story of the key unfolds we meet 9-Jack-9, an electrical assassin, Dekko, a robotic world-conqueror, and Zot's Uncle Max, an inventor who represents Jenny and Butch's best chance of getting back to their own world. The colour series was cancelled due to poor sales at this point, but revived two years later in black and white.

From 11 Jenny has to adjust to being back on her own, flawed world, while Zot tries to fight crime and discovers just how difficult that can be in New York, when his only 'superpower' is flight. The series continues in this vein, with excursions back to Zot's world and the return of 9-Jack-9 and Dekko for most of the second run. Then with 28 writer/artist Scott McCloud took a new direction. As Zot is stranded on Earth, Jenny introduces him to her family and school friends to help him blend in. He becomes part of a love triangle with her and a friend, Woody. Each issue is told from a different person's point of view. Thus McCloud explores the world-views of a variety of adults and teenagers as well as that of Zot himself, contrasting their hopes and fears with the beauty and perfection of his lost homeworld. The story reaches a peak in 33, one of the most beautifully crafted, humane single issues ever written. Read it.

With *Zot!*, McCloud succeeded in creating an exuberant, fun comic that can still deal with important matters, that's more about feelings than adventures despite the science-fiction trappings of the early issues and the fantastic basis for its premise. *Zot!* 10½ (Not Available Comics, 1986) is a minicomic by McCloud and Matt Feazell, whose stick-figure character Cynicalman co-stars. 14½ is a regular sized comic entirely by Feazell which continues the off-beat but funny 'Zot in Dimension 10½' back-up strip that runs in issues 12-36.~NF
Recommended: 28-36

ZU

Mu Press: *One-Shot 1995, 19 issues 1995-1998*

Anthropomorphic anthology with two main features in most issues plus short gag-strips by regulars such as Kris Kreutzman, Mike McMurry and Mark Stanley. Of note otherwise are the three series that run through most of the run. 'Sergei' by Darko Macan (2-4, 15) is similar in execution to Stan Sakai's Usagi Yojimbo. After an appearance in Menagerie and her own self-published fanzine, Donna Barr's 'Hader and the Colonel', about an enchanted harpy and rabbit, is concluded here (6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16-19). 'Frontiers', by Adrian Kleinbergen, is an adventure strip dealing with war and racism in an intelligent and appealing manner (7-9, 16-18). While nothing else stands out, the rest of the strips are engagingly produced and will appeal to fans of the genre. The one-shot contains strips by, amongst others, Roberta Gregory, Tom Stazer, Phil Yeh, Tracy Kazaleh and Cathy Hill (a Mad Raccoons story).~NF

ZULU NATION

Caliber: *3 issue miniseries 1996-1997*

Examination of the Zulu wars at the end of the 19th century, with features on the history of South Africa, the battles of Isandhlwana and Rourke's Drift and biographies of the major players such as the great Zulu chief Shaka. Erudite but unremarkable work from Wayne Reid.~WW

ZZZ

Alan Bunce: *1 issue 2000*

A little chap starts dreaming. He finds treasure cave, then a genie, not so keen to be removed from the bottle. Using a strict eight panel grid, Alan Bunce's silent cartoon is fast-paced, delightful, imaginative and extremely accomplished for someone producing their first comic. To counter the quick read first time through, Bunce has thrown in plenty of visual asides. You know the end, of course: he wakes up, but getting there is a lot of fun.~FP

NON-SERIES TITLES

NB some of these features may have appeared only for a single issue of an umbrella title, and unless particularly noteworthy may not be mentioned in the text piece on the title referenced.

ABDUCTIONS - see SECRET MESSAGES
ABYSS Hell's Sentinel – see UNDERWORLD UNLEASHED
ADVENTURES OF THE X-MEN - see X-MEN ADVENTURES
AEON FOCUS – see BIG THING, INK BLOT, Justin Hampton's TWITCH
AFTER THE SNOOTER - see ALEC
AGE OF INNOCENCE - see IRON MAN
THE AIRTIGHT GARAGE - see MOEBIUS GRAPHIC NOVELS
A*K*Q*J - see the Adventures of CAPTAIN JACK
ALBERTO - see THE CRUSADERS
AMAZING ROCK'N'ROLL ADVENTURES - see BRAINSTORM
AMAZON - see AMALGAM Comics
AMBASSADOR OF THE SUBURBS - see VALERIAN
ANGEL OF LIGHT - see THE CRUSADERS
ANT-MAN - see MARVEL FEATURE, MARVEL PREMIERE, TALES TO ASTONISH
APOKALIPS Dark Uprising – see UNDERWORLD UNLEASHED
ARCANA Annual - see BOOKS OF MAGIC
THE ARK - see THE CRUSADERS
ASHEMA - see HEROES REBORN
ASSASSINS - see AMALGAM Comics
ATLAS (Lone Star) - see Heroic Tales: AMAZON
AVENGERS WEST COAST - see WEST COAST AVENGERS
B-MAN - see DOUBLE DARE ADVENTURES
BALLISTIC/WOLVERINE – see DEVIL'S REIGN
BANNER - see HULK miniseries
BAREFOOT GEN - see I SAW IT
BATMAN Shadow of the Bat - see SHADOW OF THE BAT
The BEAST - see AMAZING ADVENTURES
THE BEATLES - see MARVEL SUPER SPECIAL
THE BELIEVER - see IMAGE INTRODUCES
Tales from BEYOND - see 1963
BIRTHRIGHT - see CRITTERS
BLACKHEART - see Heroic Tales: AMAZON
BLOOD ENGAGEMENT - see FLIPPER
BLOODLINES - see TALES FROM THE HEART
BLOODSTONE - see MARVEL PRESENTS, Rampaging HULK
The BLUE BEAGLE - see CRITTERS
BOG BEAST – see TALES OF EVIL
BOMBAST - see SECRET CITY SAGA
BOULEVARD – see VAUXHALL
THE BRADLEYS – see NEAT STUFF
BRAUN - see SAINT MICHAEL
THE BROKEN CROSS - see THE CRUSADERS
BRUCE WAYNE AGENT OF S.H.I.E.L.D. - see AMALGAM Comics
BULLETPROOF - see TRESPASSERS
BUTCH CASSIDY – see SUNDANCE KID
B'WANA BEAST - see SHOWCASE
BYGONE - see FLIPPER
CALEB HAMMER - see MARVEL PREMIERE
CAPTAIN GLORY - see SECRET CITY SAGA
CAPTAIN UNIVERSE - see MARVEL SPOTLIGHT
Deity II CATSEYE - see DEITY
CAVE CARSON - see SHOWCASE
CEASEFIRE - see FANNY
CHAOS - see THE CRUSADERS
CHAOS Prince of Madness - see WARP
CLASSIC COMICS – see CLASSICS ILLUSTRATED
THE COBWEB – see TOMORROW STORIES
CODENAME SPITFIRE - see SPITFIRE and the Troubleshooters
COMMAND REVIEW - see ALBEDO
CRYPTOPIA - see IMAGE INTRODUCES
THE CUTTING EDGE - see LEGENDS OF LARIAN
CYBLADE – see CYBERFORCE ORIGINS
CYBLADE/GHOST RIDER – see DEVIL'S REIGN
DANCES WITH SHEEP - see THE K CHRONICLES
DARK HORSE CLASSICS - see CLASSICS ILLUSTRATED
DARK NEMESIS – see NEW YEAR'S EVIL
DARK OZ - see OZ
DARK SHADE - see The SCARLET SCORPION
DARKLON THE MYSTIC - see EERIE
DARKSEID - see NEW YEAR'S EVIL
DEATH DREAMS OF DRACULA - see BLOOD OF DRACULA
Sergio Aragones DESTROYS DC - see SERGIO ARAGONES
DHP - see DARK HORSE PRESENTS
DISSENTING WOMEN - see FANNY
DOCTOR DOOM - see ASTONISHING TALES
DR RADIUM - see IT'S SCIENCE with Dr Radium
DOCTOR STRANGEFATE - see AMALGAM Comics
DOG SOLDIERS - see IMAGE INTRODUCES
DOLPHIN - see SHOWCASE
DOMINIC FORTUNE - see BIZARRE ADVENTURES, MARVEL PREMIERE, Rampaging HULK
DOOMSDAY - see HEROES REBORN
DOUBLE-CROSS - see THE CRUSADERS
DRACULA CHRONICLES - see Dracula: VLAD THE IMPALER
DRAGONLORD - see MARVEL SPOTLIGHT
DUCK 'BILL' PLATYPUS - see CRITTERS
DYNAMITE JOE – see WARFRONT
ELEKTRA/CYBLADE – see DEVIL'S REIGN
THE END – see END OF THE CENTURY CLUB
EXORCISTS - see THE CRUSADERS
EXPO 2000/2001 - see SPX
FACTOR X - see X-FACTOR
THE FALL - see DARK HORSE PRESENTS
FAMILY - see FAST FORWARD
Ghost Rider, Captain America FEAR - see GHOST RIDER
FEAR OF A BLACK MARKER - see THE K CHRONICLES
FIREHAIR - see SHOWCASE
THE FIRST AMERICAN – see TOMORROW STORIES
FLOYD FARLAND CITIZEN OF THE FUTURE – see ELCIPSE Graphic Novels
THE FORCE - see THE CRUSADERS
FOUR HORSEMEN - see THE CRUSADERS
FRANK IN THE RIVER - see TANTALISING STORIES
Warrior Nun FRENZY - see Warrior Nun AREALA miniseries
FRITZI and PETRA - see LUBA'S COMICS AND STORIES
Private Beach FUN & PERILS IN THE TRUDYVERSE - see PRIVATE BEACH
No-One Escapes FURY - see 1963
Super Villain Classics GALACTUS: THE ORIGIN – see THOR
GEN OF HIROSHIMA - see BAREFOOT GEN
GIANT-SIZE SUPER-STARS - see FANTASTIC FOUR
GHOST RIDER/BALLISTIC – see DEVIL'S REIGN
THE GIFT - see THE CRUSADERS
GNUFF - see CRITTERS
THE GODFATHERS - see THE CRUSADERS
GOG – see NEW YEAR'S EVIL
GOTTERDAMERUNG - see RING OF THE NIBELUNG
GREEN LANTERN/SILVER SURFER - see DC VS MARVEL
THE GREEN SKULL - see TRESPASSERS
THE GREEN TEAM – see FIRST ISSUE SPECIAL
GREYSHIRT – see TOMORROW STORIES
GUNSLINGER - see Heroic Tales AMAZON
HALLOWEEN MEGAZINE - see TOMB OF DRACULA
HALLS OF HORROR - see HOUSE OF HAMMER
HEARTS OF DARKNESS - see GHOST RIDER
HECTIC PLANET - see PIRATE CORP$!
HELL AND BACK – see SIN CITY
HERALDS - see PARADISE X
HEROES OF THE EQUINOX - se VALERIAN
HORUS Lord of Light - see 1963
I-SPY - see SHOWCASE
IMPACT – see CYBERFORCE ORIGINS
INNER DEMONS - see TALES OF THE MARVES
IRON MAN X-O MANOWAR IN HEAVY METAL see X-O
ISIS - see IMAGE INTRODUCES
IT, the Living Colossus - see ASTONISHING TALES
JACK B.QUICK – see TOMORROW STORIES
JACK Q FROST - see UNEARTHLY SPECTACULARS
JASON'S QUEST - see SHOWCASE
JIHAD - see NIGHTBREED
JIMMY CORRIGAN - see ACME NOVELTY LIBRARY
JLX - see AMALGAM Comics
JOHNNY DOUBLE - see SHOWCASE
JUDGE ANDERSON - see PSI JUDGE ANDERSON
Bloodbath At KHE SANH - see VIETNAM JOURNAL
KEN STEACEY'S SUMMER RERUN - see VORTEX
KID FLASH - see THE KINGDOM
KING CONAN - see CONAN THE KING
KING TIGER - see COMICS GREATEST WORLD
KISS - see MARVEL SUPER SPECIAL
LADY COP – see FIRST ISSUE SPECIAL
The LAST KISS - see KISS OF DEATH
LEGENDS OF THE DARK CLAW - see AMALGAM Comics
The LEGION OF CHARLIES - see The Legion Of CHARLIES
LIBERTY LEGION - see MARVEL PREMIERE

LIONHEART - see CRITTERS
LONDON'S DARK - see ESCAPE
LONER – see WILDSTORM SPOTLIGHT
The LOSERS – see OUR FIGHTING FORCES
THE LOST GODS - see JOURNEY INTO MYSTERY
MAGNETO AND THE MAGNETIC MEN - see AMALGAM Comics
MAJESTIC – see WILDSTORM SPOTLIGHT
MAN-GODS - see MARVEL PREVIEW
MAN-MONSTER – see TALES OF EVIL
MAN WITHOUT FEAR - see DAREDEVIL Miniseries
MAN-WOLF - see CREATURES ON THE LOOSE, MARVEL PREMIERE
MANIAKS - see SHOWCASE
MANIMAL - see HOT STUFF
MARVEL VS DC - see DC VS MARVEL
Serigo Aragones MASSACRES MARVEL - see SERGIO ARAGONES
MASTERS OF EVIL - see HEROES REBORN
MEET ANGEL - see ANGEL AND THE APE
Lady Pendragon MERLIN – see LADY PENDRAGON
MISSING BEINGS -see SOUTHERN KNIGHTS
MR FREEZE - see BATMAN GRAPHIC NOVELS
MR MXYZPTLK – see NEW YEAR'S EVIL
MIXED BUNCH - see BRAINSTORM
MONARK MOONSTALKER - see MARVEL PREMIERE
MONSTER - see COMICS GREATEST WORLD
MORBIUS Revisited - see Adventure Into FEAR
MY TERRIBLE ROMANCE - see TALES TOO TERRIBLE TO TELL
MYSTERY INCORPORATED - see 1963
NECROMANTRA - see LORD PUMPKINHEAD
NEW TITANS – see TEEN TITANS
NICK FURY and his AGENTS OF SHIELD - see STRANGE TALES
NIGHT FRUITS - see FANNY
NIGHT WALKER - see 666
NIGHTMASTER - see SHOWCASE
NIGHTSTAR - see THE KINGDOM
1994 - see 1984
OFELIA and the Little Ones - see LUBA'S COMICS AND STORIES
OFFSPRING - see THE KINGDOM
100% TRUE - see BIG BOOKS
ONLY THE END OF THE WORLD AGAIN - see ONI DOUBLE FEATURE
ORACLE - see TRESPASSERS
ORLAK - see CALIBER PRESENTS
OSBORN JOURNAL - see Amazing Spider-Man
OUR CANCER YEAR - see AMERICAN SPLENDOR
OUTLAW - see ALL-STAR WESTERN
OVERKILL - see MINDHUNTER
PALADIN - see MARVEL PREMIERE
PANTHA -see VAMPIRELLA, WARREN PRESENTS
PARADOX - see STRANGE DAYS
PATTERNS OF FEAR – see UNDERWORLD UNLEASHED
PENGUIN TRIUMPHANT - see BATMAN GRAPHIC NOVELS
PHILBERT DESANEX'S 10,000th DREAM - see WONDER WARTHOG
PIPO - see LUBA'S COMICS AND STORIES
PIT BULLS - see COMICS GREATEST WORLD
PLANET KRYPTON - see THE KINGDOM
PRIMAL MAN? - see THE CRUSADERS
PRIMATE - see IMAGE INTRODUCES
PROMETHEUS – see NEW YEAR'S EVIL
THE PROPHET - see THE CRUSADERS
THE PUNISHER MAGAZINE - see THE PUNISHER
REAL SCHMUCK - see REAL STUFF
REAL SMUT - see REAL STUFF
REBEL (Dark Horse) - see COMICS GREATEST WORLD
REBEL (Marvel) - see HEROES REBORN
REMNANTS - see HEROES REBORN
REQUIEM FOR DRACULA - see TOMB OF DRACULA
RESCUE COMICS – see CAPTAIN RESCUE
REX HAVOC - see EERIE, WARREN PRESENTS
RHEINGOLD - see RING OF THE NIBELUNG
ROAD TRIP - see ONI DOUBLE FEATURE
ROG 2000 - see E-MAN
ROGUES – see NEW YEAR'S EVIL
RUNAWAY - see TRESPASSERS
SABOTAGE? - see THE CRUSADERS
SAFECRACKER - see TWO-FISTED SCIENCE
SAMURAI Son Of Death – see ECLIPSE Graphic Novels
SATANA - see MARVEL PREMIERE, MARVEL PREVIEW
THE SAVAGE RETURN OF DRACULA - see TOMB OF DRACULA
The Spectacular SCARLET SPIDER - see Spectacular SPIDER-MAN
SCAR FACE - see THE CRUSADERS
SCARECROW - see MARVEL SPOTLIGHT or NEW YEAR'S EVIL
SECRET AGENT - see SARGE STEEL
SEEKER 3000 - see MARVEL PREMIERE
SEVERANCE PACKAGE - see SPIDER-MAN'S TANGLED WEB
SHADOW MAN - see SHADOWMAN
THE SHADOW'S EDGE - see LEGENDS OF LARIAN
SHATTERPOINT - see BROID
SHI/CYBLADE - see CYBLADE/SHI
SHINING KNIGHT - see ADVENTURE Comics
Talent SHOWCASE - see NEW TALENT SHOWCASE
SIEGFRIED - see RING OF THE NIBELUNG
SILVER SURFER/WEAPON ZERO – see DEVIL'S REIGN
THE SISTERS D'ESPARD - see FLIPPER
SON OF THE BAT - see THE KINGDOM
SOPHISTIKATS - see WILD LIFE
SPEAKING OF THE DEVIL - see FLIPPER
SPEED DEMON - see AMALGAM Comics
SPELLBOUND? - see THE CRUSADERS
SPIDER-BOY - see AMALGAM Comics
Giant-Sized SPIDER-MAN – see MARVEL TEAM-UP
STAINED - see HIGH CALIBER
STAR WARS Tales Of The Jedi – see Star Wars TALES OF THE JEDI
Sergio Aragonés STOMPS Star Wars - see SERGIO ARAGONES
STORYTELLERS - see FAST FORWARD
STRANGE KILLINGS - see STRANGE KISS
STRYKER – see CYBERFORCE ORIGINS
SUPER SOLDIER - see AMALGAM Comics
THE SURVIVORS - see JEREMIAH
TAKEN UNDER - see CALIBER PRESENTS
TANGLED WEB - see SPIDER-MAN'S TANGLED WEB
The TARANTULA - see WEIRD SUSPENSE
TATTOO MAN - see FOX COMIC
TEMPORARY NATIVES - see TALES FROM THE HEART
Captain Marvel Presents THE TERRIBLE 5 - see CAPTAIN MARVEL (MF)
TERROROLOGY - see TALES TOO TERRIBLE TO TELL
TET '68 - see VIETNAM JOURNAL
THE THOUSAND - see SPIDER-MAN'S TANGLED WEB
3-D MAN - see MARVEL PREMIERE
TIGER BOY - see UNEARTHLY SPECTACULARS
TIMEDRIFTER – see THE BIG PRIZE
TMNT - see TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES
TOM, DICK AND HARRIET - see GOLD KEY SPOTLIGHT
TOMMY TOMORROW - see SHOWCASE
The TOMORROW SYNDICATE - see 1963
TORPEDO - see MARVEL PREMIERE
TOTAL WAR - see M.A.R.S. PATROL
TOWER - see THE WAITING PLACE
ULTIMAN - see BIG BANG
ULTRAFORCE AVENGERS - see AVENGERS Miniseries
Tales of the UNCANNY - see 1963
The VALKYRIE (Dark Horse) - see RING OF THE NIBELUNG
VALLEY OF DEATH - see VIETNAM JOURNAL
VICTIMS – see SCREAM
VIOLENT CASES - see ESCAPE
VOYEUR - see VOYEURS INC
VOYEUSE - see FANNY
WACKY ADVENTURES OF CRACKY - see GOLD KEY SPOTLIGHT
WACKY WITCH - see GOLD KEY SPOTLIGHT
WAR OF THE WORLDS - see AMAZING ADVENTURES
WARDRUMS - see JOURNEY
WARRIOR (DC) - see GUY GARDNER
WARRIORS THREE - see MARVEL SPOTLIGHT
WEAPON ZERO/SILVER SURFER – see DEVIL'S REIGN
THE WEDDING OF DRACULA - see TOMB OF DRACULA
WEIRDWORLD - see MARVEL FANFARE, MARVEL PREMIERE, MARVEL SUPER SPECIAL
WELCOME TO ALFLOFOL - see VALERIAN
WHAT A LONG STRANGE STRIP IT'S BEEN - see THE K CHRONICLES
WILD PERSON IN THE WOODS - see DIGNIFYING SCIENCE
WITCHBLADE/ELEKTRA – see DEVIL'S REIGN
WITCHBLADE/TOMB RAIDER - see TOMB RAIDER/WITCHBLADE
WOLF PACK - see COMICS GREATEST WORLD
WOLF RUN - see TRESPASSERS
WOLVERINE/WITCHBLADE – see DEVIL'S REIGN
WOODGOD - see MARVEL PREMIERE
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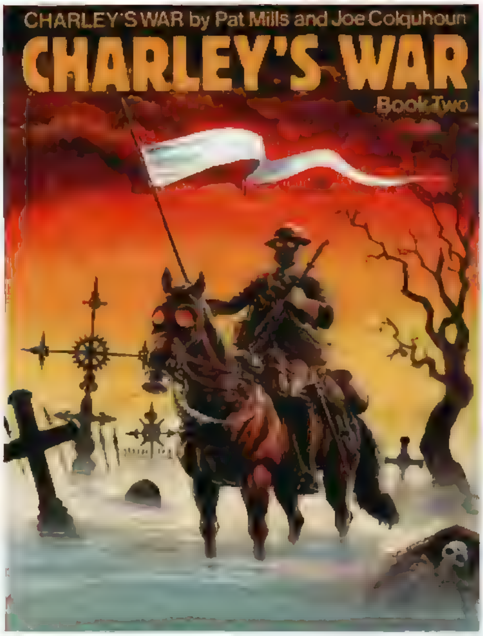
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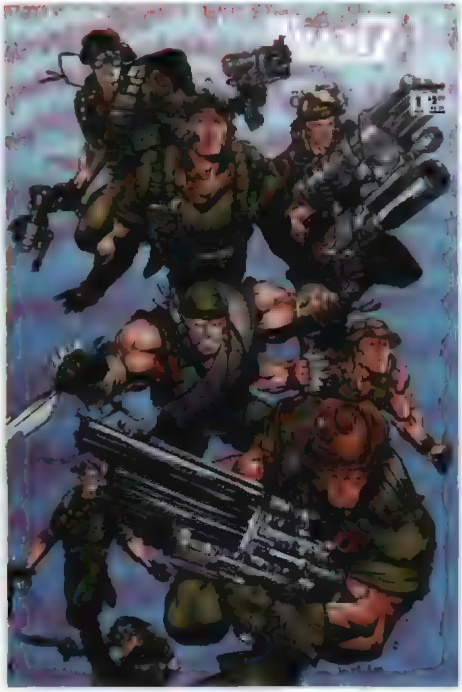

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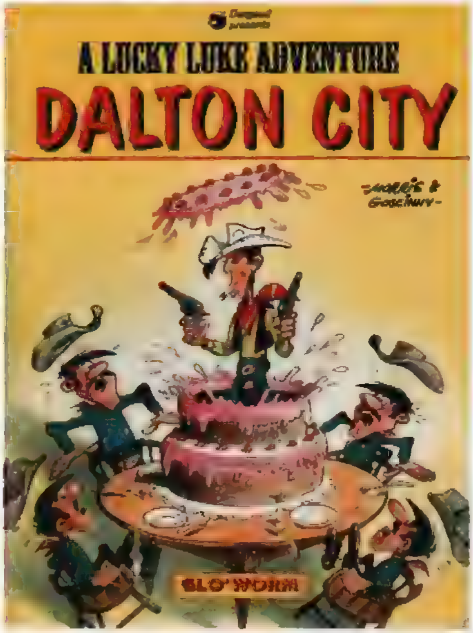
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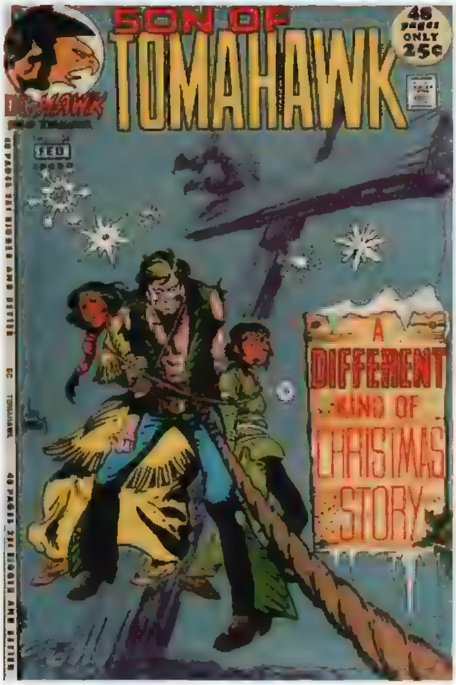
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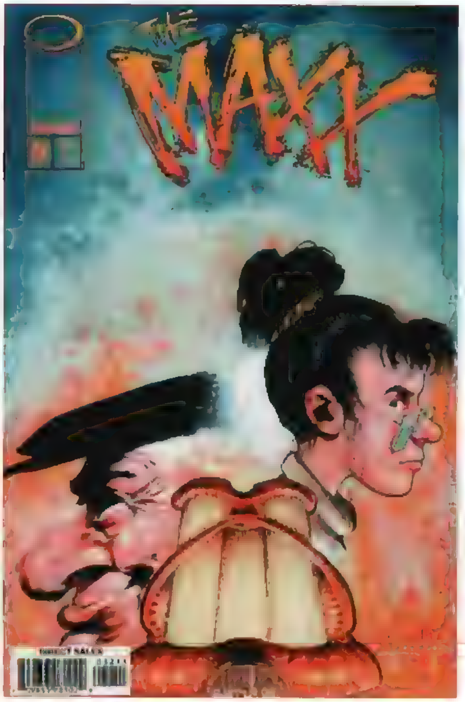

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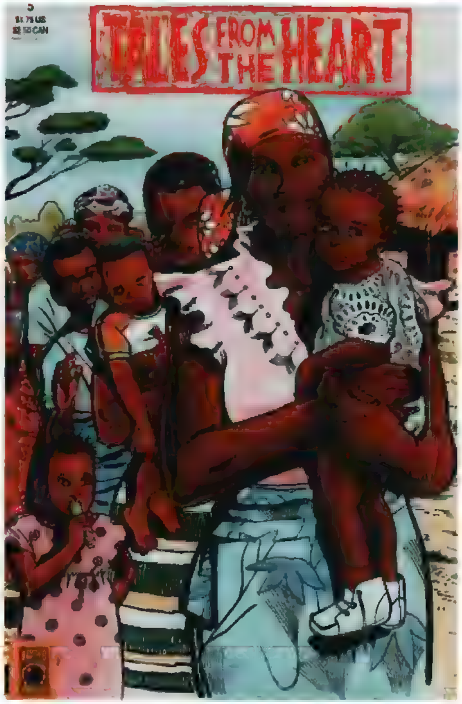
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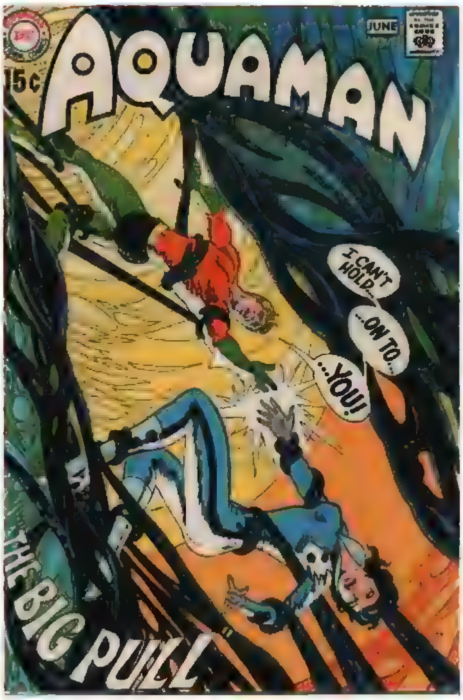
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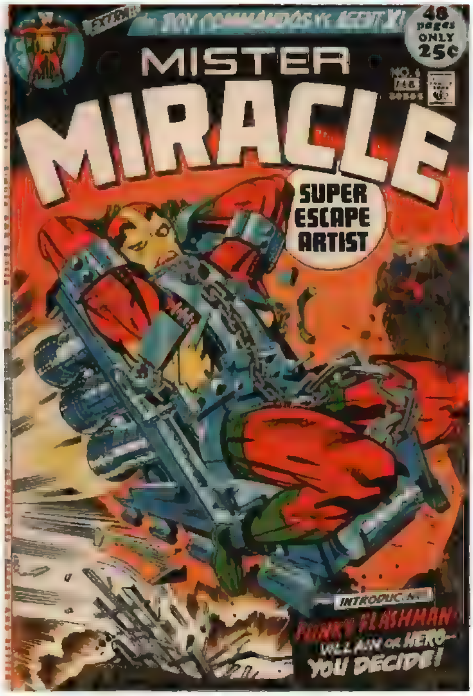
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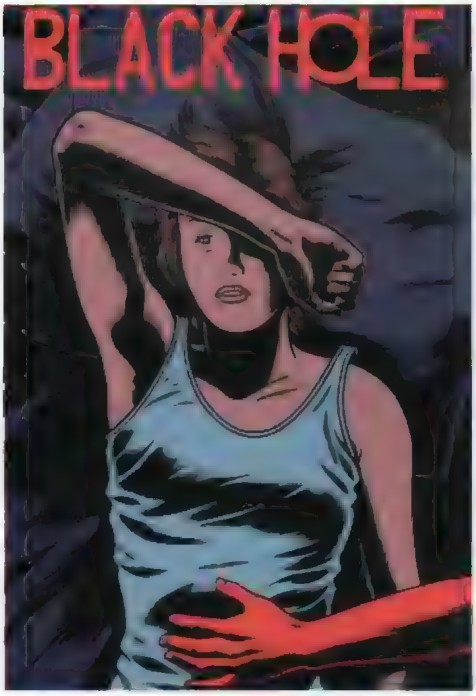
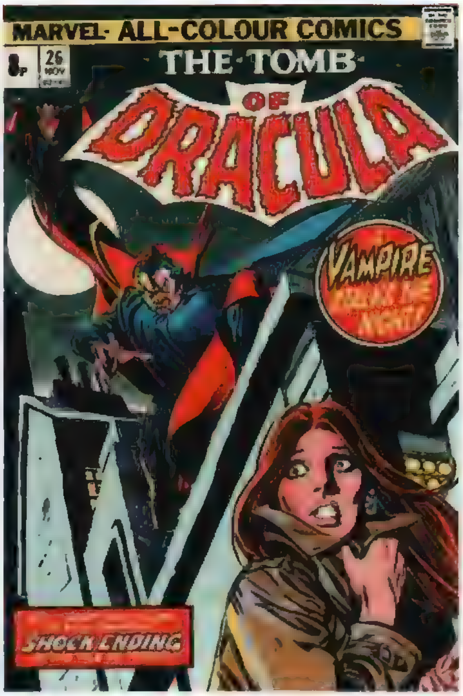
- Black Hole
- Deadbeats
- Flesh Colored Horror
- The Haunted
- Suburban Nightmares
- Swamp Thing
- Tapping the Vein
- Tomb of Dracula
- Vault of Horror
- Vigil



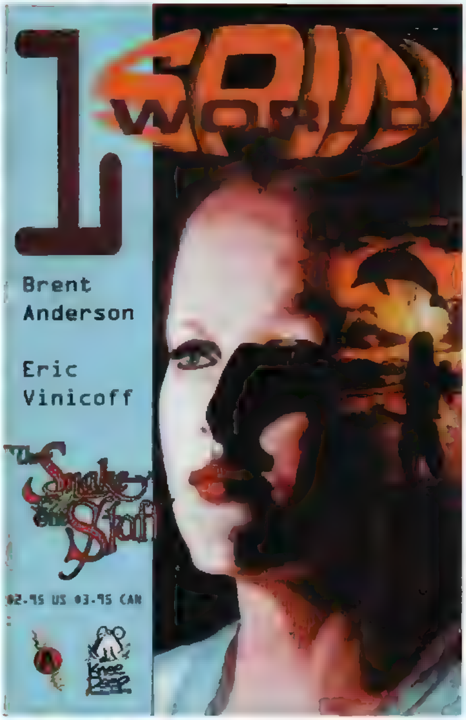
Cover artist: Charles Burns


MARVEL ALL-COLOUR COMICS
8p
26 NOV
THE TOMB OF DRACULA
VAMPIRE
SHOCK ENDING

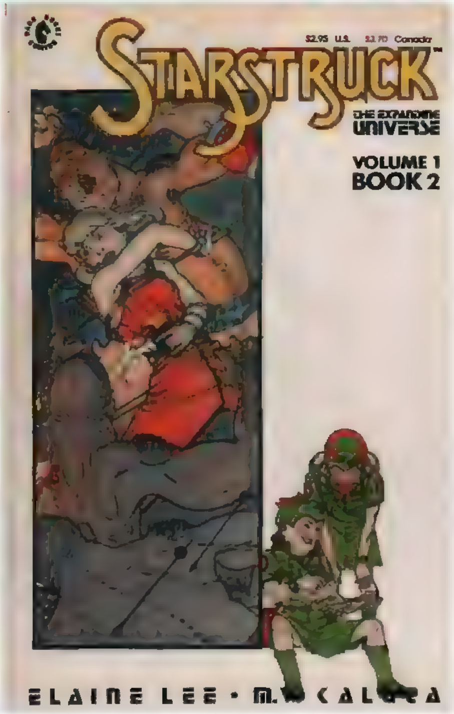
Cover artists: Gil Kane and Tom Palmer

10 GOOD SCIENCE-FICTION COMICS

- American Flagg
- Border Worlds
- Little White Mouse
- Metropol
- Mars
- Nausicaa
- Spin World
- Star Wars: Mara Jade
- Starstruck
- THB

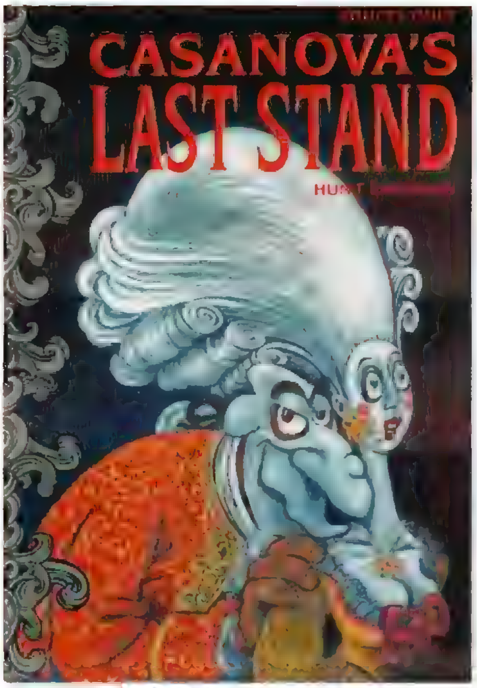

1
SPIN WORLD
Brent Anderson
Eric Vinicoff
The Snake and the Staff
$2.95 US $3.95 CAN
Knee Deep

Cover artist: Brent Anderson

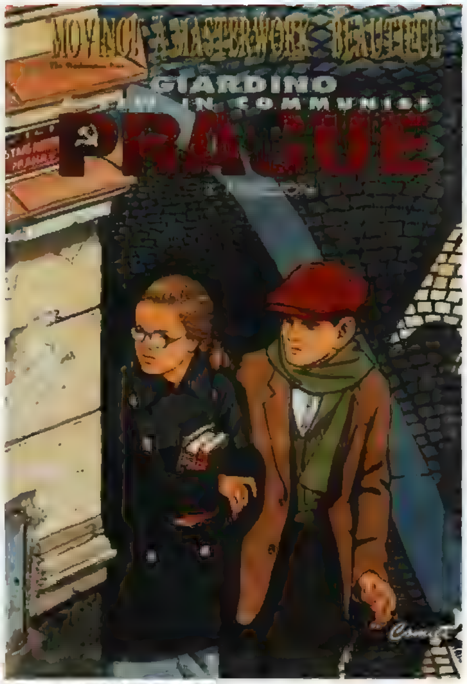

$2.95 U.S. $3.70 Canada
STARSTRUCK
THE EXPANDING UNIVERSE
VOLUME 1
BOOK 2
ELAINE LEE • M.W. KALUTA

Cover artist: Mike Kaluta

10 GOOD GRAPHIC NOVELS


CASANOVA'S
LAST STAND
HUNT EMERSON

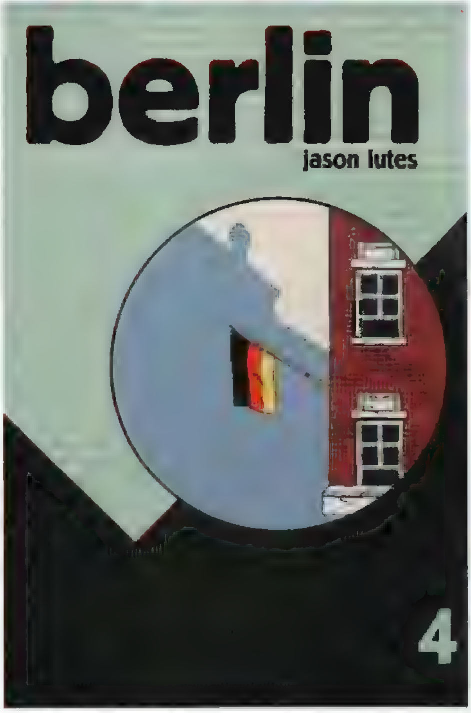
Cover artist: Hunt Emerson


MOVING · A MASTERWORK · BEAUTIFUL
GIARDINO
A JEW IN COMMUNIST
PRAGUE

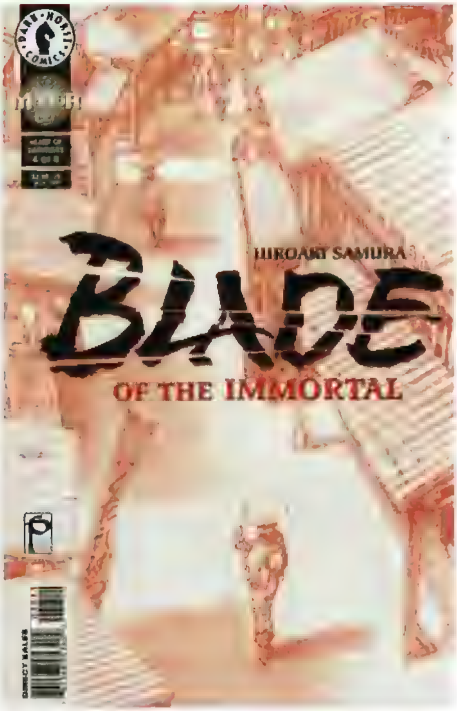
Cover artist: Vittorio Giardino

- Casanova's Last Stand (Knockabout)
- The Cowboy Wally Show
- The Death of Captain Marvel
- Dropsie Ave (Kitchen Sink)
- Epileptic
- Hicksville (see Pickle)
- Indian Summer (Catalan/NBM)
- A Jew in Communist Prague (NBM)
- Miss (Humanoids)
- Stuck Rubber Baby

10 GOOD HISTORICAL COMICS


berlin
jason lutes
4

Cover artist: Jason Lutes

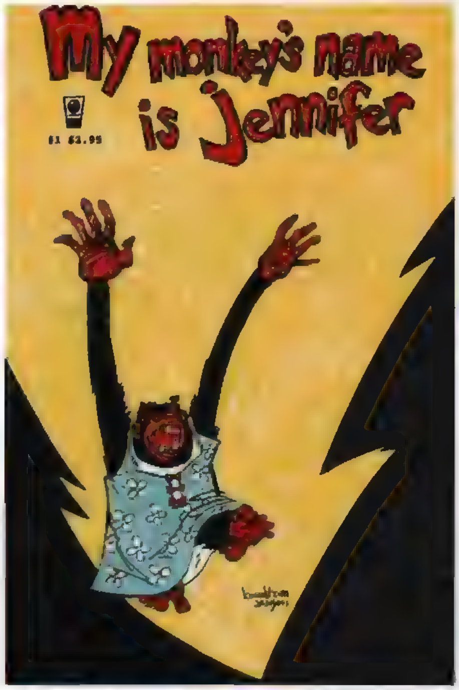

DARK HORSE COMICS
HIROAKI SAMURA
BLADE
OF THE IMMORTAL

Cover artist: Hiroaki Samura

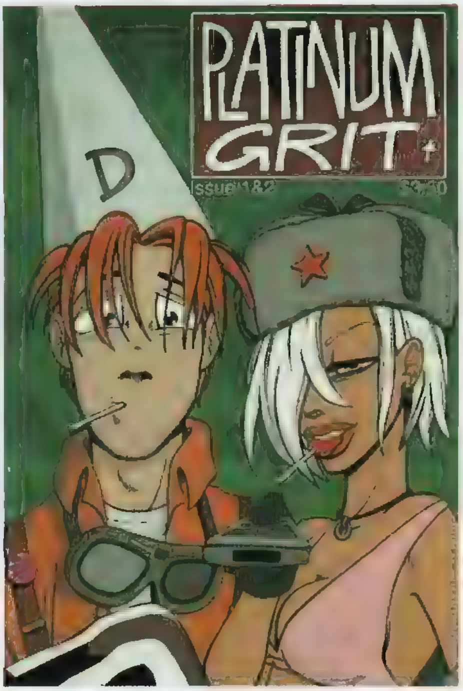
- Adolf
- Berlin
- Blade of the Immortal
- The Cartoon History of the Universe
- Journey
- Kings In Disguise
- League of Extraordinary Gentlemen
- Lone Wolf and Cub
- Piracy
- Prince Valiant
- Towers of Bois Maury

10 GOOD COMICS YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF

Fade from Blue
Hugo
Loose Teeth
My Monkey's Name is Jennifer
Pablo's Inferno
Platinum Grit
Saturday Nite
Strange Embrace
Thirteen
White Death


My monkey's name is Jennifer
#1 $2.95

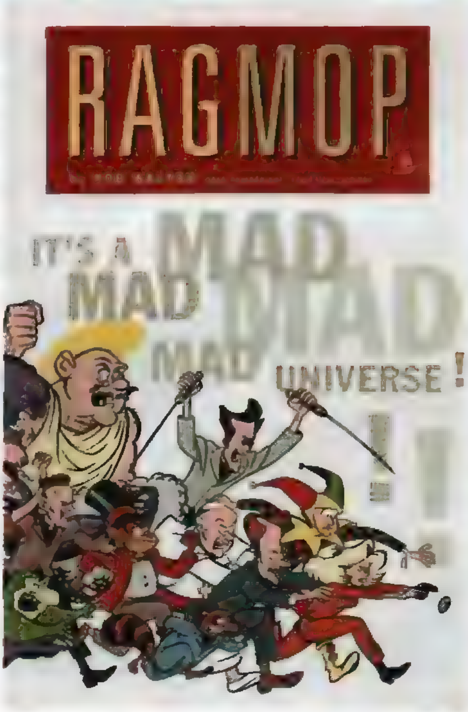
Cover artists: Ken Knudsen and Klaus Janson


PLATINUM GRIT
issue 1&2

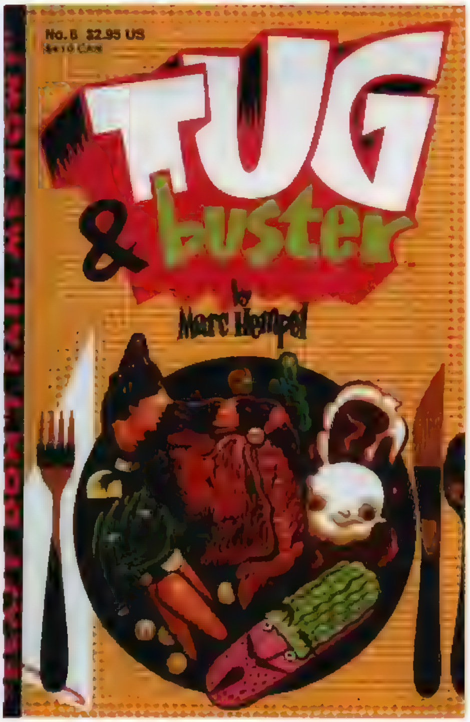
Cover artist: Trudy Cooper

10 GOOD FUNNY COMICS

The Bogie Man
Dork
Eye of Mongombo
Freak Brothers
Groo
Hate
Major Bummer
Ragmop
Sugar Buzz
Tug & Buster

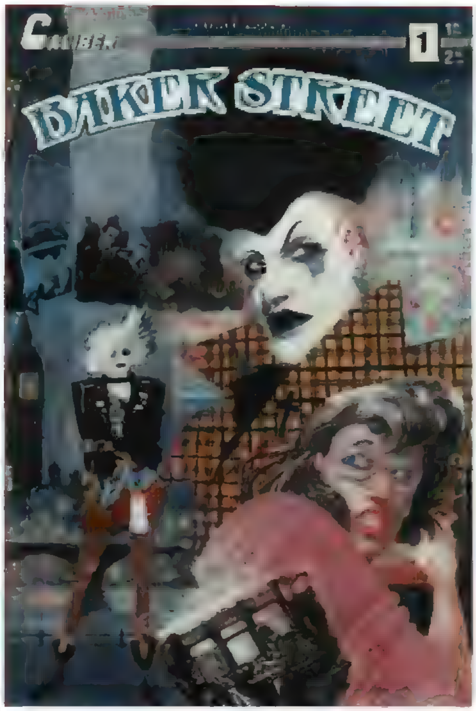

RAGMOP
by ROB WALTON
IT'S A MAD MAD MAD MAD UNIVERSE!

Cover artist: Rob Walton

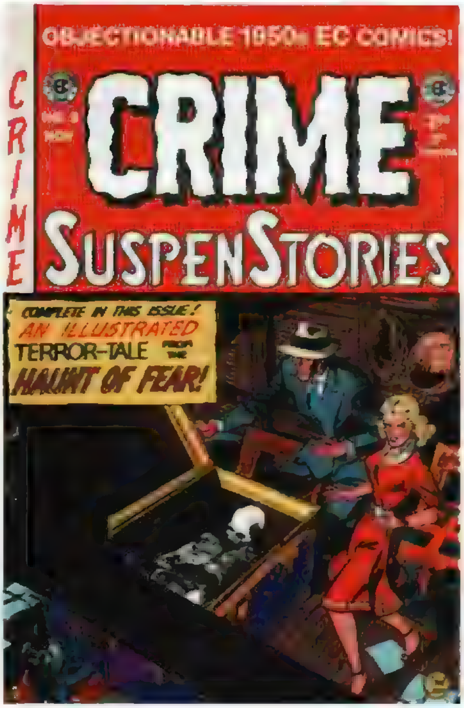

No. 6 $2.95 US
TUG & buster
by Marc Hempel

Cover artist: Marc Hempel

10 GOOD CRIME COMICS


Caliber
1
BAKER STREET

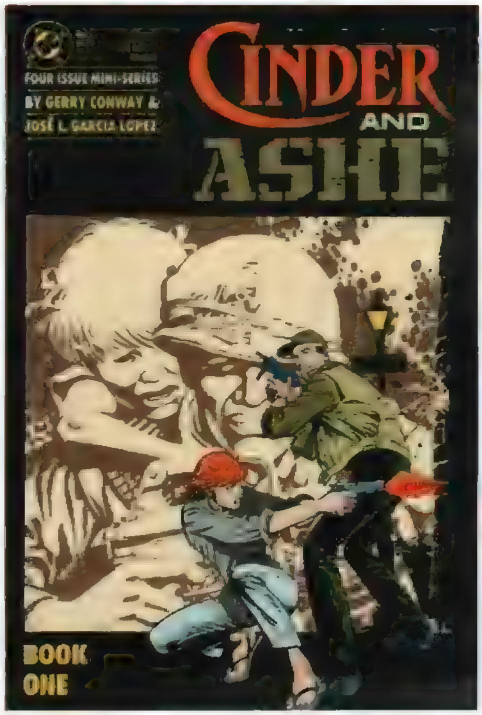
Cover artist: Guy Davis


OBJECTIONABLE 1950s EC COMICS!
CRIME
CRIME
SUSPENSTORIES
COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE!
AN ILLUSTRATED
TERROR-TALE FROM THE
HAUNT OF FEAR!

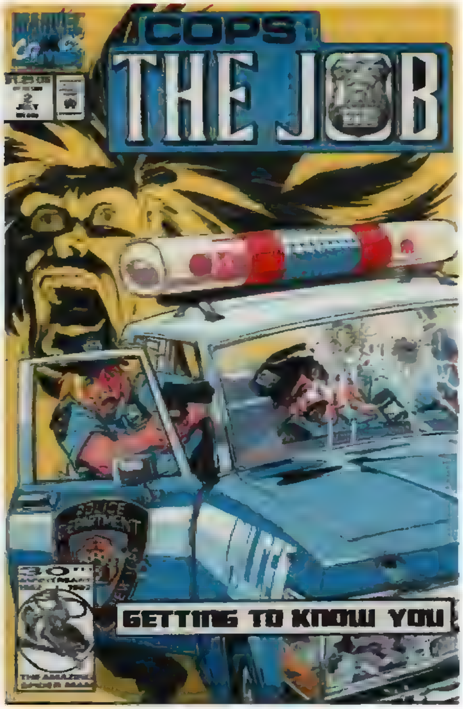
Cover artist: Johnny Craig

- AKA Goldfish
- Baker Street
- Crime SuspenStories
- La Pacifica
- 100 Bullets
- Sandman Mystery Theatre
- Skreemer
- The Spirit
- Strain
- Whiteout

10 COMICS THAT REALLY SHOULD BE COLLECTED


DC
FOUR ISSUE MINI-SERIES
BY GERRY CONWAY &
JOSÉ L. GARCIA LOPEZ
CINDER
AND
ASHE
BOOK
ONE

Cover artist: José Luis Garcia-Lopez

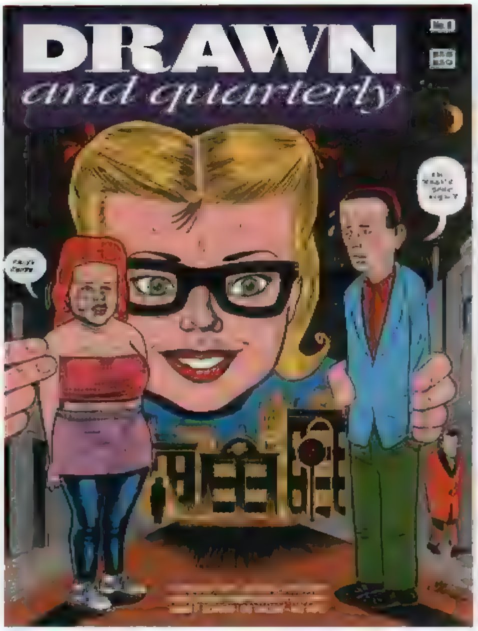

MARVEL COMICS
COPS
THE JOB
2
JULY
POLICE DEPARTMENT
30th ANNIVERSARY
THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN
GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Cover artist: Michael Golden

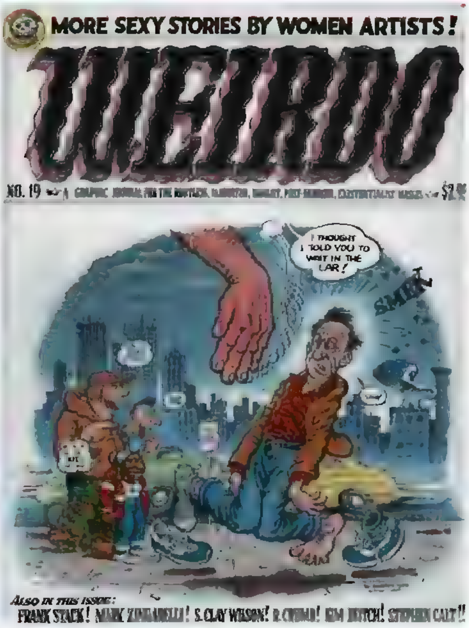
- Cinder and Ashe
- Defenders by Steve Gerber
- Herbie
- Cops: The Job
- Killraven from Amazing Adventures
- Rima
- Martian Manhunter
- 'Mazing Man
- Skull & Bones
- Strange Embrace

10 GOOD ANTHOLOGIES

- Arcade
- Big Apple Comix
- The Big Book of...
- Bizarro Comics
- Critters
- Drawn & Quarterly
- Escape
- Raw
- SPX
- Weirdo


DRAWN
and quarterly

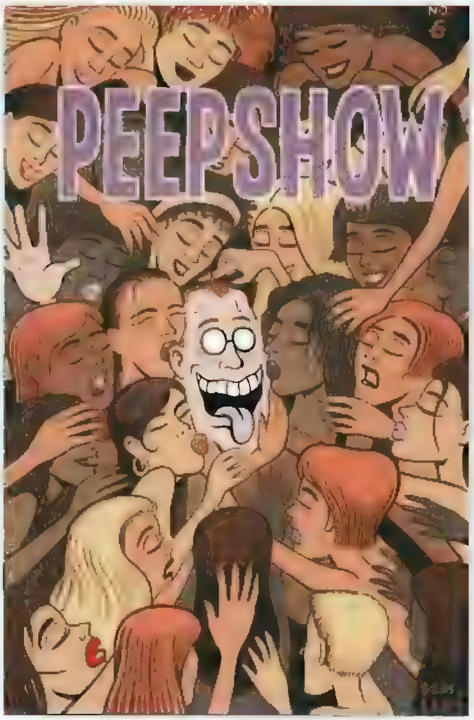
Cover artist: Dan Clowes


MORE SEXY STORIES BY WOMEN ARTISTS!
WEIRDO
NO. 19
I THOUGHT I TOLD YOU TO WAIT IN THE CAR!
SMIRK
ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:
FRANK STACK! MARK ZINGARELLI! S.CLAY WILSON! R.CRUMB! KIM DEITCH! STEPHEN CALT!

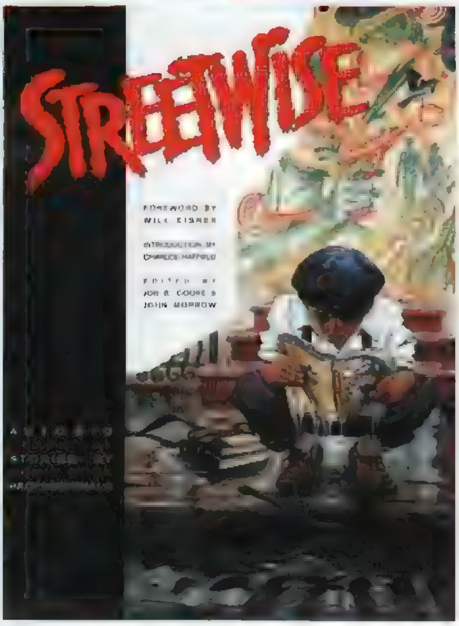
Cover artist: Robert Crumb

10 GOOD AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL COMICS

- Alec
- American Splendor
- Assume Nothing
- Fortune & Glory
- My Troubles With Women
- Nowhere
- Palestine
- Peep Show
- Real Stuff
- Streetwise

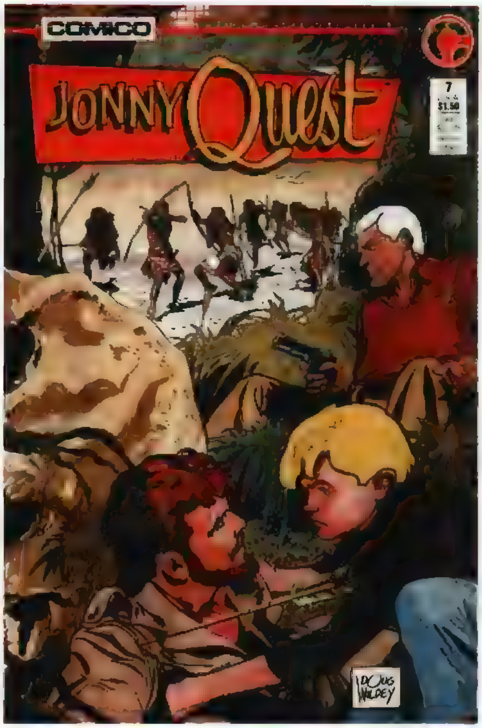

No. 6
PEEPSHOW

Cover artist: Joe Matt

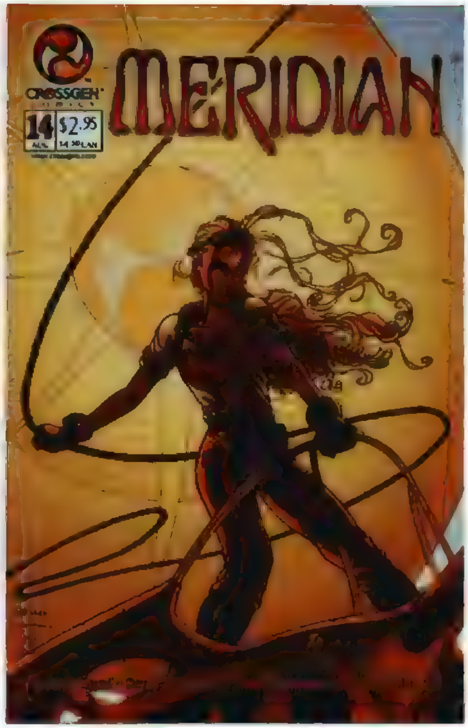

STREETWISE
FOREWORD BY WILL EISNER
INTRODUCTION BY CHARLES HATFIELD
EDITED BY JON B. COOKE & JOHN MORROW

Cover artist: Steve Rude

10 GOOD ADVENTURE COMICS


COMICO
JONNY Quest
7
$1.50
DOUG WILDEY

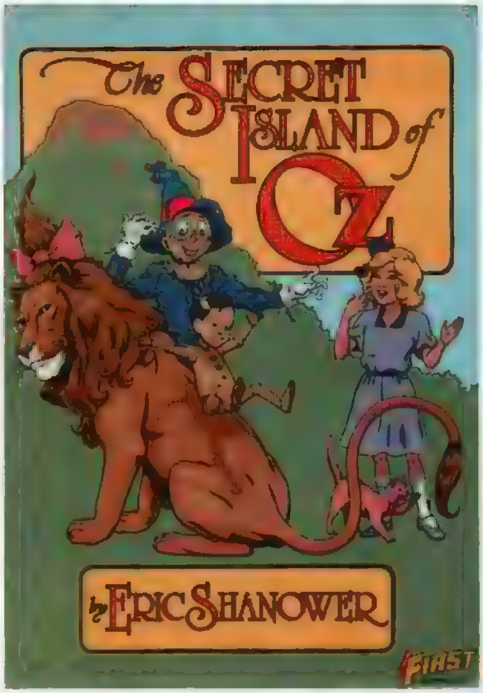
Cover artist: Doug Wildley


CROSSGEN COMICS
14
$2.95
MERIDIAN

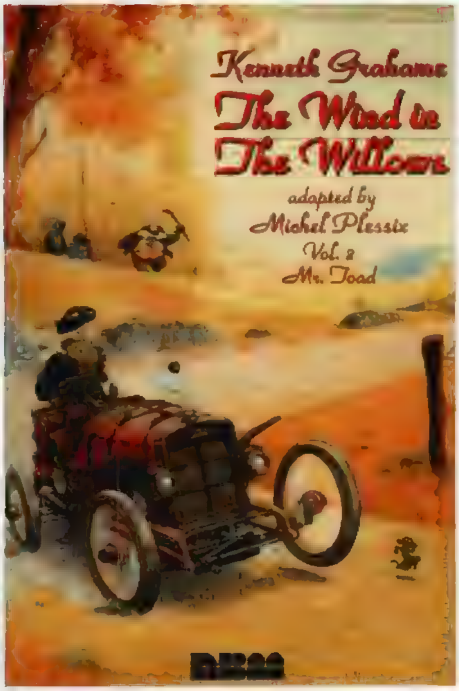
Cover artists: Steve McNiven and Tom Simmons

- Elfquest
- The Interman
- Jeremiah
- Jonny Quest
- Mai the Psychic Girl
- Master of Kung-Fu
- Meridian
- Tandra
- Tintin
- Xenozoic Tales

10 GOOD ALL-AGES COMICS

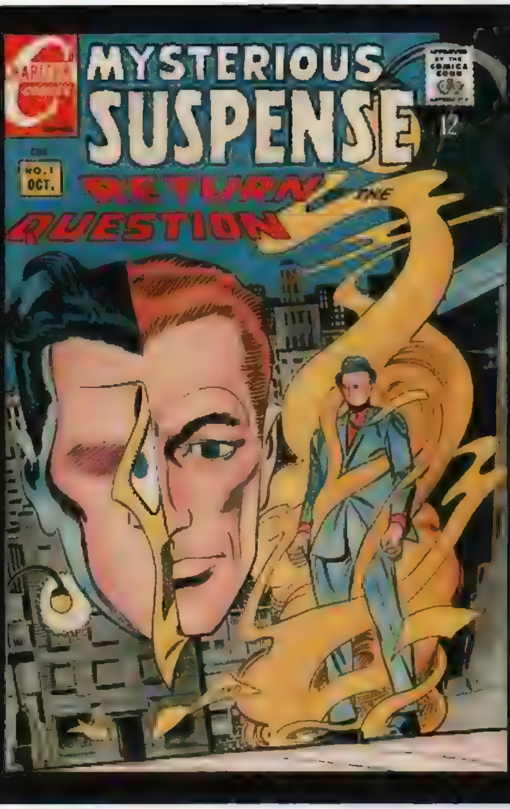

The SECRET ISLAND of OZ
by ERIC SHANOWER
FIRST

Cover artist: Eric Shanower


Kenneth Grahame
The Wind in The Willows
adapted by Michel Plessix
Vol. 2
Mr. Toad
NBM

Cover artist: Michel Plessix

- Asterix
- Batman Adventures
- Gon
- Oz graphic novels
- Patty Cake
- Popcorn
- Sugar and Spike
- Uncle Scrooge
- Walt Disney Comics & Stories
- The Wind in the Willows

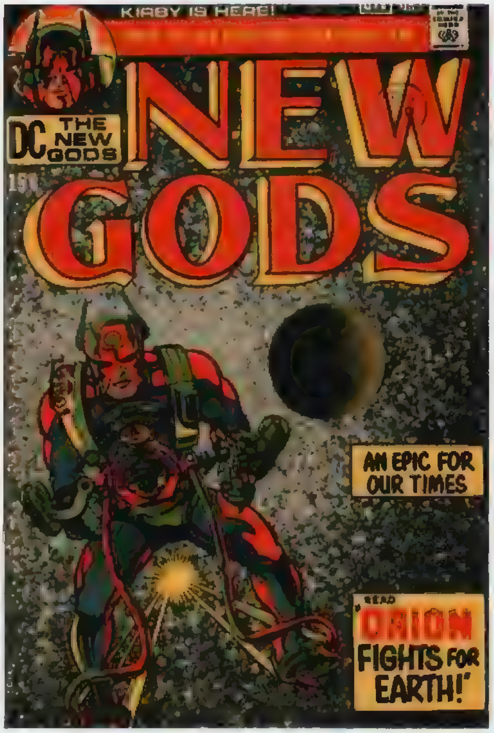

MYSTERIOUS
SUSPENSE
12¢
NO. 1
OCT.
RETURN OF THE
QUESTION

Mysterious Suspense 1 (October 1968)

Steve Ditko

With this comic Steve Ditko reaches a peak, balancing commercial needs with proclaiming his extreme opinions. He would later produce more stunning artwork for unreadable personal tracts, while, with few exceptions, the quality of his commercial work deteriorated. Here investigative journalist Vic Sage and his crimefighting alias The Question combat corruption and racketeering sanctioned by the indolent, while Ditko harangues his readers with questions concerning what constitutes a hero. It's not subtle, and is very wordy, but it's a powerful slab of polemic enjoyable even to a lifelong lefty.

William Jobbie

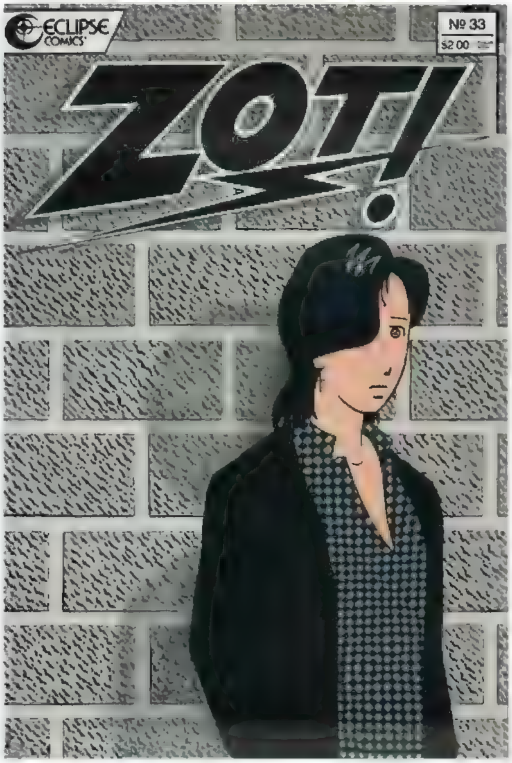

KIRBY IS HERE!
DC
THE NEW GODS
15¢
NEW
GODS
AN EPIC FOR OUR TIMES
READ
"ORION
FIGHTS FOR
EARTH!"

New Gods 1 (March 1971)

Jack Kirby and Vince Colletta

A new decade, I'm at Big School now. Girls are interesting not annoying, music is cool. I've had comics all my life. My parents, both immigrants, taught me, and themselves, to read English with comics. Now I'm growing beyond them. Then I see New Gods 1. I'd loved Kirby, but that stuff he'd been drawing lately. Wordy and repetitious. But This! Power! Drama! Raw edges to the characters, the scope of a novel or ancient legend, and I'm sucked in and blown away all over again. But now I want to do this kind of stuff too. I still do.

Win Wiacek

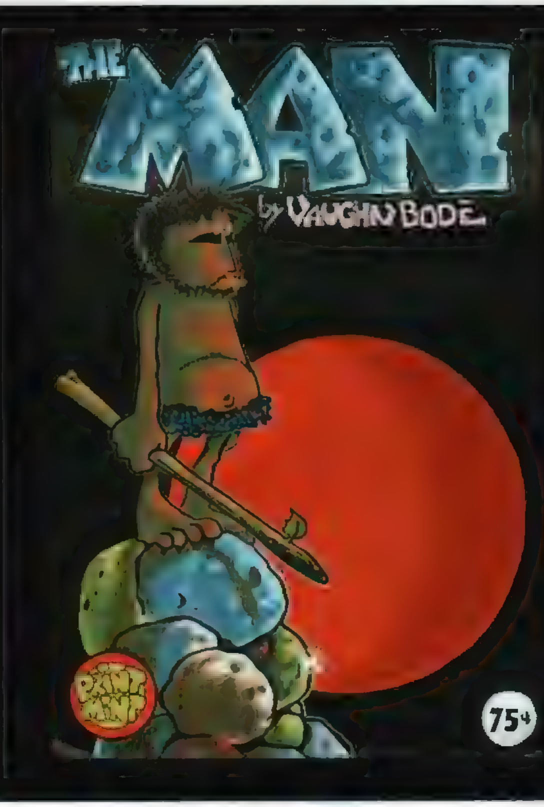


Zot! 33 (October 1990)

Scott McCloud

One of several single-issue stories focusing on Zot's friends on Earth, 33 tells the story of Terry. Triggered by news of a prank that disables a boy who's labelled "faggot" for doing ballet, Terry remembers that she used to be close to his sister, Pamela, who is now shunned after her own reaction to the accident, which was to announce that she's a lesbian. Zot's compassion helps Terry to understand that her friends will stand by her, whoever she is. McCloud even uses the positioning of the comic's letters' page to emotional effect in this romance and appeal for tolerance.

Nigel Fletcher

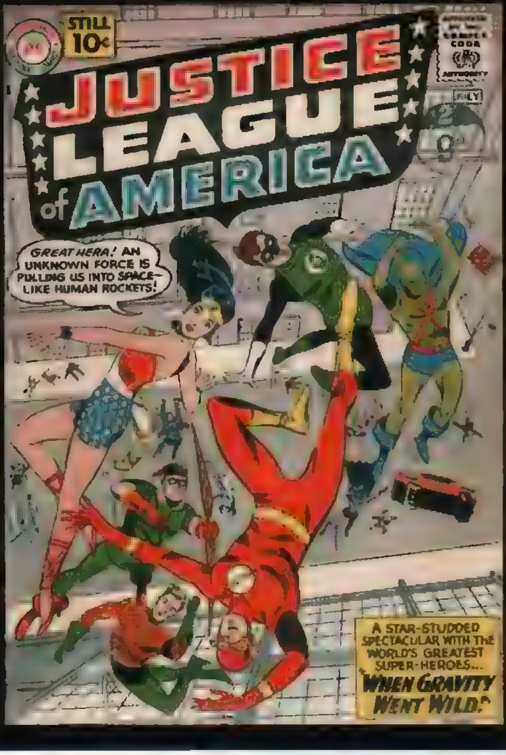


The Man (1972)

Vaughn Bodé

The Man's inability to articulate the feeling of loneliness - even to himself - is brilliantly developed. His conversations with "Stick", his spear, highlights a growing dissatisfaction with living alone. The arrival of the lizard Erg gives a taste of companionship that spoils the Man for solitary life. Readers may choose to see the back cover (drawn much later) as the strip's last panel.

Steve Whitaker

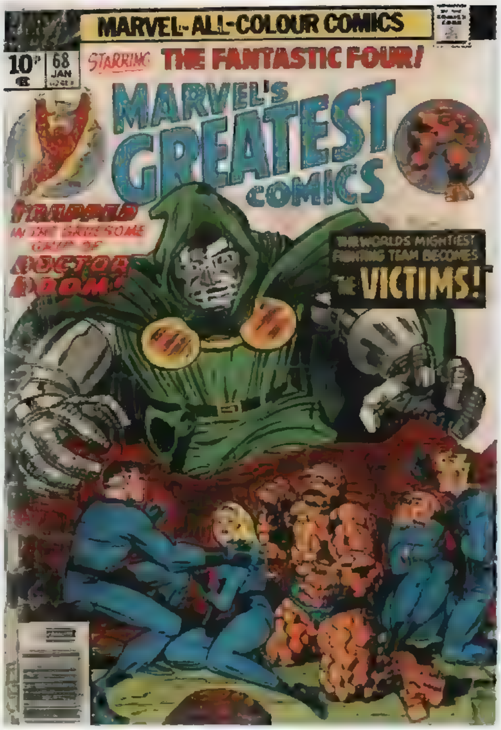

STILL 10¢
JUSTICE LEAGUE of AMERICA
GREAT HERA! AN UNKNOWN FORCE IS PULLING US INTO SPACE—LIKE HUMAN ROCKETS!
A STAR-STUDDED SPECTACULAR WITH THE WORLD'S GREATEST SUPER-HEROES...
"WHEN GRAVITY WENT WILD!"

Justice League of America 5 (July 1961)

Gardner Fox, Julie Schwartz, Mike Sekowsky and Bernard Sachs

The vertiginous cover, disorienting yet intriguing as the JLA, and sundry bystanders, are drawn away from the Earth's surface. Eight of the World's Greatest Heroes, one of them seemingly a traitor. Seven villains, six of our heroes' arch enemies and the seventh a deadly new threat. Dazzling battles against the elements, a genuinely surprising twist, unusual settings and intelligent use of the heroes' abilities. The skilful scripting of Gardner Fox (not as verbose as usual), and Sekowsky & Sachs' scandalously underestimated kinetic, expressive artwork given free rein. Compelling and mesmerising when I first encountered it as a five year old; still stellar work even in the cold light of 2003.

Howard Stangroom

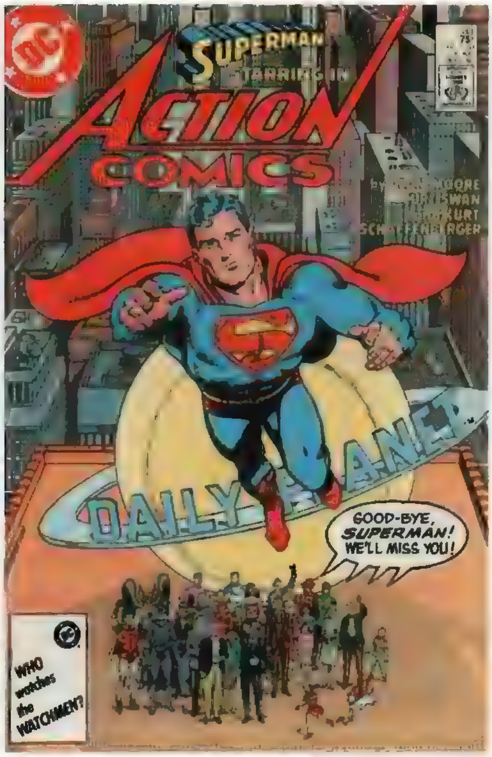

MARVEL-ALL-COLOUR COMICS
10p
68 JAN
STARRING THE FANTASTIC FOUR!
MARVEL'S GREATEST COMICS
TRAPPED
DOCTOR DOOM!
THE WORLD'S MIGHTIEST FIGHTING TEAM BECOMES THE VICTIMS!

Marvel's Greatest Comics 68 (January 1977)

Stan Lee, Jack Kirby and Joe Sinnott

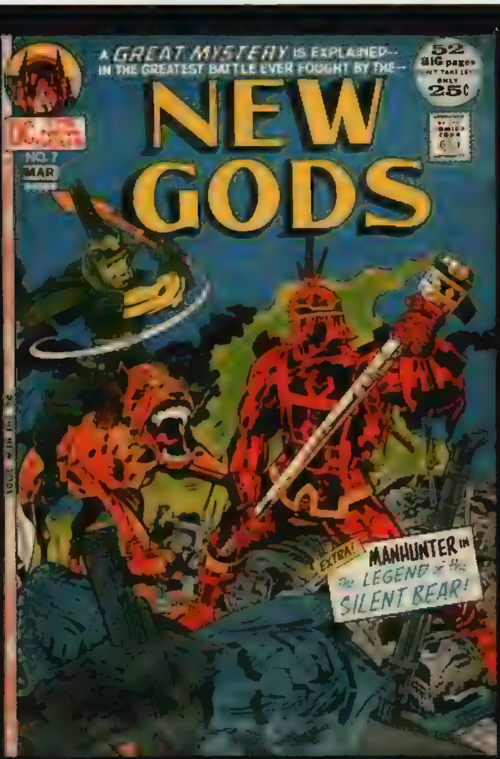
But not just any copy – that ripped, tattered and dog-eared copy up there that no comic shop in the country would give me a penny for. Tempted as I was to nominate "the one that's waiting for me at the comic shop next week" as favourite comic, I couldn't help but go the other way and instead plump for the first American comic I ever read – which is why this reprint of Fantastic Four 86 rather than the original is the one that gets my vote. Lee and Kirby at their best was more than enough to blow my six-year-old mind. There had been Titans before, but this was full-sized and in colour and the world never was the same again.

Jenni Cole


DC
SUPERMAN
STARRING IN
ACTION COMICS
by ALAN MOORE
CURT SWAN
KURT SCHAFFENBERGER
DAILY PLANET
GOOD-BYE, SUPERMAN! WE'LL MISS YOU!
WHO watches the WATCHMEN?

Action Comics 583 (September 1986)
Alan Moore, Curt Swan and Kurt Schaffenberger

The end of a legend has to leave tears in your eyes (e.g. King Arthur, Robin Hood). When DC consigned their Earth One universe to oblivion with Crisis on Infinite Earths Alan Moore wrote a tragic denouement for the "old" Superman (commissioned by editor Julius Schwartz). It starts in Superman 423 and concludes here, drawn iconically by Swan and Schaffenberger. All the major elements of the legend, even some of the sillier bits, are used with respect and dignity. As Moore says, "This is an imaginary story. Aren't they all?" Yes, and after this, Superman stories are just another bunch of comics.
Guy Lawley


A GREAT MYSTERY IS EXPLAINED—
IN THE GREATEST BATTLE EVER FOUGHT BY THE—
52 BIG pages
ONLY 25¢
NO. 7
MAR
NEW GODS
EXTRA!
MANHUNTER IN the LEGEND of the SILENT BEAR!

New Gods 7 (March 1972)
Jack Kirby and Mike Royer

The cover wasn't outstanding, but the interior certainly was! Jack 'King' Kirby's whole 'Fourth World' trilogy blew this thirteen year old's mind away with the ultimate cosmic opera. Seven issues into this great title (just look at that wonderful logo) Kirby decided to produce a prologue to the New Genesis/Apokolips conflict. 'The Pact!' had everything: fantastic art and graphics, helped by the crisp inking of Mike Royer, intense powerful drama, great dialogue (yes – great dialogue!), intriguing new characters, and just simply superb pacing. Jack Kirby was at his peak. All this plus a short back-up tale and a 1940s Simon and Kirby Manhunter reprint. Magnificent!!
Hassan Yusuf

FEBRUARY
Walt Disney's
Comics
$6.95

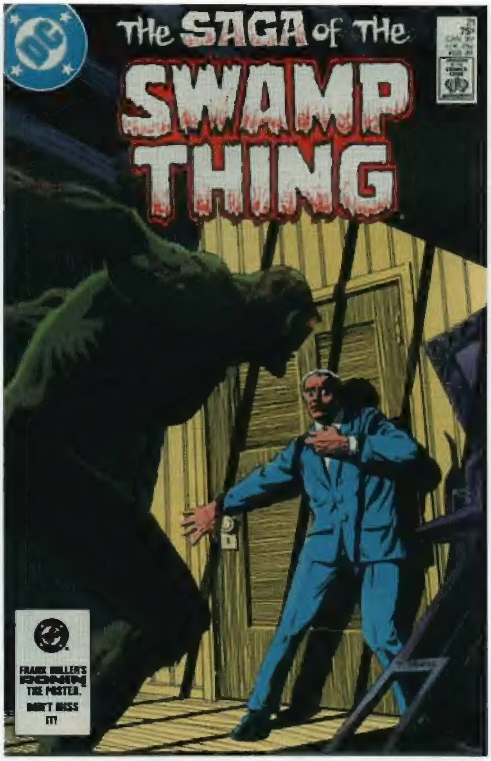
Walt Disney's Comics & Stories 633 (February 1999)
Carl Barks, Don Rosa, Vicar, William Van Horn

If you must discontinue a title after almost sixty years, you might as well go out with one of the best issues of the run. The great cover is possibly the work of Hank Porter, but no-one knows for sure. Inside there's a sentimental, yet not cloying, Carl Barks Christmas tale, followed by a fun Vicar story and two great duck stories from Don Rosa and William Van Horn, both returning Barks characters. All are top quality charming entertainment, and all bar Vicar's have a point to make besides. There's no Mickey Mouse, but the duck material is so good he's not missed.
Frank Plowright

Fungus the Bogeyman
RAYMOND BRIGGS

Fungus the Bogeyman (1977)
Raymond Briggs

After a particularly heavy and indigestible read, such as Kiss Psycho Circus, I like to look at dear old Fungus, whose family life reminds me of my own with my parents in 1977, when the book came out and my father brought me my copy home from work, and now of my new one with my own dumpling. I admire the satisfying balance of lavatory humour and the war against meaninglessness in a quiet world, not unlike our own, where there is no magic, and there are no giant punch-ups, and I can drink my pint of slime in peace.
Gerard Kingdon

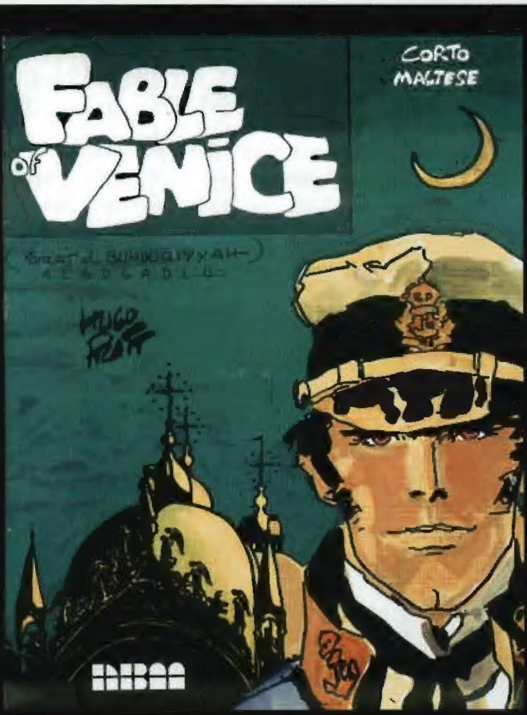


Swamp Thing 21 (February 1984)

Alan Moore, Steve Bissette and John Totleben

Before 'The Anatomy Lesson', Swamp Thing had little choice but to string the reader along with a con; DC were never really going to let Swamp Thing get his human body back because that would bring the entire story to an end and they wouldn't be able to sell you any more issues. In just twenty-three pages Alan Moore changed the rules. He opened out the story and all the characters, managing to avoid undermining what had gone before, and while telling a chilling horror story. It can't be bettered as a writer's display of thought, intelligence and skill.

Fiona Clements

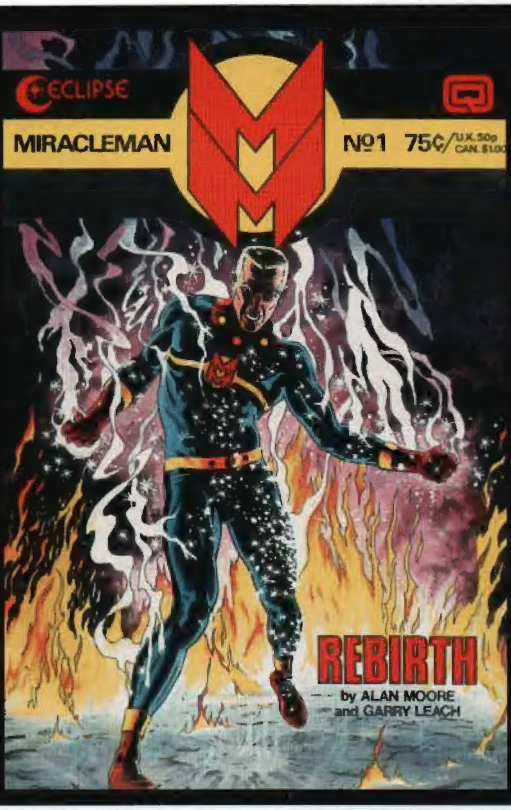


Corto in Venice (1981)

Hugo Pratt

There is so much to love about Hugo Pratt's storytelling: the amazing looseness of ink and pen line, his ear for dialect, and his ability to create mysterious and compelling characters. His most magical work is Corto in Venice, with Corto in search of an ancient sigil – that just happens to be in the form of a giant emerald. The star of this most beautifully drawn book is the city, whose twisting alleys, ancient courtyards and peeling grandeur are lovingly delineated, and the story evolves as both a taut thriller and a metafiction about searching. In itself it's a jewel – brief, richly characterised, labyrinthine and exquisite.

Fiona Jerome

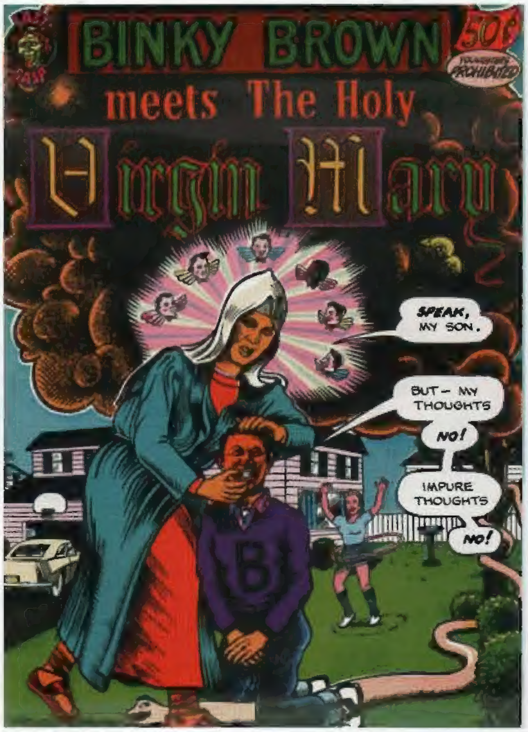

ECLIPSE
MIRACLEMAN
Nº1 75¢/U.K. 50p CAN. $1.00
REBIRTH
by ALAN MOORE and GARRY LEACH

Miracleman 1 (August 1985)

Alan Moore and Garry Leach

Alan Moore's writing broke new ground with its real world setting and dialogue, while Gary Leach's clean line and beautiful panel layouts showed us that he was as good as anyone drawing comics. Mike Moran, freelance journalist, regains lost memories during a terrorist siege and transforms to Miracleman after an eighteen year absence. Then Kid Miracleman comes calling. In just six pages Moore and Leach make him one of the most evil and corrupt characters in comics. By the last panel the tension is such that you genuinely fear for Moran and his wife. Now that's entertainment.

David Braysher

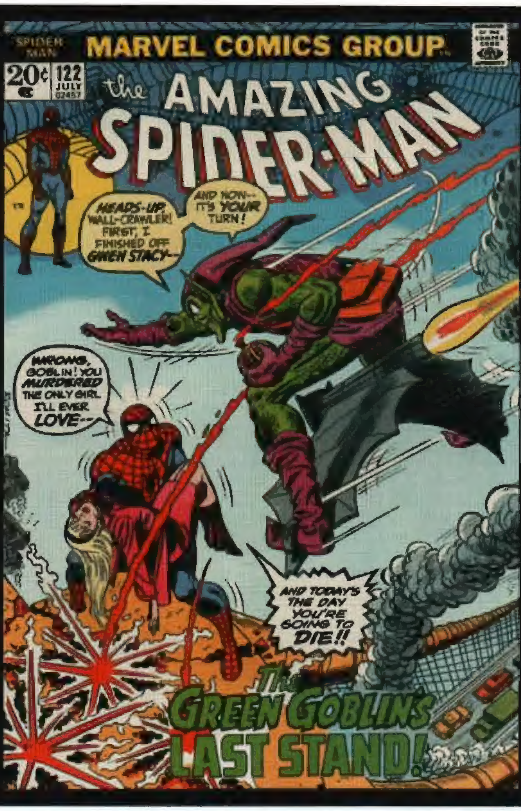

BINKY BROWN
50¢
meets The Holy
Virgin Mary
SPEAK, MY SON.
BUT- MY THOUGHTS
NO!
IMPURE THOUGHTS
NO!
B

Binky Brown meets the Holy Virgin Mary (1972)

Justin Green

Binky Brown meets the Holy Virgin Mary was the first Autobiographical comic and not only is it historically important but it is still a terrific read. Green manages to meld together all sorts of elements from religious guilt to bizarre sexual urges and schoolboy angst into a package that is at once hilarious, terrifying and hallucinatory. I can't think of any other comic in which the hero is troubled by invisible rays shooting from his phallus and passing through catholic schoolgirls, but there are times when no other kind of comic will do. If you ever feel the need for this particular sort of entertainment then you know where to go.

David A. Roach

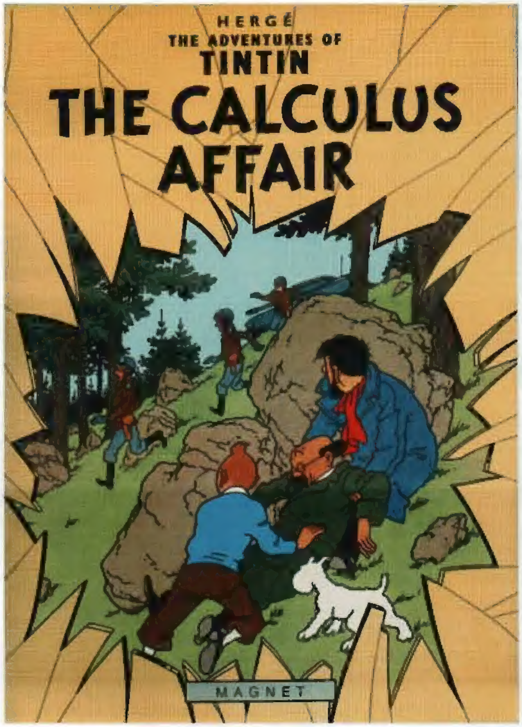

SPIDER-MAN
MARVEL COMICS GROUP
20¢
122 JULY
the AMAZING SPIDER-MAN
HEADS-UP, WALL-CRAWLER! FIRST, I FINISHED OFF GWEN STACY--
AND NOW-- IT'S YOUR TURN!
WRONG, GOBLIN! YOU MURDERED THE ONLY GIRL I'LL EVER LOVE--
AND TODAY'S THE DAY YOU'RE GOING TO DIE!!
The GREEN GOBLIN'S LAST STAND!

Amazing SPIDER-MAN 122 (July 1973)

Gerry Conway, Gil Kane, John Romita and Tony Mortellaro

'The Goblin's Last Stand' depicts the death of the Green Goblin, Norman Osborn, after he had been responsible for killing Gwen Stacy the previous issue. Peter Parker's grief, anger and denial over her death is portrayed in a manner never surpassed in comic storytelling. Gerry Conway pulls out all the stops in an explosive release of Spider-Man's rage culminating in his near murder of the Goblin who eventually endures a self inflicted death in the battle. Gil Kane's expressions of Peter Parker's haunted face linger long in the memory. The stunningly emotional final page epilogue shows a sensitive side to Mary Jane's airhead character for the first time and contributes to an unforgettable story even thirty years on.

Adrian P. Snowdon

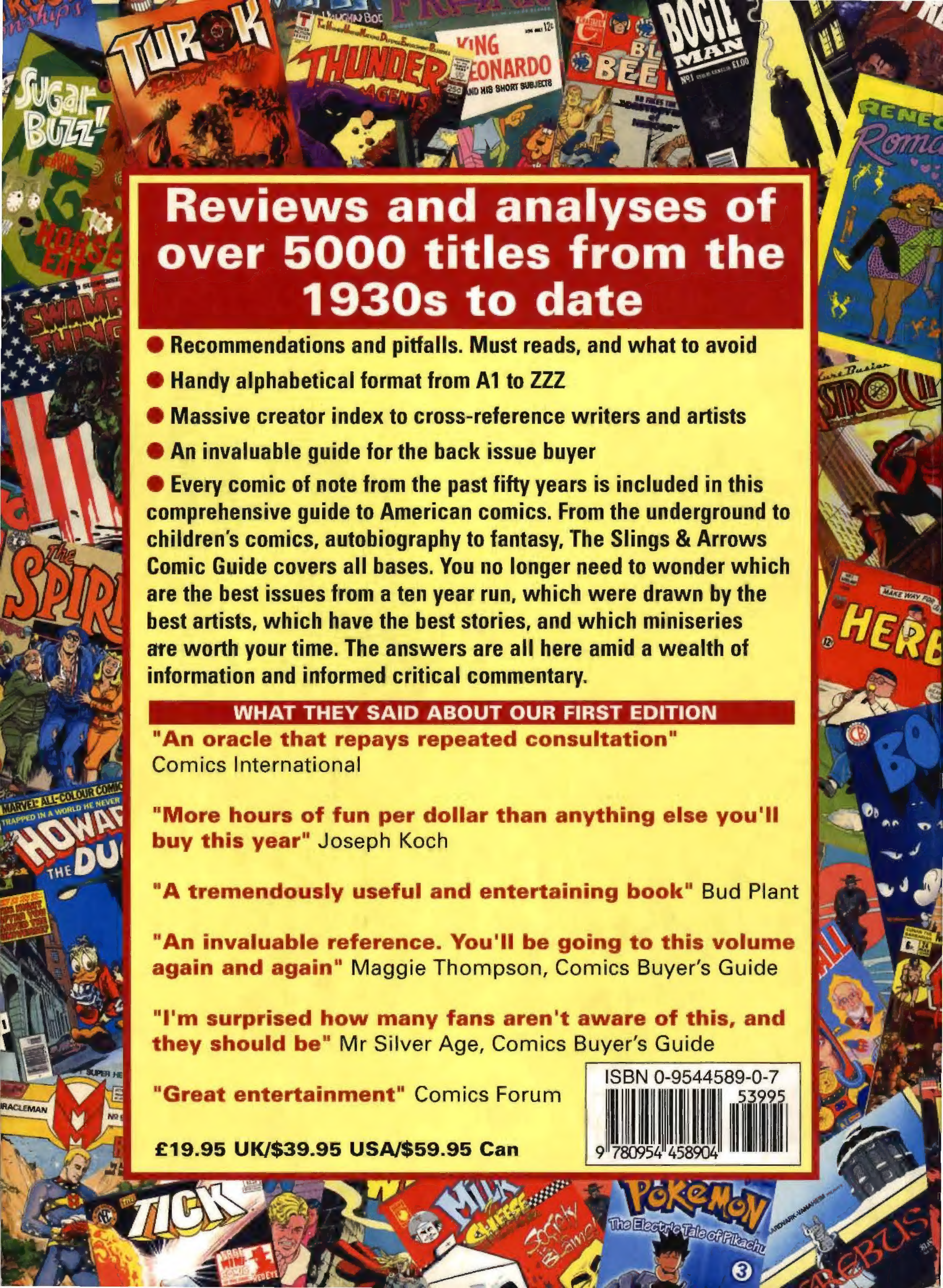

HERGÉ
THE ADVENTURES OF TINTIN
THE CALCULUS AFFAIR
MAGNET

The Calculus Affair (1956)

Hergé

The best comic by the best comics artist of all time? Oh, how to choose between this and 'Prisoners of the Sun' or 'The Castafiore Emerald' or… Let's just say that the artwork is immaculate, crisp, detailed, full of life and visual humour, and that the script is a masterpiece of intrigue, suspense and verbal wit. By the time that 'The Calculus Affair' was published, Hergé had mastered every aspect of the comic strip form. The confidence, the feeling that you're in the hands of a master capable of anything, makes this album one of the most re-readable and pleasurable comics that I've ever encountered.

Andrew Littlefield


TUROK
THUNDER AGENTS
KING LEONARDO AND HIS SHORT SUBJECTS
BLUE BEETLE
BOGIE MAN
Sugar Buzz!
SWAMP THING
The SPIRIT
MARVEL ALL-COLOUR COMIC
HOWARD THE DUCK
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TICK
MILK & CHEESE
Pokémon
The Electric Tale of Pikachu
CEREBUS
Romance
MAKE WAY FOR

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